

Ascension. Year B
Lectio divina on Mk 16, 15-20

The conclusion of St Mark's gospel is a compendium of extracts from different sources. The text we now have emphasizes the missionary responsibility of believers. This was the final command, the last testament, of the Risen Lord before his Ascension. Remembering it today as the Word of God, should make us realize that the only legitimate way to celebrate the kingship of Christ is by evangelizing the world. The followers of Christ seek to Christianize the world, beginning with their own hearts. For as long as they continue to carry him in their hearts and proclaim him to the world, the disciples will feel the Lord's presence with them, and they will see, to their surprise, that they are capable of performing the same wonders that he did. The Lord has ascended to heaven, but to make him present on earth it is enough to proclaim him. If the disciples do not want to feel alone and abandoned in this world, all they have to do is go all through the world, to the ends of the earth, with the gospel as their only message. The gospel, if it is preached, will save Christians from feeling lonely and will confer on them unexpected powers. There is no reason to complain of the apparent absence of God. We are the ones who have abandoned our task of proclaiming the Lord.

At that time: [Jesus, appearing to the Eleven] ¹⁵ said to them, "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to the whole creation. ¹⁶ He who believes and is baptised will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned. ¹⁷ And these signs will accompany those who believe: in my name they will cast out demons; they will speak in new tongues; ¹⁸ they will pick up serpents, and if they drink any deadly thing, it will not hurt them; they will lay their hands on the sick, and they will recover." ¹⁹ So then the Lord Jesus, after he had spoken to them, was taken up into heaven, and sat down at the right hand of God. ²⁰ And they went forth and preached everywhere, while the Lord worked with them and confirmed the message by the signs that attended it. Amen.

Read: understand what the text is saying, focussing on how it says it

The canonical conclusion of Mark's gospel (Mk 16, 9-20) presents a problem that is unique in the New Testament. It seems beyond doubt that the original gospel finished with Mk 16, 8. All the best manuscripts of the fourth century finish at this point. Nevertheless, Mk 16,9-20 was regarded as an inspired text right from an early time, and it was confirmed as such at the Council of Trent.

Originally Mk 16,9-20 was probably an appendix added to the gospel at the end of the first century. It was meant to provide a more 'respectable' ending than the earlier one, where the women's fear made them keep quiet about the angels' testimony of the resurrection of Jesus (Mk 16,8). The text is a summary of various traditions regarding the paschal experience which were found in the other gospels. Its purpose seems to have been to harmonize the different stories and make them fit into the gospel accounts.

The text of this appendix is in two parts – the appearances of the Risen Lord (Mk 16,9-14), and then his final discourse in which he sends out the disciples (Mk 16,15-20). Taking it as a single episode, we see the mission of the disciples inserted into the paschal experience, which

reflects the basic Christian conviction. It is significant, therefore, that the mission arises from the appearance of Jesus. Those who were sent were disciples who had met the Risen Lord.

The content of the apparition was the sending of the disciples to the world (cf. Lk 24, 46-47; Mt 28, 16-20). The meeting did not end with those who took part. The Risen Jesus was to return to God (Mk 16, 19). The disciples were to go out to the created world (Mk 16, 20). Evangelization must reach the whole of creation. The command to go, and the extent of their mission, were imposed by the Risen Lord. Now the Good News (Mk 1, 1) belongs to the world, not just to Galilee (Mk 1, 14). The witnesses are transformed into apostles of the Risen Lord. Their mission to the world is the first exercise of the universal sovereignty won by the Lord.

Evangelization is not just a hobby. On its acceptance or rejection depend salvation or perdition. The Risen Lord knows that his mission will not be a complete success. The Gospel is met with faith or with rejection. Speaking of faith and baptism, the passage reflects the early Christian praxis, and it is significant that it makes salvation depend on one's response to the gospel. Faith leads to baptism, rejection to condemnation. Conversion is an opportunity that must be grasped when the gospel is offered. Evangelization calls for a personal decision. The mission was lived by people who knew what was at stake. The offer is made to all, but salvation depends on the reaction of the listener.

Clear signs of the salvation received will be given, not only to those who preach, but to all who believe (cf. Mk 6, 7-13). These signs come after faith. They are a proof of faith, not a prior condition. They are signs that characterize Christian existence or, more accurately, Christ's sovereignty, which extends to all who accept the gospel. The five signs listed are typical of the life of the first Christians (Acts 2, 11; 28,3-6; Lk 10,9). We should reflect, not so much on the nature of the signs but on the effects of faith and the powers it confers on believers (cf. Mt 17,20). Faith must be ready to face all dangers with the certainty of being able to overcome them.

Finally, the Lord's Ascension is described as in Luke's account (Lk 24, 50; Acts 1,12). After the apparition of Jesus and the mission of the disciples, the Lord Jesus ascends to heaven. The one who gave birth to the Church's mission now sits, as sovereign Lord, next to God, enthroned as his Son (Ps 110, 1). The apostles of the Lord Jesus were given all power from God. As the Lord Jesus leaves the world, his witnesses go out to the world. Their mission is the task that must occupy the Church while Christ sits at the right hand of God (cf. Mt 28, 20). The missionary community counts on the Lord's sovereign power, which is visible in the signs that accompany them and the faith that comes through their word. The mission is to be seen, therefore, from the perspective of the Risen Lord. He is the one from whom it comes. He accompanies it and gives it power. Their meeting with the Risen Lord transformed the disciples from fearful unbelievers to effective apostles of the Lord Jesus.

