
God's Story

Mark 1.1-8

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on December 4 2005 by the Revd Canon Dr Sam Wells

As a pastor I sometimes sit down with a person in some distress and try to help them piece together what has gone wrong in their life and why things are hurting so much. Eventually the tears begin to dry and the familiar face begins to reappear from a bundle of handkerchiefs and the needless but embarrassed apologies that grief and pain seem to evoke. At that point I often ask a simple question. 'Where does the story begin?' For me, pastoral care is about helping people get to a point where they can tell a truthful story that makes some sense of the actions of the various parties involved without resorting to blame or resentment or victimhood or bitterness. But what makes it Christian pastoral care is being able to see how God was in the story all along, or better still, how this small story was a tiny part of what God is and has been doing in the world.

And so with that experience of the way God interweaves his story in our human stories, I once again pick up Mark's gospel, and am knocked sideways by the gospel's very first words. 'The beginning'. This is where the story really begins. And the story, this first sentence says, is about Jesus Christ, the Son of God. So the gospel has made in less than a sentence a leap that in pastoral counseling and spiritual direction it often takes two or more years to get to: this is a story that isn't fundamentally about us, it's about God.

And straightaway at the beginning of verse 2 we are told that something very important happens between the 'beginning' and the main part of the story. We learn about the prophet Isaiah. Isaiah speaks about a Voice, and that voice is crying out, and the place from which it is crying out is the wilderness. If we call the 'beginning' part one of the story, then these details about Isaiah are part two of the story. The center of the story, part three, is just about to happen. The point of Isaiah, part two, is to prepare the way for part three. The role of John the Baptist is to be the Voice that tells people that part two, Isaiah, is becoming part three, Jesus. And is Jesus the end of the story? It seems not, for two reasons. One is that behind John's words is a sense of a final ending to the story. This we might call part four. But before we rush to say part four is the end of the story, just think about the fact that this is a written gospel. In other words it assumes the reader is coming after the beginning of the story, and after the main part of the story and the Isaiah part that prepares for the main part. But the reader can't be coming after the end of the story, because the end of the story is the end of all things, and there won't be much call for any kind of story after that, still less people around to read such a story. So there must be a part four, the time when people read this story, coming before part five, the end of the whole story.

So what Mark is giving us is the story of God. We can see that story as a drama in five acts, rather like a Shakespearean play. What I'm going to do now is to tell that story as a five act play, drawing not just on the first 8 verses of Mark's gospel but on the whole Bible in which Mark's gospel sits.

Act 1 of this five-act drama is the beginning, Creation. The drama of this act is that there was too much love in the Trinity for God to keep it to himself. The beginning of Mark's gospel reminds us that Jesus was there in the beginning. Jesus wasn't a last throw of the dice God threw when things looked bad. Jesus was the reason for the story all along. The world is not the center of the story: God is. Things do not have to be the way they are – they exist because God chose for them to be. God is the creator and he is surrounded by his creatures. His creatures do not exist for themselves, but have a purpose for him. He made them this way because he wanted one like each of them. Their chief purpose is to glorify him and enjoy him forever. And yet these creatures use their freedom ill. They choose, but have lost the art of making good choices. God pours out just as much love as before, but so little is returned, so much creative, playful, joyful energy is wasted. The mystery of why God bothered to make the world is compounded by why he continued to bother to love his creatures when they turned away – and is rivalled by the mystery of why his creatures do not bother, cannot be bothered, in return.

Here is the drama of creation, of how God came to turn his infinite freedom into a covenant, and how humanity comes to turn its finite freedom into a prison.

The second act is Israel. God longed to be in true relationship with his creation through that part of creation that apprehended his glory – humankind. The prologue to Genesis describes how this failed in Adam and failed again at Babel. So God called Abraham, and Abraham followed. The rest of the Old Testament is a love story, in which Israel strives with God, unable to live with him and unable to live without him. Here we find what vocation and covenant mean. God will not leave Israel alone: therein lies a promise and a warning. Israel exists for God and for the salvation of the nations. Here is the drama, the wrestling of the story: can Israel find the forms of life that honour her call to be holy? How will God woo or wrest Israel back when Israel strays? How far is too far to stray? Will God save the nations another way? The opening verses of Mark's gospel see Israel as fundamentally in the wilderness, and yet not without hope. The prophetic voice has not gone silent, and when it speaks in the form of John the Baptist it speaks the words of Isaiah. And Isaiah is the prophet who maps Israel's transition from a nation chosen and blessed by God to a nation that discovers how blessing can be found in God's suffering and her own. God brought truth and freedom out of the wilderness once before. When John the Baptist appears he closes Act 2 by asking the question: will God do it again?

