

**A Sermon preached at Stanford Memorial Church  
on Palm Sunday 2009  
by the Revd Canon Dr Jane Shaw, Dean of Divinity,  
New College, Oxford**

Texts: Philippians 2: 5 – 11 and Mark 15: 1 – 39.

Every year, on this day, as we enter Holy Week, we face the great paradoxes of the passion. The triumphal entry into Jerusalem today leads inexorably to death on the cross six days later at the hands of the same men and women who welcomed Jesus into Jerusalem. Those who proclaim hosanna today will shout ‘crucify him’ on Friday. And then out of that crucifixion, out of death, out of Good Friday, comes life, comes abundance, comes Easter. “Death is trampled down by death” as the Orthodox Christians sing on Easter morning.

Every year we tell the story again, but with shades of difference according to which gospel the lectionary sets for us. Last year, we read John’s gospel, in which Jesus is entirely in control of what happens. He is not a victim at the mercy of his opponents but one who has chosen to lay down his life. He has a task to do, and he does it. He is not caught off guard by the events of the last few days of his life. In the garden, he expects arrest and steps forward for it, going to meet Judas the betrayer. He is so eloquent in the trial with Pilate that we begin to feel that it is Pilate on trial, not Jesus. He carries his own cross. In John’s gospel, the paradoxes of the Cross are everywhere apparent: glory in dishonour; power in weakness; triumph in defeat. There, the cross is also paradoxically throne, and the world’s values are questioned and thrown into reversal.

This year it is Mark who tells the story: a leaner and sparser tale than John’s lush theological prose. Here Jesus is truly a man, showing human frailty and even fear as ‘the hour’ arrives. His last words on the cross are: “Father, father, why hast thou forsaken me?” The hallmark of this gospel is, in fact, fear: throughout, the disciples are presented as failures – afraid, lacking understanding, astonished because they don’t get it, and finally they run away when Jesus is arrested; one (unnamed) even runs away naked rather than face arrest. There is a wilful negativity about this gospel. Here in the Passion story, Jesus says very little to Pilate – quite unlike the Jesus in John’s gospel who turns the questioning around on his interrogator. In this gospel, even those who are crucified with Jesus taunt him. Here there is no

meaningful conversation on the crosses, with the promise of heaven for the one who recognises Jesus for who he is; just abuse towards Jesus from those who share the same criminal fate as him.

This morning we read only part of the passion narrative - chapter 15 of Mark's gospel - but the whole passion story really goes from the beginning of chapter 14, the Passover on the Thursday, through chapter 16 and the narrative of Sunday morning. And even here the negativity of the gospel resounds, for Mark merely hints at the resurrection; there is no sighting of the risen Lord. The original ending of the gospel is a little less than halfway through the chapter, at Chapter 16, verse 8: the women have gone to the tomb on Sunday morning with oils to anoint the body. They arrive and find the stone rolled back; a young man (an angel?) tells them "Fear nothing, you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised again; he is not here." They are commanded to give a message to the male disciples - that the risen Jesus has gone into Galilee where "you will see him, as he told you", but the women, despite being told to fear nothing, do the exact opposite – they run away from the tomb, "beside themselves with terror ... they said nothing to anybody, for they were afraid." To the very end of this gospel, human beings are presented as full of fear, failure and weakness.

A man named R H Lightfoot was one of the most well-known New Testament scholars of mid 20<sup>th</sup> century England. I have a particular interest in him because he was one of my predecessors as dean of divinity at New College, a mild-mannered but brilliant man who was not perhaps so good at the chaplaincy part of the job. Timid with the students, one story (told to me by an alum of the college who was a student in Lightfoot's day) tells of a group of boisterous young students (all men in those days of course) who invited Dr Lightfoot for a game of croquet. He cautiously assented, only to find himself the victim of their prank, as they fastened him to the ground with the croquet hoops. But what he lacked in social ease, he made up for in scholarly boldness. He was one of the first people to suggest that Mark really did mean to end the gospel half way through what we know as chapter 16, with these words: "They said nothing to anybody for they were afraid." This was radical in England in 1938; scholars believed that the author of the gospel intended to proceed further but was prevented from doing so, or had

written more but that the last part of that chapter had been quickly lost.<sup>1</sup> No one seriously believed that the author intentionally ended his work at that negative verse. But Lightfoot made the case, and while his work was regarded as highly unusual at the time, scholars have largely come to accept that the last 12 verses of Mark's gospel – in which the risen Lord does appear to the male disciples – were added at a later date.

Lightfoot found the negativity of this gospel positively attractive. And here is the paradox of the passion as Mark tells the story. The more humans fail, the greater our weakness, so we can better understand the need for faith. In a way, there is nothing to hang onto, and in that “nothing” so hope resides. For God is our all. Mark communicates the gospel to us through foolishness and loss of nerve. At the end there is no sighting of the resurrected Christ, no ascension into heaven, no Pentecost, no founding of the churches – indeed as Mark presents the disciples they could not organise a party in a brewery, let alone found the church. We are left only with the words of the angel, “you will see him, as he told you”. This is entirely about faith.

I have a hunch that Lightfoot might not have minded that those highspirited young men fastened him to the lawn with croquet hoops, that his own social fears and nervousness made him a target for such student pranks; his worldview embraced it, and even expected it. That was the foolishness of human beings – his own and that of others.

The message of Mark's gospel is paradox throughout: the first will be last and the last will be first; life will come through death; death is the only way forward; through failure comes faith. In my opinion, it's the gospel for our times, our economically hard times when what was regarded as success has turned out to be failure; it's the Passion for the twenty-first century.

Amen

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<sup>1</sup> R H Lightfoot, *Locality and Doctrine in the Gospels* (1938) and *The Gospel Message of St Mark* (1950). Another English scholar, J. M Creed, had suggested the earlier ending for Mark eight years earlier: “The Conclusion of the Gospel of St Mark” in *Journal of Theological Studies* 31 (1930). Julius Wellhausen, a German biblical scholar, primarily of the Old Testament, had proposed the idea in 1903 in his *Evangelium Marci, übersetzt und erklärt*.