

Mark 1:1-15 ***Installation of Canon Martin Gainsborough***

I trained to be a priest at Cuddesdon, the Principal, David Wilcox, asked every clergy visitor to Cuddesdon the same question

I have to interview candidates who want to come to this college, what question should I ask people who want to train to be a priest?

He asked the Vicar of Dorchester Abbey, there was a bit of a silence and then he replied.

Ask them, 'Have you any good news?'

Have you any good news? We are supposed to have good news. It is what the gospel is. In Greek the gospel is an, *euangelion*, that translates as *good news, glad tidings*. Which is why, every Christmas, we hear the angel in Luke's gospel say

Behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy Luke 2:10

Now that is quite interesting, but actually, *euangelion* is a bit sharper than just *good news*. When the gospels were written people knew exactly what this word meant. *Euangelion* was actually a bit of *political* good news. If the Romans were announcing a victory: Rome 6, Upper Gaul 0, that would be *euangelion*; news that it was the emperor's birthday that would be *euangelion*.

Now politics as *good news* is a *really* interesting idea. We don't think that. I have been reading the glossy pamphlet on our mayoral candidates. They play down politics. The assumption is that politicians are the sort of people who mess up education, or the environment, there's a sense that we might need protecting from politics. So, in the pamphlet about possible mayors we get phrases 'Your Mayor, not a *Party* Mayor' or, from someone who is a party member an insistence that their loyalty is local and not political. Conversely, if you want to smear a candidate in Bristol you stress their *political* commitment. Politics is never good news here, it is something we need protecting from because the power is cynical and politics will do us in. In just the same way the campaign about Europe is quite routinely couched in negatives. Staying in Europe will flood us with immigrants and regulation, getting out of Europe will make us poorer. There is no good news. There is just fear.

Have you any good news? We are here to install a Canon Theologian, so let's have some theology. Tomorrow is the feast day of St Mark the man who wrote Mark's gospel. Mark was a teller of good news and this afternoon we heard the beginning of his gospel.

The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

That is a bit odd if you think about it. I did not start this sermon saying, *The beginning of the sermon of the Dean*. We knew it is the beginning, we could tell it was the beginning. So, why does Mark need to tell us that this is *The beginning of the good news*? He does it because he is looking over his shoulder. This is the way another book starts, *In the beginning* is how Genesis sets off. We are supposed to notice that. When Mark says *The beginning*, this isn't

just the beginning of a book, this is the beginning of *everything*. And, notice, he was very clear, this is the beginning of *good news*. That is not an accident Mark knows that this is a political message. It is, you see, the good news about *Jesus Christ*. And when we call *Jesus Christ* we mean Jesus is the anointed king. So, Mark drops a very big cat amongst the pigeons in these opening words of the gospel. This is good news and it is very definitely politics.

Then Mark gives us a quotation

As it is written in the prophet Isaiah, "See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way"

Now that is quite exciting, because as any fool in the Divinity Faculty knows, the quotation is not actually Isaiah at all, quite a lot of it is Malachi. Why is that interesting? Because Malachi was supposed to be the last prophet. After Malachi had prophesied, no-one was supposed to talk like that ever again. So Mark is giving us good news about a King announced in Judea (which cannot really have a King because it is part of an empire) and Mark has a prophetic voice that is supposed to be silenced.

After all that there is the bit that sounds more formal

'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight,'

Except that it is more complicated than you think. *Get ready*, it says, *lay out the red carpet*. Fine, but the trouble is the carpet has to be flat: *make his paths straight* and it has to be in the wilderness. If you have ever been to the Judean wilderness you will know this is a big ask. The wilderness has more hills than Bristol, more diversions and more twists and turns than there are round road-works in the Watershed. Making the path straight means re-making the landscape. You have to level it all, drive a highway through the hills. Mark really has taken us back to the *beginning*, it really is a new creation.

Our politicians are a bit prone to saying 'It has all got a bit tricky and we better go carefully'; they deal in fear. Mark says 'here is a new creation'; and he is certain he has good news, Mark's gospel does not ask us to look at the problems we face and be a bit braver, or try a bit harder. Mark asks us to look at all our problems and begin to see that they are not leading where we thought. Mark announces the world is not what we supposed. Instead, in Christ, the dead are raised, the sick are healed, the poor hear good news. That is, if you like, the politics of Mark's, the voice we thought we would not hear, the promise of something other.

The voice we thought we would not hear, the promise of something other. Let's talk about Canon Martin Gainsborough; interesting man. He comes to us from the great parish of St Luke's Barton Hill right at the heart of this city, where they love Jesus and love their neighbour. It is a place where they have thought hard about how you belong and who belongs, they try not to make that too difficult. Christians mean well, some of the most well-meaning people ever. But we do make it a bit tricky sometimes, a bit formal, a bit anxious. Martin and the people of St Luke's have done good things, great things in recent years to make it easier. I was half expecting some of them to send me letters - green ink, things underlined - when I stole their excellent Vicar, but of course they are better than that and know how to continue the work they have started. And Martin is a Marine Chaplain too. This quietly

spoken, thoughtful man has earned his green beret and a different kind of respect. I am sure he can tell you if asked what the Marines' motto is... *Semper Fidelis*, always faithful. He brings that commitment too

And of course Martin is a Professor of Politics in Bristol University. In anyone else you would begin to think this is just showing off, I mean: Vicar, Marine, and Professor? It is tiring just describing this. But Martin is quiet about all the achievement. He is though, quietly, a man of deep learning and academic distinction. I am an academic, I have studied and written, I know my way around a library, but there is something more here. The breadth of experience is impressive, research in Vietnam, secondment at the United Nations Development Programme, work on the aid agenda, the impact of corruption, development, elites and poverty and more and more the conversation we started with theology and politics.

He is a bright man, he really does know the Marines motto and he knows why politics is called *politics*. You will go home this evening with all sorts of things to say next time you need to take sherry with the Vice-Chancellor. The Greek word for good news is *euangelion*, and the Greek word for a city is a *polis*. We have politics because the Greeks needed to work out how you live in a city. Blame Aristotle, he wrote the *Politics* and he meant *the affairs of the city*. And that is precisely why we are here this evening to install Martin as Canon Theologian. He is here to be the theologian St Mark wanted to see, the one who knows that good news is *political* and specifically, that it is good news for a city.

A city should be a glimpse of God's Kingdom, the vocation of a city is to be the city of God. And in that city of God power and politics play differently. This is the city in which the anointed king rides a donkey. The city where judge of all is judged, and the city where the one who speaks with God's voice is silenced. In this city power does not corrupt and the poor and the outcast get to the front of the queue.

Martin is joining us, of course, to serve city *and* diocese but above all he is coming to remind us that politics is theology; coming to insist that we should live in a city that looks like the city of God where power is never abused, where a new creation breaks in, where the poor hear good news.

Martin is here to help us hear the *euangelion* the good news. Today we should thank God for him, pray for him and begin the business of working with him, building the City of God in Bristol and casting out the politics of fear.