**2021-06-06 Barbara Mitchell**

**Trinity 1: 2 Corinthians 4: 13 - 5: 1 and Mark 3:20-35**

“I have come," said a deep voice behind them. They turned and saw the Lion himself, so bright and real and strong that everything else began at once to look pale and shadowy compared with him.”

Aslan, the lion at the centre of C.S. Lewis’ Narnia stories is one of the most enduring characters in children’s literature. But he did not simply spring from Lewis’ imagination, rather he has his roots in the images of Jesus presented by St Mark in his Gospel. From the earliest days of Christianity, the four evangelists, the authors of the Gospels, have been identified with creatures seen in visions, firstly by the Old Testament prophet Ezekiel and later by John in the book of Revelation – Matthew with the man, Luke with the ox, John with the eagle and Mark with the lion. The link between these different kings of creation and a particular Gospel was the picture of Jesus the writer wants us to see. And in the passage we have heard in our Gospel today we can clearly picture Mark’s lion-like Jesus – the powerful figure beside who, never stopping for long in any place and performing powerful miracles, everything else seems pale and shadowy.

I had to study Mark’s Gospel in Greek for my first year exams at university. Quite a daunting task when you are learning a new language, particularly one which uses funny letters, from scratch! But in reality it was not as hard as I thought because Mark does not use an extensive vocabulary – a frequently repeated phrase, which occurs 40 times in 16 chapters, is *kai euthus* – which means ‘and immediately’. Like C.S.Lewis’ Aslan, Jesus bounds around from place to place without stopping. Like any male lion, he has a wide territory, ranging across the whole of Galilee. One of the things that most struck me on my first trip to Israel was the sheer amount of walking Jesus must have done! Mark adds to the sense of urgency and vivacity in Jesus’ mission by using the historic present form for verbs – so for me there was little battling with the joys of the perfect and aorist tenses either!!

For Mark it is the miracles that are the key to the person of Jesus. Isaiah had said that when the Messiah came then the blind would see, the deaf would hear and the lame would walk. So those events were the proof for Jewish readers that Jesus was indeed the promised leader from God that they had been waiting for. No space for lengthy parables, like those in Luke, or collections of moral teachings, like Matthew’s Sermon on the Mount, for him. In his Gospel 17 miracles are recorded, mostly in the first half of the book – described by him as *dunamis* – acts of power. We get our word ‘dynamite’ from the same Greek root, and the effect that Mark says they had on people did cause the kind of explosion we heard about in today’s Gospel.

If we had begun at the start of the chapter we would have heard about Jesus healing a man in the Capernaum synagogue on the Sabbath. Not a problem if he was at death’s door, as saving life takes priority over all other Jewish laws, but this guy had a deformed hand, a life-long condition which could have waited until the day ended at sunset. That was followed by a series of healings, including a number of exorcisms as he walked in the countryside around the lake, accompanied by his ‘pride’ – his 12 apostles – who were commanded to share in his work of teaching and healing. No wonder by the time we reach the end of the chapter it seems as if the whole world is against him!

This is one of the few references to Jesus’ family in the Gospels. Most of what we hear in Luke and Matthew is confined to the nativity stories, But for Mark, Jesus the lion bursts out into Galilee fully grown, like a male cub thrown out of the family group to find his own way in life. News of his reputation must have reached the hill town of Nazareth and his family were so shocked by what they had heard that they had come to sort things out. But the young adult lion can never return to his original pride, despite the picture that children’s films like ‘The Lion King’ and ‘Madagascar’ may portray! He has to establish his own family group and pride, as Jesus forcibly points out to Mary and his brothers.

What was going on in the remote region of Galilee must also have reached the ears of the religious leaders in Jerusalem – mutterings that a young hot-head was being proclaimed as a messianic figure was a threat to the very existence of Judaism. The Roman government had proved tolerant so far, but rebellions in Galilee had already tested that sympathy and the Jewish leaders would not have wished the uneasy relationship to be put under more strain. And so the most experienced religious teachers had been dispatched post-haste to debate with Jesus before he could lead more gullible young men astray from the officially approved version of the faith.

The image many people have of Jesus is that of a saintly figure with long blond hair wearing a pristine white robe wandering serenely around the countryside, occasionally pausing to gently touch small children on the head to bless them – the gentle Jesus, meek and mild of stained glass windows and Sunday school hymns. For those whose understanding of Christianity is limited to their childhood experiences this is far from being the true picture and that may be why C. S. Lewis chose to use the image of the lion, Aslan, in his allegorical children’s stories.

Aslan may want the best for those who live in Narnia, but he is always unpredictable. His actions cannot be controlled or fully understood and faith is required to accept the way he behaves – as Mr Beaver said to the children in ‘The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe’:

“Safe? Who said anything about safe? ‘Course he isn’t safe. But he’s good. He’s the King, I tell you.”

Over the recent year there has been a rise in interest in spiritual matters and all forms of religious belief. The pandemic has taken away our former certainties and expectations and made us more aware of the precariousness of our existence. I suspect that for some the certainty of that image of Jesus acquired in childhood may have encouraged some to return to re-explore a faith that they had put away with ‘childish things’. But, as both our readings today show, there are no certainties in this life. I like Paul’s image of our earthly life as a tent. As making tents was his trade I am sure that he was an expert in their fragility. And those of you who have experienced the joys of camping will know that it is fine when it is warm and dry, but hard work and uncertain in the unpredictable English summer – I well remember having to storm-set and then sleep though a thunderstorm in a 6 person Icelandic tent during Guide camps!

The Jesus of Mark’s Gospel is never the cosy, comforting character we may wish for. He is unpredictable and challenging – as both his family and other Jewish rabbis found to their cost. We are now in the long season of Trinity with green as the predominant liturgical colour until Advent Sunday. Green reminds us that we should be continually growing as Christians and that requires us to challenge our preconceptions. We are always encouraged to read books during Lent to help us in our spiritual quest, but maybe reading the whole of Mark’s Gospel (it is only 16 short chapters), or even re-read the Narnia books, to discover that power of Jesus the lion would be a suitable task for us all during this season of the Christian year.

P.S. If you want to do some follow up reading I suggest ‘Deep Magic, Dragons and Talking Mice’ by Alister McGrath

And/or ‘The Lion’s World’ and ‘Meeting God in Mark’ by Rowan Williams. These are talks he gave during Lent at Canterbury Cathedral.