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ERIC SYMES ABBOTT

Memorial Lecture

delivered by

John Fenton

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John of the Cross and the Gospel according to Mark

A strange pair to bring together, you might think – John of the Cross and the author of the Gospel according to Mark. John lived in Spain in the sixteenth century, and never left it; he was both in 1542 and died in 1591; Henry VIII was King of England when he was born; the first English Prayer Book of 1549 came out when he was seven (and he almost certainly knew nothing about it, then or later); William Shakespeare was born when he was 18; the Armada was defeated when he was 46, and he died just before his fiftieth birthday, when Queen Elizabeth I still had twelve more years on the English throne.

All we know about Mark is what we can gather from one small book written in Greek, somewhere in the Roman Empire, perhaps around the year A.D. 70. John (by whom is meant John of the Cross throughout this lecture; the gospel of that name will be referred to as The Fourth Gospel) – John was a poet, who wrote in Spanish, and composed commentaries on his own poems which fill three volumes in the English translation of E. Allison Peers (1934, reprinted 1943); Mark was a story-teller, who used stories as his way of proclaiming the good news. John was trained in scholastic philosophy and theology, and owed much to traditions of devotion that went back, by way of Bernard of Clairvaux and Pseudo-Dionysius, to *The Song of Songs* in the Old Testament interpreted allegorically; Mark's immediate background was probably the teaching of Paul, and, behind that, Jewish Apocalyptic, and ultimately a different Old Testament book (the last to be written), *Daniel*. Of course John knew Mark's gospel: he had only two books in his cell, we are told, and one of them was the Bible (which in any case, they say, he knew off by heart); he knew Mark's gospel, but he does not often quote Mark's gospel: according to the index in Allison Peers' *Complete Works* the figures are: Matthew 65 times, Mark 3 times, Luke 54 times, the Fourth Gospel 85 times. So the Fourth Gospel was the one he quoted most frequently, and Mark's the one he quoted least frequently, and by a long way: 85 – 3. But, as we shall see later, there is one particular passage in one of John's works in which he explicitly mentions a chapter in mark, and draws his readers' attention to it with great emphasis.

History was kinder to John than to Mark; John was beatified within a century of his death (in 1675), canonized fifty years later (in 1726), and declared a Doctor of the Church (in 1926). Mark, on the other hand, was regarded as the follower and abbreviator of Matthew; no commentary was written on him before that of Bede in the eighth century, unless one counts a catena by Victor of Antioch in the fifth century; but there is no commentary on Mark by Origen, Chrysostom, Jerome or Augustine. Interest in Mark began only in the first half of the nineteenth century, when it was suggested that it might be the oldest of the four gospels and one of their sources; and it was not until the beginning of the twentieth century that anyone thought of Mark as more than a collector and editor of other people's reminiscences. Then, in 1901, for the first time, he was treated as a real author, a writer of profound thought and skill.

So the question is, why bring two such different writers together, and try to talk about both of them in one lecture?

I know that old men should not be encouraged to reminisce; but I have through about this question for a long time, and I cannot see how to answer it without being, very briefly, autobiographical. That is the only way I can explain why, when I was invited to give the Eric Abbott Memorial Lecture, I chose the subject, John of the Cross and the Gospel according to Mark.

I went to Lincoln in July 1943, to do one year in preparation for ordination, and Eric Abbott was the Warden of the Theological College at that time. In the previous three years, I had been reading

Theology at Oxford, and the man who tutored me for the New Testament was Robert Henry Lightfoot, the Dean Ireland Professor at New College. Lightfoot taught me how to read Mark's gospel; he was, at that time, I think, the only person in the world who knew. Eric Abbott introduced me to the writers on Spirituality, and among them, of course, to John of the Cross; he also taught me how to pray, and how to preach. To have been the pupil of one or other of these great teachers, Lightfoot and Abbott, would have been the greatest good fortune anyone could have hoped for; to have been the pupil of both was very heaven; I was one of the luckiest people alive.

In those days, the Biblical books were on the left of the Theological College library at Lincoln, as you came in; and the devotional books were at the far end, on the right. Somehow, and I cannot remember who it was who said it, but somehow we were given the idea that our job was to bring together Biblical Theology (which was all the rage at that time) and Spirituality; we were to find a theology that could be prayed, and a spirituality that was scriptural. (The weakness and *naïveté* of this, as it must now seems, was that we paid little or no attention to systematic theology.)

