

Gospel endings by Robert Cotton – 15 April 2011

Our culture pays more attention to beginnings than endings. We read biographies because we want to understand where someone came from, and what nourished their earliest ambitions. Freud directed our attention to the first months and years as the foundation and determining feature of a person's character. Bookstores seem packed with national histories, local history and genealogy books because our fascination with origins is corporate as well as personal.

But in the greco-roman culture of the 1st century AD, the era when the books of the New Testament were being written, there was also an emphasis on endings. For it is in our end, many philosophers would have said, that we find our purpose. I say this partly as a correction of what I have said in various sermons in the past, where I have focussed on how the gospels began: Matthew placing Jesus in touch with his Jewish roots; Luke sets Jesus in the context of the Roman empire; and John's story starts with Jesus pre-existent at the beginning of time. Mark stands out as he begins with John the Baptist, and, when he gets to Jesus, it is Jesus' proclamation that is emphasized: 'the kingdom of God has come near' (Mark 1.15). All this is important, but within each gospel there is a sufficiently strong sense of direction that we are taken unceasingly to where the gospel writer wants us to be: at the end, we will understand Jesus and be more likely to recognise him for who he was. Given the largely oral culture of that period, people would have been expected to hear the gospel again, having reached the end. We hear, we recognise; having completed the journey, we are to begin again. The earliest texts of the gospels always had the ascription ("according to Luke", for example) written at the end, after the final verse.

Matthew wants to take us to the mount of Ascension. There the disciples hear that Jesus has been given all authority (and so they, by association, have it too). They are commissioned ("Go therefore and make disciples of all nations") and they are reminded of his name (which was trailed in 1.23: "I am with you"). Jesus says "*I am with you always*". Read the final verses of Matthew carefully and you will see that there is no statement about Jesus' departure. It is implied. But more important that the implication is the promise "*I am with you always*".

Luke closes his gospel with the same incident. But, since his is a "2 volume" work (including Acts of the Apostles too), he finishes his gospel, as it were, on a semi-colon. The ending is important but it is not a full stop. Indeed, that is part of Luke's message, which is precisely what his community needed to hear: that the praise and service of God must continue. So, the word Luke uses about Jesus is that he "withdrew", a softer description than that which occurs in Acts 1.9, because the emphasis is on the next verse (Luke 24.53) 'they were continually in the temple praising God'. The closing verse of the gospel reminds us of our purpose: not to give up in our discipleship, nor to cease in the praise of God.

The end of John's gospel is a bit of a puzzle. When I was doing some close study of the text, I became convinced that the gospel originally finished at the end of Chapter 20. The climax is clear and intense; the purpose is revealed and stated clearly. Chapter 20 contains four main stories: Peter and the Beloved Disciple at the tomb; the resurrection appearance to Mary; the appearance to the disciples with the gift of the Spirit (John's story equivalent to Pentecost in Acts); and doubting Thomas. After which comes two short verses: (a) there are lots more things that Jesus did, and (b) this is written so that you may believe and have life in his name. Full stop. Closure.

And then the gospel stutters into life again: another resurrection appearance, followed by the poignant reconciliation with Peter when he is three times charged to “Feed my sheep”, overturning the three times Peter had denied Jesus. Yet it is the final anecdote that gives us a clue as to what might have happened: Jesus challenges and then clarifies to Peter his relationship with the Beloved Disciple. I reckon that in the church community that gave rise to John’s gospel there were questions about which disciple had the most authority. ‘John’s Church’ (if we call it that) perhaps was being challenged by the church in Jerusalem over where authority lay. The gospel was written in a period where Peter was slowly being recognised as the senior apostle (admittedly, 30 years after his death); but ‘John’s Church’ was very sensitive about having been founded by the Beloved Disciple. That is why there are a number of stories in John that half-acknowledge Peter’s position, but do so in a way that does not undermine that status of their founder. I believe that this local difficulty probably surfaced after the first draft of the gospel was completed. And so, chapter 21 was added on slightly later to help clarify the situation, basing the clarification on memories of what Jesus himself had said.

The ending of Mark’s gospel, though, provides the most startling puzzle. For this gospel seems not to end, but merely stop. No other book in all of Greek literature ends with the word that closes Mark – it’s a bit like finishing a sentence with a preposition, and, not just a sentence, but a whole book: Mark 16.8 could be translated ‘and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid of’.

Some old texts have extra verses. Your bible might print a “shorter ending” and a “longer ending” (commonly called 16.9-20). But the oldest texts definitely did not have these. Perhaps the oldest version was torn – unlikely as the scroll would have been so highly prized that it would have been recompleted before further copying.

I reckon that Mark intentionally finished his gospel like this. First, this is a gospel of reversals in many ways. For example, in his life Jesus regularly told people not to speak about him but they did; yet now, after the resurrection, the disciples are commanded to spread the news, and they didn’t. The implication to the reader is “don’t you get it wrong as well!” Secondly, throughout the gospel the male disciples have failed, most obviously in Peter denying Jesus, whilst the women have been found faithful. Yet now, after the resurrection, even the women fall short. This is a good example of why I call Mark the “Nevertheless” gospel: in spite of all the mistakes the disciples make, *nevertheless* God’s plan will not be thwarted. This message was especially important for Mark’s church community which was beginning to experience the terrors of Roman persecution.

Thirdly, the last sentence may be about the fallible women, but it is the penultimate sentence, containing the closing remark given by an angel, that should be emphasised. The angelic visitor declares “Jesus is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you”. The message is ‘if you want to meet the risen Christ, you have to go – don’t wait at the tomb, don’t loiter in Jerusalem – go on your journey, and you will meet him on the way’. Mark’s gospel is the only one that does not actually describe a resurrection appearance. Surely that is intentional. Mark is saying: the risen Christ is not only accessible to those who lived back then and back there; rather, do what Jesus told you, and you will meet Christ on the way.