

*“Go ye into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature” (Mk. 16.15)*

The Gospel for Ascension Day itself comes from the “long ending” of Mark (16.9 onwards). This passage is not found in major early copies of the gospel, and is written in a style unlike the rest. I am confident that St. Mark did not write it. But that is not the end of the story. The passage has been recognised as part of Holy Scripture by the Church for many centuries. There is every reason for continuing to read it and accepting that it has authority.

We read it because we learn from it the faith of a Christian of, I think, the late first century, who had read all of the first three Gospels and decided that Mark needed an ending which made explicit what the original hinted. This was not a fraud. There was no “New Testament” whose content was agreed, nor would there be for nearly three hundred years. Every copyist (in those days before printing) could improve a book (and perhaps the 21<sup>st</sup> chapter of John represents the same instinct for improvement, albeit by somebody much nearer to the author of the rest of that book). Maybe (theologians disagree) either Mark was never finished or it lost the last column of text almost as soon as it was written (something which very easily happened to papyrus rolls). In either case the attempt to supply an ending would be a reasonable response. Maybe, however, St. Mark himself did regard 16.8 as a perfectly adequate ending. I think it better you should know these problems, so that you are not tempted to imagine the New Testament to be certain in every detail. But, having recognised the background, we are seeking, not to improve our knowledge of textual criticism, nor the aesthetics of authors in the first century, but our souls' health. For our unknown author had some important truths to give us, even if he was largely summarising material we can read elsewhere.

For the Ascension is not a study in space travel. I am sure you know this, but theologians of my youth seemed to be sure that ordinary Christians made that mistake. There is an earthly truth, which is this. It seems that between the Resurrection and the Ascension Jesus from time to time showed himself to the disciples. These appearances were always in completely human reality (albeit glorified humanity) – he could be touched, he would eat. The Ascension, whatever the event was like as experienced, convinced them that there would be no more of these appearances. The earthly ministry in its human form was over. But not over because it had failed, rather because the Father had accepted it and it was completed. For that is the first heavenly truth of the Ascension.

And the second heavenly truth is that this is not the story of Jesus in isolation, but our story “that where he is, thither we might also ascend, and reign with him in glory” (the Proper Preface for Ascensiontide).

But there is also a second earthly truth. It is often said that Jesus founded no church. This is true, in that he belonged, as did the disciples, to God's church as already existing – the Jewish people meeting for worship. But it is also false; he had in practice (as was common enough in Judaism) developed his own Jewish group for religious purposes, eating together and praying together. Should this continue or not? If it should continue, on what terms? The other Gospels, in different ways, have the last appearance as decisive for answering the question. Jesus declares that the group must continue and defines its purpose. These passages are, in effect, the title-deeds of the Church.

So here too we get title-deeds. The church is to continue, and it has a universal mission of preaching and baptising. This is not just a matter of earthly obedience; God's backing is promised. Those signs which Jesus had done in his earthly ministry will continue, being done “in my name” which means on the basis of my Father's acceptance of me (notice that John 14.12 says the same, with a promise of “greater works” indeed; and compare 1 Peter 4.10-1). We might think some of the details are naive; but either we accept this “great commission” or we have no basis for existing.

Our author organised his ending very effectively. Jesus is called “Lord” (so he shares in God's majesty) and “sat on the right hand of God” (whereas not even the highest of the angels could be allowed to sit in God's presence, just as the Privy Council has to stand in the Queen's presence). The term “Son of God” which might (or might not) be found in Mark 1.1 is not conclusive for Jesus' status; this passage is unambiguous within the terms of contemporary Judaism. So this is the start of the understanding of the Holy Trinity.

*The sermon relates to the Prayer Book Gospel for the Ascension.*