I left Lincoln in June 1944, a few days before the D-Day landings, and was made deacon the day before my twenty-third birthday, and served as a curate in a parish near Wigan for three years. I read more in those three years than in any other three of my life, including the complete works of John of the Cross and Allison Peers' life of him, *Spirit of Flame* (1943). Then I went back to Lincoln, on the staff, when Kenneth Sansbury was Warden, from 1947-1954, and lectured on the New Testament. We covered the whole of it, Matthew to Revelation, once every year; it was superb training for the lecturer. I also lectured on a course called Introduction to Western Spirituality. When I left, to become a vicar in South Yorkshire, and time lay heavy on my hands, I planned to write a book that was to bring together the New Testament and the spiritual writers, and, if I remember right, the contents-page was to go like this:

Chapter 1:	*Matthew and the Desert Fathers*
Chapter 2:	*Mark and John of the Cross*
Chapter 3:	*Luke and Francis de Sales*
Chapter 4:	*The Fourth Gospel and Walter Hilton*
Chapter 5:	*Paul and Julian of Norwich*
Chapter 6:	*Hebrews and the Cloud of Unknowing*
Chapter 7:	*Revelation and Bernard of Clairvaux*

The contents-page was as far as the book ever got; I was asked to write a commentary on Matthew for a popular series and never returned to the New Testament and Spirituality – until now. Might I, I wondered, redeem my mis-spent time that's past by attending, at this late stage, to one of the pairs that I had put together nearly forty years ago, Mark and John of the Cross.

In the 1950s, I think I would have attempted to show how, in each case, the later writer developed the ideas of the particular biblical author with whom I had paired him (or her). But that does not now seem to me the best way to go about it. I do not want to argue for any historical or causal link between a biblical writer and his later partner. It would be almost impossible to argue that John of the Cross was deliberately and consciously expounding the theology of Mark; almost, but not quite, as we shall see. The way I see it now is more like this:

Suppose someone comes along and says to you: I think I get the point of Matthew; it's all about impossible commands that are made possible because Christ is present with his disciples till the end of the world. I think I get the point of Luke; it's all about Christ the friend of sinners, and his offer of repentance and forgiveness; the parables are the main thing in Luke. I think I get the point of the Fourth Gospel; it's all about eternal life, and how you can have it now; this life is in God's Son; if you have the Son, you have life. But, try as I may, I cannot see what the point of Mark is. I know he has more miracles per page than any of the other three; I know he hates the disciples; I know there is a problem about the end of the gospel. In Mark, Jesus is remote; people are afraid of him and daren't ask him questions, and are always wrong whatever they say or do; and his own exit-line is My God, my God, why have you abandoned me? We never see him again after that. Tell me what to do, so that I can make some sort of sense of The Gospel according to Mark, because it does not seem to me much of a gospel, a book of good news, at all.

If someone said that, then the answer would be – and it's obviously impractical and of no use to the majority of those who might conceivably ask such a question about Mark, if indeed anyone would – but the answer is: Read John of the Cross, and then you will see the point of Mark's Gospel. Take John as the prologue to Mark. You will understand and appreciate Mark, if you taste is educated through reading John.

To say that might provoke the comment: Aren't you taking a sledge-hammer to crack a nut? Yes, indeed: but what a sledge-hammer! and what a nut!

How would reading John of the Cross help me to understand The Gospel according to Mark? – that is the question; where shall we begin? At the end. Both writers believe in a future of the purest joy and happiness. Both of them are writing with the purpose of telling their readers or hearers how to live now, in order to arrive at that future, reach the goal and participate in the bliss. Both writers are controlled and dominated by hope: the hope of glory; the hope of salvation; seeing God and being united with him. There are difference in the way they write about it; but we need not, must not, be put off by that. What they have in common is far more important than how they differ. It would be superficial and far too slick to say, Mark is looking forward to the Kingdom of God on earth; John is looking forward to the union of the soul with God in heaven. Mark's thinking is corporate, and includes the renewal of all creation; John's is individualistic, and shows no interest in the redemption of the natural order. Much of this may be true, but it is largely irrelevant and partly not even true. Mark, for example, like John, uses the marriage metaphor, though in a different way: Christ is the bridegroom who will be taken away (2.19f) but will come again (13.26f). According to Mark, the root of uncleanness is in the heart of the individual; there is a sort of individualism in Mark, just as there is in John:

> *From inside, from the human heart,*
> *come evil thoughts, acts of fornication,*
> *theft, murder, adultery, greed, and malice;*
> *fraud, indecency, envy, slander,*
> *arrogance, and folly; all these things*
> *come from within, and they are what defile a person* (7.20ff).

