

Advent 2

One of the most satisfying exams I ever sat was one for which I had not read the texts - a slight exaggeration, but a good start for a sermon. To be precise, I had not read the texts properly, thoughtfully or carefully. There was a question about the poetry of Philip Larkin. Larkin was, I knew, more than a poet: he was also a jazz enthusiast. Now I was interested. Among the set poems, the text of which we were allowed to take into the exam, was one about Sydney Bechet: after Johnny Dodds, Sydney Bechet is my favourite practitioner of jazz clarinet. So I wrote about that poem, patronizingly commending Larkin for his success in capturing Bechet's style in his verse. I enjoyed writing the answer.

Then came the question about novels. I chose Dickens, though I can't now remember which novel. My thinking was that, although not over familiar with the particular work, I had read other novels by him and many other 19th century novels and I had the text before me. I reasoned that if I used the first and last pages of the text and compared the beginning and the ending with things I did know, I might persuade the examiner that my answer had merit. Again, I enjoyed writing the answer, because close analysis of the texts and the connections with other novels which occurred to me while I was writing engaged my interest as I wrote. Having enjoyed my three hours filling pages with sentences that appeared to make sense, I expected to pass. In fact the exam produced my best mark of the year.

From this I learned two life lessons.

First, writing spontaneously and enthusiastically about something which engaged my interest was likely to engage the interest of someone else. Enjoyment, unusual in my experience of exams, communicated passion and understanding.

Second, the importance of beginnings and endings. Because I was ill-prepared, the two safest pieces of text to write about were the first and last pages. These passages said something the novelist wanted the reader to notice and they could easily be compared with similar moments in other novels that I knew better: I knew them better because I found them more appealing.

Without deserving to, I had hit upon an important truth about narrative. Mark, whose style and structure has been under-rated, clearly knew it. Mark is an engaging and effective gospel-writer because, like me writing on Larkin, he is captivated by the *subject matter*, rather than the other texts and traditions from which he worked and his first and last pages are especially effective. He uses texts like today's first reading, from Isaiah, as a springboard. Rather than labouring the connections as Matthew might he leaps from the prophet's name to the quotation to the fulfilment, without pausing for breath or explanation:

² As it is written in the prophet Isaiah, "See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way; the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight,'" John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

The first eight verses of his gospel, our text today, evoke an entire prequel, the Old Testament, and depict the character who bridges Old and New, while summing up his role in the new story:

⁷ He proclaimed, "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals.

The protagonist is also introduced, teasingly, at the end of today's verses, a bit like an announcement we're all waiting for this morning.

⁸ I have baptized you with water; but *he* will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

'*He*' then appears, named, in the following verse (9) and the announcement is made:

⁹ In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan.

When Mark published his book (whatever 'published' means in this culture - that's another sermon) there had never been a gospel before. So his opening line is perfect:

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

Mark's ending is equally compressed: in, again, just eight verses he relates the visit of the women to the empty tomb and their commission to inform 'Peter and the disciples' of the resurrection, concluding

⁸ So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.

This final instalment, identical in length to the first and equally economical in its narrative, is also equally engaging in its presentation of character and event, with that final captivating cliffhanger clause:

for they were afraid.

People reading Mark's work early in the life of the church were themselves more than a little afraid of the unadorned truthfulness of this final phrase. Where was the happy ending? Dickens would certainly have added one: he wrote in instalments and often had to change his endings because his readers required it of him. There are two additional endings to Mark's book in your bibles, tacked on by anxious scribes, which are just longer and shorter summaries of what we know from elsewhere. But Mark, who wrote for the liturgical listener, assumes that we, as participants in that Liturgy, *know* what happened next. St Luke, of course, wrote a whole sequel to his gospel, the Acts of the Apostles, in which St Paul becomes the hero. Mark, who knew Peter and knew that those who heard his gospel would also know about Paul (and, probably some of his letters), didn't need to join all those dots. He wrote with an enthusiasm for the truth of the story itself.

I am, literally, getting ahead of myself. The first verse is where we are today, in Advent, looking to Christmas (and also looking forward to a new incumbency, a new chapter in the story of our parish):

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

That sets our horizon, well beyond this morning's announcement. It tells us what the big story is: Good News about the Saviour. It also immediately introduces *us*, or someone like us: John the Baptist, who is not the protagonist, but whose life and energy are harnessed to pointing him out. That is how we can face all the empty

tombs or unresolved questions in our lives: the sentence *after* 'for they were afraid' is written in our life story.