

Homily. 2nd Sunday of Advent. Year. B. 9/10 December 2023.

Mark's gospel was written around 66AD. It was written to the Christian community in Rome who were experiencing persecution under Nero, that well known mad and bad Emperor. Nero was on a rampage to blame the small Christian group for the fire that had burnt much Rome to the ground, a fire we now think Nero had lit and wanted so that in his madness he could remodel the city to suit his own vainglorious plans. The Roman Church, built on the witness and martyrdoms of both Sts. Peter and Paul, was being asked at this time to stand up for their faith. Many were afraid, some were questioning their faith, others were buckling under the strain, giving up, fleeing out the back door and into the night.

As I say this to you I can't help but think of our own Church and times, the ongoing persecution of Christians across the world, in some places openly and violently, in other places a persecution by laws and by the court of public opinion that's no less nasty, challenging and disheartening. Keeping this situation in mind, St. Mark begins his gospel very positively, saying that he is writing Good-News for us about Jesus Christ, God's anointed and chosen one, the Son of God. Our very word 'Gospel' is from old English meaning God's Good-News. St. Mark invented this phrase just as he invented the entire idea of writing the kind of works that we now call gospels. Before him, there were none; after him, many.

St. Mark's aim was to comfort us, assuring us that our faith is true and our hopes are not in vain. Quickly then this leads us to the desert witness of John the Baptist, his message of repentance and a baptism of renewal. Then we hear John say that all he did was to get us ready for the coming,

the advent we might say, of the more powerful one who would baptise and re-birth us in the light and strength of God's Holy Spirit. So far, so good.

What follows next though is a story of Good-News that mixes miracles and wonders with sacrifices, misunderstandings and great suffering. A suffering, misunderstood community of faith needs to hear that Jesus was misrepresented, rejected and suffered too. An unjustly persecuted Church has to know that Jesus was persecuted and killed for his faith in God. A Christian people, built on the place and by the witness of martyrs must remember that these apostles, these Christians, didn't shirk or flee from following the crucified Son of God. Rather in the Holy Spirit and God's merciful kindness, they walked all the way in the footsteps of the Lord.

St. Mark ends his Good-News as all of the gospels do, with some women at the empty tomb in the light of the first Easter Day. However, he adds a twist to this event that shocked the early Christians and has the power to shock us still. You see, Mark has the women go to the tomb at dawn, find the stone rolled away, enter the grave itself and see that Jesus' body is gone, then notice a young man dressed in pure white. They were stunned speechless by this sight and full of fear. This shining youthful figure told them that Jesus is risen and that their mission was to go to the other disciples, and to Peter, telling them that He is going before you to Galilee just as he told you and that you will see him there. Mark ends his resurrection story and his entire gospel with these words; Trembling and bewildered the women went out of the tomb and fled. They said nothing to anyone because they were afraid. Did fear win out? Did faith fail?

No one liked this ending. Even today our Church does its best to have us not hear this last sentence. But this is a madness, for what could be better news for a persecuted people than to know that despite fear, silence and fleeing, the resurrection Good-News did get told, believed and lived, for otherwise how did anyone, how did we ever come to hear it and believe in it? How did Peter who then died for it in Rome? How do people today believe in and give their life for the risen Lord if no one ever said a word and they all ran away?

There is always a voice crying out in the wilderness; Prepare a way for the Lord; Make straight His paths. We are that voice, we are that living witness to the risen Lord's presence with us. Now he is asking us to come to Galilee and to persecuted Bethlehem, places in the real world and the place of our real daily lives, for it is there above anywhere else that we will meet him; always coming to us as a child born under troubled skies and in desperate times; always there fishing and talking with us, suffering and being crucified for us, yet alive, undying forever; God's hope given to us and also through us for sake of this whole messy, frightened world.