Moreover, Mark uses stories of miraculous healing to express the good news of salvation, and he does so more frequently than any of the other three evangelists; there are thirteen individuals healed, whose cures are described in detail. The good news that Your faith has saved you is put before us by means of accounts of sick and crippled individuals being made well. There is no fundamental difference here between Mark and John: both are writing about a future of

indescribable joy; for both, the present is overshadowed by the future that is to come. (On the day I wrote this {20.iv.92} *The Times* carried an obituary of the late Frankie Howerd, which ended like this: Once asked for his favourite memory, he replied: "It hasn't happened yet". Mark and John of the Cross would both have enjoyed that; in fact, it is almost a quotation from John.) Commentating on the lines in *The Spiritual Canticle*:

> *There wouldst thou show me*
> *That which my soul desired*

John writes:

> *This desire is the equality of love which the soul ever desires, both naturally and supernaturally, because the lover cannot be satisfied if he feels not that he loves as much as he is loved. And as the soul sees the truth of the vastness of the love wherewith God loves her, she desires not to love him less loftily and perfectly, to which end she desires present transformation, because the soul cannot reach this equality and completeness of love save by the total transformation of her will in that of God, wherein the two wills are united after such manner that they become one … She will love Him even as much as she is loved by God.*
>
> (*Complete Works* II 172f).

John shows us how what we long for, what our future is, is union with God in love; like Bride and Bridegroom, as in *The Song of Songs*, a book he treasured; when he was dying, he asked for it to be read to him: Read me some verses from the *Song of Songs*, he begged. The Prior complied. (E.A. Peers, *Spirit of Flame*, 80).

Another quotation from *The Spiritual Canticle* makes the same point: that our longing is for union with God. He is commenting on the line in his poem:

> *And let us go to see ourselves in thy beauty.*

He says:

> *Which signifies: Let us so act that, by means of this exercise of love aforementioned, we may come to see ourselves in Thy beauty: that is, that we may be alike in beauty, and that Thy beauty may be such that, when one of us looks at the other, each may be like to Thee in Thy beauty, and may see himself in Thy beauty, which will be the transforming of me in Thy beauty; and thus I shall see Thee in Thy beauty and Thou wilt see me in Thy beauty; and Thou wilt see Thyself in me in Thy beauty, and I shall see myself in Thee in Thy beauty; and thus I may be like to Thee in Thy beauty and Thou mayest be like to me in thy beauty, and my beauty may be Thy beauty, and Thy beauty my beauty; and I shall be Thou in Thy beauty and Thou wilt be I in Thy beauty, because Thy beauty itself will be my beauty.*
>
> (*Complete Works* II 164).

All of John's writing is controlled by hope of God and longing for union with him in love. Mark, too, is about the future, and the key term that he uses to express it is The kingdom of God. He has it fourteen times in his gospel, thirteen of which are in the direct speech of Jesus. It comes for example, in the first words of Jesus in the book:

> *The time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God has come near* (1.15);

again, at the end, just before they sing the Passover hymn and leave the house to go to Gethsemane, Jesus takes an oath of abstinence from wine until the kingdom comes:

> *Truly I tell you: never again shall I drink from the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God* (14.25).

It is not the *Song of Songs* for Mark, but *Daniel* that he starts from: four world empires to be followed by God's direct rule on the earth. In Daniel 2, the image of gold, silver, bronze, iron and clay (that is, Babylon, Medea, Persia, Greece) will be totally destroyed by a stone that will fill the whole world; God's rule will abolish and replace all human politics. Then, again, in chapter 7, which is the chiastic pair to chapter 2, the four beasts are also the four empires, and they will be replaced by God's rule, symbolized now not by a stone but by one who was like a human being. Mark is looking forward that time, and his gospel is rich in allusions to Daniel. Jesus, he believes, will come as the Son of man whom Daniel had seen, and he will send his angels to gather the elect from the four winds back into his kingdom. The tree in which the birds roost (Mark 4.32) refers back to the tree that Daniel had described (4.12); it is the symbol of kingly power, which God gives and takes back, in order that, in the end, he may exercise it himself.

