



Sharing together; and Sermon. Revd Nigel Uden on the First Sunday after Trinity, 6th June 2021

Readings: II Corinthians 4.13-5.1, Genesis 3.8-15, Mark 3.20-35

Sharing Together II Corinthians 5.1



I so appreciate things made by hand. Here is a peacock made by Sioned, one of our younger members, which she presented to me when I was visiting them recently.

Notice the great care. The subtle use of colour. The overall beauty of the peacock.

The work has been undertaken to embrace modern technology and to last a long time. There are countless examples of very fine work that has been done by people's hands.

Borrowing similar language, St Paul often talks of people as buildings. And sometimes as tents. Like buildings and tents, he speaks of us being made with human hands, or 'handmade'. Sometimes I think he means that we are 'God's works of art,' but in the passage Pippa just read, it feels different. I think he is drawing attention to how our lives rely so much upon our own resources – our ideas and abilities, our determination and strength and resilience. And the point about things that are 'handmade' is that they do not often last forever. That is why it was a good idea after 125 years to do so much work to renew this building. In a similar way, one day this body of ours will wear out and come to an end; we will die. For some of us that can happen after just a little while, which can make the people around us particularly sad. For others of us this body remains strong for more than ten decades. But rarely any longer than that.

Paul's point is that even though our handmade 'buildings' don't often last forever, that need not leave us without hope for when this life has ended, because we have an invisible body from God – not made with hands, but energised and animated by the Spirit of God. And that endures forever. We are invited to live with a deep-seated trust that even though what we can see is temporary, what we cannot see is eternal. That's why we can sing from deep in our being 'Hallelujah'.

A quiet and reflective *Hallelujah* from South Africa is sung.

Sermon Mark 3.27

It is often implied that the Gospel we attribute to Mark is the most straightforward. There *is* an immediacy and down to earth-ness to it. But we should not imply simplicity or naivete.

It's a bit like a Le Carré novel, with careful and multi-layered themes introduced from the outset. I can almost hear the Geoffrey Burgon *Nunc dimittis* and see Alec Guinness's peerless portrayal of George Smiley. After only three chapters, it is obvious that Mark is painting a dramatic and theologically intense picture. After just a hundred or so verses, by deft movements of the editor's pen, we're presented starkly with the **tension** that they see at the very core of things.

Indeed, by the section of chapter three from which Pippa read, it would appear that this author's carefully highlighted

- tension between family members;
- tension between religious leaders;
- tension between nations;
- tension between those who steal and those they steal from;
- tension between those who are powerful and those who are side-lined;
- and supremely, tension between what is cryptically referred to as the 'strong man' and those who bind him.

And just as these are tensions we may assume characterised society of two millennia ago, so we can surely recognise them as tensions writ large across today's world, too.

- Which of us is a stranger to the difficulties that accompany the delights of family life?
- How profoundly religious intolerance infects the peaceableness of today's world.
- How near the surface are the lust for power and ready resort to aggression that mar the neighbourliness of nations.
- How susceptible we are to that jealousy and greed which leads one person to think they can rob another of their possessions, of their spouse, or their peace.
- How alarming it is to see how easily populism crushes or even co-opts dissent.
- How intimidating the grip of those whom life's unfairness has enabled to be 'strong' ones, and how alluring their deceptions.

All that being considered, this earliest Gospel seems to be especially insightful about what lies at the heart of the world's ills. This is no 'smile Jesus loves you' message of sentimentality. It's not even reducible to 'love one another and Jesus will smile on you'. I hear Mark addressing the crisis that defines both first-century Judah, and twenty-first century Europe. We are alerted to the sophistication of the crises we face, and to which in 2021 we are challenged to bring the added sophistication of two millennia more discovery, learning and experience. So for you and me there's an extra two thousand years of science and economics, philosophy and the arts, compassion and competence to bring to the table as we explore the world's ills and how to remedy them.

But crucially it's not only down to us. This Gospel's summing up of the world's ills – our tendency either to hide from God as if God was irrelevant, or to attempt to be more God than God is, as the Adam and Eve story implies – is answered with its description of Jesus and the Kingdom of God; the Kingdom of God denoting life lived in loyalty to God and acknowledgement of God's reign. That's what is offered as the good news which heals the world's tension. In today's Gospel reading it's all given a particular focus. Jesus's life and work are contrasted with Satan's. Borrowing ideas from older antiquity, Mark uses 'the strong man' as a symbol of Satan – the very one Jesus wrestled as he was tempted during those forty days in the wilderness. So, for example, Mark echoes Isaiah's euphemism for Satan as 'the strong', 'the mighty' or 'the terrible'.¹ It sort of sums up the way in which that which is 'not God' can be so dominant, so controlling.

