

GO INTO ALL THE WORLD

(Mark 16.9-20 and Acts 4.1-4)

Mark's Gospel breaks off abruptly at chapter 16 verse 8, "They said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid." Why? It is a bit of a mystery. This is certainly not a ringing endorsement of the courage of the early Christians!

The passage that follows, verses 9-20, is clearly written by another hand – a later editor perhaps? It seems to be someone who had read Luke's writings (that is, Luke and Acts), because you can find lots of echoes from those books in what is now Mark chapter 16. Look at the following comparisons:

- Verses 9-11 are about Mary Magdalene seeing the risen Jesus, but the others don't believe her: see Luke 24.9-12
- Verses 12-13 are a brief summary of the road to Emmaus story in Luke 24.13-35
- Verse 14 is where Jesus appears to the unbelieving disciples, as in Luke 24.36-43
- Verses 15-16 sound like the Great Commission in Matthew 28.19 and Luke 24.47
- Verses 17-18 talk about demons submitting (as in Luke 10.17), speaking in tongues (as in Acts 2.4), snakes not doing harm (as in Acts 28.3-6) and healing (as in Luke 10.9)
- Verse 19 is about the Ascension of Jesus to heaven, reminiscent of Luke 24.51.

So, my guess is that someone who knew Luke's writings pretty well completed Mark's Gospel. (If you want to know more about how this could have come about, may I "modestly" draw your attention to my book "Confident Faith" pages 50-51? There you will find an imaginary dialogue between Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson on this topic – but many apologies for recommending my own book!)

Our title today is "Go into all the world." Our two passages give us clear pointers as to why and how to do this. In Mark 16 we have two commands, two statements and five promises; and in Acts 4 we have clear guidance on what to proclaim.

1. "Go...and preach the good news" (Mark 16.15). Here are the two commands, to go and to preach – very clear, simple and straightforward. They were given to the disciples; and Matthew 28.20 makes it clear that these commands apply to us too, nearly 2,000 years later.

There we read "Go and make disciples...baptising them...teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you." If those first disciples had only done the going, the preaching and the baptising, that would have been fine – but for one generation

only! The next generation would have known nothing! Christians need to work on the principle of "one beggar telling another beggar where to find bread" with every beggar passing on the message to his friends. No secret hoarding permitted!

Jesus said, "Go into all the world..." Today this means that the whole group of disciples (that is, the universal church) should seek to cover the whole world – not that each individual Christian must spend a bit of time preaching in every single country! The world is a vast harvest field of people waiting to hear the good news; and we each need to pray and find out where God is calling us (as individuals and as a local church) to work for him.

2. The next verse (Mark 16.16) contains two statements, which are like two sides of the same coin. "Whoever believes and is baptised will be saved [that's a promise], but whoever does not believe will be condemned" [and that's a terrible warning]. It is a stark choice, and it is a choice that all humans must make once they have reached the age of discernment.

It is a choice that is talked about many times in the New Testament – "Enter through the narrow gate..." "that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life..." "Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil...". You will find those particular verses in Matthew 7.13, John 3.16 and John 3.19. This should really instil a sense of urgency in us as we think about the same choice facing all our friends, family and neighbours.

Three questions arise from verse 16.

First, what happens if we believe but never get the chance to be baptised? Answer: it doesn't matter. The inward reality of believing and trusting in Jesus is the most important thing. But do get baptised if you weren't baptised when younger and have now come to faith: it is an important outward expression of our inner commitment.

Secondly, what about those who have never heard the good news? Answer: we need to entrust this matter to God. He reveals himself to everyone (even those who have never seen a Bible or met a Christian) in creation, in the beauty of the earth and in the intricacy of life; and he is the Judge of all the earth who exercises perfect justice (see Genesis 18.25).

Thirdly, what about those who never reach the age of discernment, whenever that is? Perhaps they die in infancy or are severely handicapped mentally all their lives.

Again, we must leave it in God's hands; and we can remember that Jesus said "Let the little children come to me..." (Matthew 19.14).

3. Now we come to the five promises in verses 17-18. Here are five signs which show that God is at work in and through his disciples. They are five promises. Jesus's followers will cast out demons, speak in new languages, lay hands on people and heal them, and not be harmed by snakes or poison.

Two very important points: firstly, all these gifts can be found in the church today, but secondly, that doesn't mean that each of us should expect to experience all five gifts daily! Saint Paul makes it very clear in 1 Corinthians 12.27-31 that we all have different gifts.

Not every Christian speaks in tongues (or new languages); not every Christian has the gift of healing; not every Christian can work miracles. So we should not drink poison just to test whether God really meant what he said in Mark 16!

And I have a friend who has considerable experience of casting out demons: he would say that this is an area of ministry not to be entered into without much prayer, preparation and the help of more experienced Christians! But on the positive side, as we seek to serve God and proclaim his truth, he will be with us, help us and protect us; and he will give us the gifts we need at any particular moment for the particular tasks he sets us.

4. Acts 4.2 talks about what those early disciples proclaimed. "The apostles were teaching the people and proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection of the dead". This is brilliant news! Jesus is the resurrection and the life. And by chance I was only this morning reading those words in the account of Lazarus being raised from the dead, in John 11.25. It's a verse well worth learning – "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies."

And what exactly does it mean, or how does it work? It means two things: Jesus can conquer death and rise again (as he did a few days after the Lazarus passage on the first Easter Sunday); and it also means that he can raise us up too. That is an amazing prospect, especially in these days of coronavirus where life has suddenly got rather less certain.

This was Paul's message when he came to Athens (Acts 17.18). The Athenians completely misunderstood and thought he was talking about two new gods. But actually, he was preaching Jesus and anastasis (not a new goddess but the Greek word for resurrection!).

So what message will we communicate to our friends whenever we do have an opportunity to speak about Christianity. Are we concentrating on the big questions of who Jesus was, did he rise from the dead, and what difference should that make to our daily lives?

Summing it up, we are called to go and preach the good news – it might be far away, it might be exactly where we are in our home, workplace or circle of friends. We need to remember that it is quite literally a matter of life and death. We need to rely on God's help and protection. And we need to focus on Jesus who conquered death and who brings the offer of eternal life.