That will be the time of salvation. Mark sets it before us in his eighteen miracle-stories: instead of demons and madness, there will be sanity; instead of sickness, health; instead of uncleanness, holiness; instead of defects, activity; instead of guilt, forgiveness; instead of sea and storms, peace; instead of hunger, plenty; instead of barrenness, fruitfulness; instead of death, life.

The miracles in Mark point to the life that there will be on the earth when God begins to rule; even more important than the miracles is the first commandment of the law:

> *The first is, Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God is the one Lord and you must love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength* (12.29).

When the scribe agrees with him, Jesus says:

> *You are not far from the kingdom of God* (12.34).

Whatever that difficult saying means precisely, it must include the idea that to love God and to enter his kingdom are closely associated.

We can see Mark's longing for the future in the one and only long, continuous speech of Jesus that he includes, in chapter 13; it is all about what must happen (13.7, a phrase from Daniel 2.28) before the Son of man comes and that new age begins, in which we shall be as angels (12.25), resurrected, healed, set free from all that hinders us now from loving God as we should. We shall be perfect in love. Mark's book ends with the promise that it shall be so:

> *Tell his disciples, and Peter,*
> *He is going ahead of you into Galilee,*
> *there you will see him, as he told you* (16.7).

He had told them that they would see the kingdom of God come in power (9.1); and that they would see the Son of man coming in the clouds (13.26, 14.62). The future is the time for seeing, and for loving what we shall see. Like Bartimaeus, we shall recover our sight and we shall follow Jesus to Jerusalem and to Galilee; we shall be saved.

John and mark, then, are both writing about something that is in the future, and is to control all our decisions and choices in the present.

John believes that our future is union with God in love, and the figure that he frequently uses to describe it is marriage. Moreover, because marriage is an exclusive relationship, John teaches with vigorous and systematic ruthlessness that there must be no other object in our affections than God alone. To get rid of our other loves, we shall have to enter the Dark Night, and this will involve us in mortification, the annihilation of self. Here is one of his much-quoted passages on mortification:

> *Strive always to choose, not that which is easiest but that which is most difficult;*
> *Not that which is most delectable, but that which is most unpleasing;*
> *Not that which gives most pleasure, but rather that which gives least;*
> *Not that which is restful, but that which is wearisome;*
> *Not that which gives most consolation, but rather that which makes disconsolate;*
> *Not that which is greatest, but that which is least;*
> *Not that which is loftiest, and most precious, but that which is lowest and most despised;*
> *Not that which is a desire for anything, but that which is a desire for nothing;*
> *Strive not to go about seeking the best of temporal things, but the worst.*
> *Strive thus to desire to enter into complete detachment and emptiness and poverty, with respect to that which is in the world, for Christ's sake.*
>
> (*Complete Works* I.61).

It is shortly after this passage, which comes at the end of Book I of the *Ascent of Mount Carmel*, that John makes his one and, as far as I can see, only explicit reference to Mark's gospel. It is in Book II of the *Ascent* chapter VII paragraph 4:

> *… It is clearly seen that the soul must not only be disencumbered from that which belongs to the creatures, but likewise, as it travels, must be annihilated and detached from all that belongs to its spirit. Wherefore Our Lord instructing us and leading us into this road gave, in the eighth chapter of S. Mark, that wonderful teaching of which I think it may almost be said that, the more necessary it is for spiritual persons, the less it is practised by them. As this teaching is so important and so much to our purpose, I shall reproduce it here in full, and expound it according to its real and spiritual sense.*

John then writes out Mark 8, verses 34 and 35, in Latin, and then provides the Spanish translation, of which this is the English:

> *If any man will follow My road, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow Me. For he that will save his soul shall lose it; but he that loses it for My sake, shall gain it.*
>
> (*Complete Works* I.88f).

