

It was St Mark's day this week – on the 25th. I had some cause to research him for a prayer I had to write, and so I found that not only is he the patron saint of lawyers and notaries, but also of Venice and lions. His symbol is the lion. I also discovered that in the tradition he was called, in Greek, *ho kolobodaktulos*, or stump fingered. All sorts of reasons are given for this: he might have been a Jewish priest, who cut off his thumb to unfit himself for priesthood. Or he might just have had stumpy fingers. Or it could refer to his Gospel, which ends in a very unsatisfying way, as if it had been chopped off. Our second reading tonight was that ending, and it leaves you hanging, wanting more. It could be, though, that that was the intention, and that the first witnesses of the resurrection simply hand on that task of witnessing to us, the hearers and readers. The Gospel doesn't end...

In the broadcasting trade there is a thing known as a vox pop. It is much beloved of BBC News: if there is a story of national importance it seems to be essential to get the ordinary person's view by sending a reporter to thrust a microphone at an unsuspecting shopper or two. I had to do this once. I was doing a placement at Radio Nottingham – one of my proudest mementoes is a badge which says *Jeremy Fletcher, The BBC* from a conference – and the feature was about ethical shopping. This is 27 years ago, before fair trade became cool, but when many people would not buy goods from South Africa. I remember being taken aback: just about everyone I spoke to chose their goods not just because of price but because of their beliefs. I had a huge conversation about South American politics with one lady whose appearance had not led me to expect that depth of knowledge and passion. Her actions witnessed to her belief.

Our lives are filled at every turn with opportunities to live out what we believe, and to apply our passions, our hopes and our longings to events which occur and into the detail of our communities and our contexts. I find the end of Mark's Gospel fascinating in this regard. Here are snapshots of some very different people who each bring their beliefs and their hopes into the most highly charged of situations, the death and resurrection of Christ, and in the manner of their looking and their responding open their lives to being completely re-ordered as a result. They teach me that it is in the way we approach our living that we will be changed, because we will be enabled to respond openly when the amazing happens.

Two main figures are featured at the end of Mark's Gospel. Joseph of Arimathea and Mary Magdalene. Previously it has been said of Joseph that though he was a respected member of the Jewish Council, the very body which had asked for the death of Jesus, he was 'waiting expectantly for the kingdom of God'. Is it this which compels him boldly to ask Pilate for the body of Jesus? He gives his own tomb, and places himself in the position to recognise the resurrection, that in Jesus the kingdom of God has come.

Mary Magdalene has been right at the heart of the group which followed Jesus and who owes him everything. There were other women too, who had supported Jesus, who have learned from him, and whose lives were so devoted to him that they could do nothing else than follow it through to what they thought was the end. They might have fled. Instead their devotion put them in a position to witness the dawn of resurrection, and the change of everything. They were in place, though they could not have expected what they found. The key manuscript of Mark's Gospel ends with them being in fear, so overwhelming was this news. The other Gospels carry on, showing how the women become the first apostles of the resurrection.

There are two equal and opposite dangers in our search for faith. The first is in not searching at all, in not even countenancing the possibility that there is anything worth looking for, in having a world view so restricted that there is no possibility of amazement and transcendence. The other is in thinking that we know exactly what this is all about and predicting exactly where belief in God and in the resurrection of Christ will lead. Only being prepared to accept what we already think we know is the death of life with Christ. Where our following Christ will bring life is when all our lives are dedicated to knowing more – as Joseph, and Mary Magdalene, and the other women’s lives were, and then in being prepared to have all that searching result in amazement, overwhelming knowledge and even fear – in being taken by surprise. This is, after all the living God we are talking about, not a TV programme which might interest us and which can be switched off at will. Mark’s Gospel doesn’t end. We carry it on. Thanks be to God that we are wonderfully made, that we are designed for this following and this living, that in Christ all things are made new, and our lives are transformed. May God deliver us from having too low or too fixed a horizon – so that we can live to his glory, now and for ever.

Amen.