The third act is Jesus. This is the definitive act, at the centre of the drama, in which God reveals his character: the author enters the drama. In him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell. This is played out on a personal level, of intimacy and betrayal, of challenge and confrontation. But it is also played out on a broad canvas. Jesus revisits all the key locations of Israel's story – wilderness, sea, mountain and Temple. There is the magnetism of Jerusalem, the inevitability of the Passion, the inability of the grave to keep Jesus down. Here the drama is at its most stark. Is God totally vulnerable, or has he kept something back? Will his people understand him, comprehend him, follow him, or will they seek to overcome him, stand over him, obliterate and annihilate him? Will their rejection of him cause God's rejection of them? If he overcomes death, what will he not do?

Still to come is act five, the end of the story. This is a frightening thing for those who have built up power and resources, but for those who have nothing to lose it is unbounded joy. The timing of the end is not known, but that it will come, when God chooses, is certain. The drama of that time will bring few shocks. For the God who will then be fully revealed will not be different in character from the God who revealed himself in Act Three. The face on the cross will be the face on the throne. Again, our personal desire for our own comfort and assurance is as strong as our anxious desire to know times, seasons and portents. But the drama of act five is the drama of how God transforms the poverty of our nature by the riches of his grace, of how he turns fallenness and striving and pain into communion and gladness and joy by no other power but the power of the cross. Mark's gospel portrays act five by the way Jesus goes round assembling the band of people who we may expect to meet in heaven. Blind men full of faith are joined by notorious sinners turned penitent; women with debilitating and demeaning menstrual difficulties are joined by men in the land of the Gadarenes formerly possessed by demons.

And that brings us to where we come in the story. Christians are in act 4. And the name of act 4, the time between Jesus and the end, is the Church. Israel thought it was in a 3 act play: Creation - Israel - Messiah, and the shock was that when Jesus came he neither restored political authority nor did he bring the story to an end. Instead, he inaugurated Act Four. In this act, the Church is given all it needs to continue to be his body in the world. It receives the Holy Spirit, and is clothed with power and authority. It is given the scripture, made up of the apostolic witness of those who seek to report, while being drawn into, the drama. It is given Baptism, a personal way in which to incorporate people into a cosmic drama. It is given the Eucharist, a regular event in which the body of Christ meets the embodied Christ, in a drama of encounter, reconciliation and commission. It is given a host of other practices to form and sustain its life. Will those gifts prove to be enough? Will the Church seek solace elsewhere? Will the ways God speaks and acts beyond the Church prove more vivid than the ways his voice is heard and his deeds are perceived within? Will rival churches parody these practices, will

the pastoral concern for the human predicament or the intellectual search for alternative narratives prevail? This is the intense drama of the present moment, of every moment in the Church's history.

What the beginning of Mark's gospel does is not only offer us the shape of God's story: it also helps us locate which act we're in. And this matters, because getting the wrong act is a disaster. If we think we're in Act 2, Israel, we behave as though the Messiah had not yet come. Yes, we are members of a special people, called by God; but no, God has not yet revealed the definitive way in which he encounters his people and in which he moves in the world. Thus one can be moved to sacrifice others, or oneself, in order to change things, rather than recognise that Christ has made the sacrifice instead. If we think we're in Act 3, we confuse our own role with that of Jesus. We fall to supposing that everything we do has decisive significance for the world – and even for God. This point of view is always fashionable – everyone likes to think they live in significant times. But the shape of the five-act play reminds the Church that it does not live in particularly significant times. The most important things have already happened. The Messiah has come, has been put to death, has been raised; and the Spirit has come. This is a great liberation for the Church. It leaves Christians free, in faith, to make honest mistakes.

If we think we're in Act 1 or Act 5, we might as well be living in a one-act play. In a one-act play, all meanings must be established before the curtain comes down. This life is all there is. All achievements, all results, all outcomes must be celebrated and resolved before the final whistle. The myth of human fulfilment, the stretching of human capacity to its utmost and the filling up of the resultant space with experience and reward, means everything must be squeezed into the unforgiving span of a single life. The five-act drama means that Christians are spared such a crisis. They are not called to be effective or successful, but to be faithful. And being faithful simply means imitating the God revealed in Christ in Act 3.

The beginning of Mark's gospel shows us how to enter the five act drama of God by bringing us to the River Jordan and introducing us to the practice of baptism. Baptism takes the Christian from a one-act play to a five-act play. In Baptism we are taken into a drama where God has created us and others for a purpose, where Israel has answered a call and pursued a vocation, where Jesus has become one like us and has conquered sin and death, where the Spirit has empowered the Church to follow Christ, and where God will end the drama when he sees fit. Christians find their character by becoming a character in God's story. They move from trying to realize all meaning in their own lives to receiving the heritage of faith and the hope of glory. We move from fearing their fate to singing of our destiny. For this is the effect of God's story: it transforms fate into destiny.