The strange and surprising thing about this passage in John is the reference to Mark's gospel. Until the nineteenth century and the theory that Mark was the earliest gospel, writers usually quoted from Matthew, if the passage they wanted to refer to was in Matthew; and John normally follows this practice. Hence his infrequent quotations from Mark. The two verses that he quotes here, Mark 8.34,35, are also in Matthew, in virtually identical words: Matthew 16.24,25. The question therefore arises, Why did John refer to Mark chapter 8 at this point in the *Ascent* when he could equally well have referred to Matthew chapter 16? The only answer I can think of – and there is no

way of testing it – is that he had noticed the repeated emphasis in Mark chapters 8 to 12 on disowning yourself, if you want to be a follower of Christ.

In John, it is the Ascent of Mount Carmel; and he tells us what that means: Union of the soul with God (*Complete Works* I, 9). In Mark, chapters 8 to 12 are also on ascent, but to Jerusalem (10.33). To be followers of Jesus on this road they must renounce self, destroy their lives, lose the world. They must be like the children whom Jesus hugs, once in chapter 9 and again in chapter 10; because children have no property or status; they are nobodies; they do not count; they are no better than slaves, Paul had said (Galatians 4.1). Mark's account of self-annihilation is as ruthless as John's; it includes cutting off your hand or your foot and tearing out your eye (9.43-48). Mark has a saying of Jesus so severe and devastating that both Matthew and Luke omit it:

> *Everyone will be salted with fire* (9.49).

It is a parody of an instruction in Leviticus (2.13):

> *Every offering of sacrifice is to be salted with salt.*

Under the old covenant, sacrifices were made acceptable to God by adding salt; under the new covenant, the worshippers are the sacrifice, and the way in which they are made acceptable to God is by fire; that is, by destruction. Mark puts the rich man immediately after the second passage about children, and the lesson is the same; the man asks what he must do to inherit eternal life. He is somebody who has everything, including having kept all the commandments since he was a child. But a rich man, by definition, lacks one thing, and it happens to be the only thing that matters: poverty; so:

> *Go, sell everything you have … follow me* (10.21).

Mark returns to the theme in the final story before chapter 13 and the passion and resurrection in 14-16; it is the story of the widow in the temple, with two tiny coins, and she puts both of them into the chest. She is the model for a disciple; Mark says it three times, because it is true:

> *She has put in everything* (panta)
> as *much as she had* (hosa eichen)
> *the whole of her life* (holon ton bion autes).

Mark's story tells us nothing about what she did next: How did she pay the rent? How did she buy her food? Was she acting prudently? Did somebody have to look after her? Mark tells us none of these things because he is not interested in that sort of problem. His stories are not realistic. He only wants us to think one thing: Love for God cannot co-exist with any other sort of love; it is exclusive in its demands; it is like marriage; there is no place for a bit on the side; all your heart, all your soul, all your mind, all your strength – and all your money, too.

Probably the characteristic of both John and Mark that is most offensive, particularly in an affluent society, is their negative attitudes. Here, for example, is John:

> *In order to come to union with the wisdom of God, the soul has to proceed rather by unknowing than by knowing; and all the dominion and liberty of the world, compared with the liberty and dominion of the spirit of God, is the most abject slavery, affliction and captivity. Wherefore the soul that is enamoured of prelacy, or of any other such office, and longs for liberty of desire, is considered and treated, in the sight of God, not as a son, but as*

a base slave and captive, since it has not been wiling to accept His holy doctrine, wherein He teaches us that he who would be greater must be less, and he who would be less must be greater.

(*Complete Works* I.27).

John obviously has in mind the story of the request of James and John for chief seats in glory; it is from Mark chapter 10 (he refers to it again, elsewhere):

Whoever wants to be great must be your servant,
and whoever wants to be first must be the slave of all (10.43f).

It is not only ecclesiastical ambition that John is against – wanting to be a canon; he warns his readers against any devotional feelings, or hearing voices, or seeing visions, or any physical experience at all. The union that we are made for is union with God and God cannot be experienced physically, because he is not a material object. Union is to be with God, therefore nothing must be allowed to get in the ay of it – no attachment of any kind; particularly no religious attachments, because they are the most insidious. This is the area in which John appears to us most negative.