Then Mark describes Jesus's work as to 'bind' this strong one. Jesus's binding of the strong man is typified by the language of exorcism. There have already been two examples of that in chapter one. Our editor is painting the picture of Jesus as one who, with divine power, casts out the demons who serve Satan, or ties them up so that they become impotent. In those earlier writings, this work of binding Satan, of depriving the evil one of capacity, is something more focussed upon the future

¹ Isaiah 49.24

hope, but our editor makes it part of Jesus's historical ministry on the streets and hillsides of Galilee. It's also what he enlists his disciples to do: 'he appointed twelve, ... to have authority to cast out demons.'²

If the good news about Jesus two thousand years ago can be summed up as binding Satan, as depriving that which is not God of its influence and power, and if Mark uses that to express how Jesus resolves the tensions at the heart of society, then, might we understand the church's work of serving God's mission today to be binding that which is not God and depriving it of its power to ruin creation and to wreck society? I confess to finding this 'binding' idea rather helpful. It's derived from a word about tying, hindering, impeding, prohibiting. It's not to do with violent obliteration, but restraining. Surely, less is gained in this world by the violent obliteration of anything than by binding, impeding that which is damaging society's coherence.

As well as giving priority to worship and evangelism, Downing Place Church has committed itself to being shaped by wellbeing, sustainability and inclusion. As we explore how to turn these three aspirational foci into realities that shape our life and work, I am wondering how this idea of 'binding the strong one' might help.

So, what about our aspiration to nurture people's well-being? In a world where so many of us are vulnerable to stress and short fuses, to disappointment and even despair, does the 'strong man' of loneliness and anxiety need to be bound by the bonds of human compassion, thoughtfulness and extra mile going charity? One of the seats in Milton Country Park struck me on a few days ago. It bears very simply a person's name, their dates and the three words, 'Just be kind'. Think of the strong ones being bound by kindness. We have the perfect model in Jesus. His gut was wrenched with fellow feeling when he saw people in distress. And his hands forever bear the nail mark of how far he would go to put love into practice.

On a planet severely at risk from humanity's abuse, neglect and exploitation, does the 'strong one' of complacency need to be bound? We do not have time on our side. The ecological situation is now regarded as both crisis and emergency. If we are in a reverie of smugness that sees it as someone else's problem, then it is precisely that which needs rudely to be interrupted so that we are awakened to the imperative of amending our ways and preserving the planet. It is the untamed strength of our carelessness with Planet Earth that needs to be bound by Governments, by institutions, including the church, and by individuals. There is nothing wrong with creation; God saw it and it was good. The difficulty is how we treat it. But how we treat it can also be the solution.

In a world that discriminates between people so that

- some are in and others are out,
- some are accepted and others are rejected,
- some are safe and others are in peril,

how do we embody inclusivity by binding those strong prejudices that prefer to exclude than to embrace? Humanity's capacity for discriminating is rarely far from the news. Pride month has just begun, with its focus upon the need for justice to define our gender politics. Last week saw the centenary of the Tulsa massacre of black people by 'strong' people in Oklahoma. And the ill-treatment of the Uighur Muslims in North Western China is an on-going case of where the strong one needs binding because they are binding the weaker ones. Then there are the many other prejudices that do not reach our headlines or campaigns: how about today's prejudice against shy people, as if only confidence and self-promotion would get you anywhere? And what about ableism - the thought that people who live with disabilities are inferior to those who don't. How do we bind those strong ones?

² Mark 3.14f

In his depiction of the person and work of Jesus, Mark illustrates what it is that binds the strong one. He models grace and truth, servanthood and reconciliation, mercy and justice. These are the pre-requisites of 'wellbeing, sustainability and inclusion'. We who walk in the moccasins of the first disciples, are charged by the words that came from Jesus, and filled with the Spirit that was in him, to bind what is not of God; to bind it with Christ's cords of holy love, which cannot be broken, so that God's reign of righteousness and peace might hold sway. That's the Kingdom of God, a house not made with hands, but eternal and in the heavens.

Thanks be to God.