Meditate: apply what the text says to life

This Gospel passage recalls for us the disciples' last memories of Jesus. It describes his farewell, his leaving this world and his return to his Father. Jesus' farewell was a real triumph, and yet, for those left on earth, it must have been a bitter-sweet experience. Seeing him ascend to heaven, they knew that they were losing him from sight forever. The time when they lived with

him had come to an end, and there was nothing they could do to prolong it. Jesus was now living with God, seated at his right hand, but they could no longer live with him or sit beside him. They knew that they could count on his constant powerful help, since he was already at God's right hand, exercising his power. Now they had to begin to learn to live without having him with them, in their sight or in their hearts.

Our situation today is the same as that of the disciples. We also believe that Jesus Christ has ascended to heaven and sits at the right hand of the Father. We live with the joy of having him as our advocate with God, but also with the fear that he will remain far away from our world and our concerns. Knowing that he is at God's right hand means that he is no longer close at hand to us. The fact that he is in heaven, close to God, does not quite make up for his absence, which makes us feel a bit lost in the world of today. We still feel that same sense of being orphans that the disciples felt when they saw him ascending into heaven.

Although we may not realize it, we Christians today are living in the same situation as those first disciples. They had not yet recovered from their surprise at seeing the Risen Christ when they were faced with the reality of his final disappearance. The disciples did not enjoy the Lord's presence for long – a mere forty days! His resurrection from the dead was followed by his ascension into heaven. For two thousand years now, Jesus has been sitting at God's right hand and his disciples have been living on earth in his absence. This is the fate of Jesus' disciples – to live in the world without seeing Jesus in their midst, in the world or in their hearts. As those early disciples learned only too well, when they saw him disappearing, any small cloud is enough to darken the disciples' vision and to obscure the existence of Jesus. Is it not true that any obstacle, however insignificant or short-lived it may be, is enough to hide the Lord from us and separate us from him? Today as in the past, the tiniest cloud is enough to steal him from our sight and from our hearts. Any pain or difficulty makes us feel that we are orphans abandoned by Jesus and left to our own misfortunes.

And yet, Christ did not leave us completely alone. He gave us plenty to do! Far from abandoning us he left us an important task to be accomplished, his final will and testament. His last words express his final wish: *"Go into all the world and preach the gospel to the whole creation."* To help us to remember him in his absence, to force us to overcome our discouragement, and to keep us busy while he is preparing a place for us with the Father, he left us with the command to proclaim him to the world. We are to fill with our words the void he left in the world when he ascended to heaven. He has imposed on us the duty to keep him always in our thoughts and on our lips, until the time comes when we can hold him again in our hands forever. He has to absent himself, but he does not want to be forgotten. He has gone from us physically but he wants us to desire him. We can no longer speak directly to him, but he wants us to speak always about him. The fact that he has left us does not mean that he has abandoned us. He is interceding with God for us, as long as we spend our lives proclaiming him.

For that reason, he wants us to know that he is with God, and that we are to speak to the world about him. It is not the time for us, then, to complain or lament. This does not mean that we should not feel the absence of God, or that his apparent distance from the world should not be a cause of sorrow in our hearts. However, it should pain us more when we see how our society and even our hearts have become distant from him. But we should realize that this

situation is not completely new. This is the situation that we as Christians were born into. The Church was founded precisely to remind the world that the absence of Christ will not last forever. He will come again. He is with God, keeping watch over all who remember him, who feel his absence and wait for him. The more we feel his absence – and we don't have to try very hard – the more we desire to speak about him to those who believe he is absent. The world must know that Christ is alive, that he will come again, that he is with God, and we must keep saying it. This is why Jesus gave us this last command. If we do not respect his last wish, if we do not proclaim the Good News, the world will believe that it has lost God. And for believers, it will become more and more difficult to live in the world as orphans of Jesus.

For our preaching to be credible, and for us to be able to convince the world that God has not abandoned us, our words must be matched by our actions. Our preaching must be first and foremost a personal commitment to the world. We cannot abandon it or run away from it. If we believe, we will be accompanied by the signs that Jesus promised. Our world is waiting for those signs from us, to keep it from losing hope in God. It is waiting for the promise of Jesus to be fulfilled. It needs us to speak about God and make him visible by the way we live our lives.

Nowadays people have no time for someone who does not live up to what he says he believes. If we say we believe that evil has been conquered, then we must be prepared to face it, without fear of being overcome by it. We must fight to conquer evil at its very roots. If we say that Jesus has ascended from this world and gone to sit at the Father's right hand, leaving us to take care of the world, then we have a duty to pay attention to the world and let it see God's concern through our efforts. If we show no concern for the world, and pay no heed to the evil that is in it, if we remain silent about God in a world that rarely speaks of God, then we will not convince the people of today that God is interested in them. They will find it hard to believe that Jesus left us to fight in his absence, and on his behalf, against the evils in the world.

But if we give the world signs of God's goodness, then we can be worthy representatives of our God. We can ensure that his absence from the world does not weigh too heavily on the people of today, and we can look forward to the day of his return. Meanwhile, as the first Christians already knew, as long as we proclaim the gospel everywhere, we will feel the presence of the Lord acting with us and through us, and he will confirm our words with the signs he predicted. Anyone who does not proclaim Jesus as he commanded will indeed feel an orphan. Anyone who bears witness to Jesus by the way he lives his life and by his day-to-day struggle against evil, will feel comforted by the company of Jesus and the strength of his power. The world has not been abandoned by the Risen Jesus. We are the ones who abandon him, we who, even though we believe that Jesus has gone to heaven, fail to show any concern for the things of this world. Christ needs us to make him present in the world today and to the people of today, our people. Jesus did not leave the world alone. He left us in the world to continue to celebrate him and serve him as Lord. Anyone among us who devotes himself wholeheartedly to this task will know how fortunate we are to have the best possible advocate and intercessor seated at God's right hand.