Of course it is a mistake to think of this as negative; we only need to look at what he is saying in a different way – and he provides the simile that we need. Sunlight strikes a pane of glass: if the glass is clean, the ray goes straight through the glass, as if it were not there. No one would think of criticizing window-cleaners as people whose work was purely negative; nor is John to be criticized in this respect.

Mark is superbly negative in the same way. The coming rule of God on the earth will abolish all kinds of authority – human and demonic. The miracle-story that he chooses to put first is the one in which the demoniac in the synagogue cries out:

You have come to destroy us (1.24).

He speaks the truth: God's rule will destroy demons and synagogues, Satan, the law and the temple. Jesus will rebuild a new temple in which there will be no more offerings and sacrifices, as the scribe had half-expected (12.33). Not even religion will get between us and God.

The demons in Mark know who Jesus is, but he silences them. John shows us why: the Devil is a great deceiver. The important truth about Jesus, as Mark sees it, is not who he is – Christ, Son of God, Son of man, Holy one of God – that's what demons know; but what he does; and what he does is, he dies. He dies, abandoned by God. That is all we see in Mark: he will not be seen again until the final union in the age to come.

The last two chapters of Mark are rich in irony. For example the women in chapter 16 come in unbelief to anoint a corpse on the very day he told them he would rise; and talk about moving a stone already moved. They refuse to believe, and instead they are afraid: these are the only alternatives (5.36). In the past, people had spoken, when told to be silent; now they are silent, when they are told to speak.

But it is the paragraph before this (15.42-47) where the irony is stronger and the humour even blacker. Joseph of Arimathea also is longing for the kingdom of God, like Jesus, who had spoken about it thirteen times, and died with the title King of the Jews on his cross. Joseph asks for the body (*soma*) of Jesus, and Pilate makes a present of the carcase (*ptoma*): the man who longed for life found himself landed with a dead corpse. Live is through death; light is through darkness. The

story of the burial epitomises the teaching of Mark's book and illustrates the main theme in John of the Cross:

> *In order to arrive at having pleasure in everything,*
> *Desire to have pleasure in nothing* (I.62).

Compare two passages, one from each. First, from *The Dark Night of the Soul*, where John is commenting on the line,

> *By the secret ladder, disguised.*

The secret ladder, he says, is dark contemplation by which the soul goes forth to union with God:

> *It is like one who sees something never seen before,*
> *whereof he has not even seen the like;*
> *although he might understand its*
> *nature and have experience of it, he*
> *would be unable to give it a name, or say*
> *what it is, however much he tried to do so,*
> *and this in spite of its being a thing which*
> *he had perceived with his senses. How much*
> *less, then, could he describe a thing that has*
> *not entered through the senses! For the language*
> *of God has this characteristic that, since it*
> *is very intimate and spiritual in its relations*
> *with the soul, it transcends every sense and at*
> *once makes all harmony and capacity of the*
> *outward and inward senses to cease and be dumb.*
> (*Complete Works* I.457).

We come to God by this secret ladder which is our inability to describe him, to give him a name.

Compare this with Mark 13 verses 5 to 37, the final speech of Jesus; and notice first the high rate of negatives: *ou*, *me*, *oume*, *oupo*, etc. In thirty-three verses there are twenty-seven instances of some form of the negative.

> *Let no one mislead you. People will say, I am he; do not believe them. There will be national and natural disasters; that is only the beginning. There will be persecution; do not worry what to say. Do not try to take anything with you; do not fetch anything from house or field. There will be false messiahs and false prophets; do not believe them. They will do miracles; that is only another form of deception. Hang on until all the lights of the created order have gone out:*
>
> > *The sun darkened*
> > *the moon not giving its light*
> > *the stars falling from the sky.*
>
> *When it is totally dark, you will see the Son of man coming, and you will see him because his clothes will shine with dazzling whiteness, just as the three disciples had seen him at the transfiguration.*

Mark provides no description of the life of the new age; he makes no attempt to describe the new heaven, the new earth, or the city that will come down from God. Mark knows, as John knew later, that the language of God makes us dumb. After twenty verses of preparation for the end, describing

the waiting, warning us against being misled, there are only two verses describing the coming and the gathering. The reader of John is not surprised by the silence of Mark.

To sum up and conclude: This lecture has been about one idea, and only one. It contains a modest and practical suggestion. If you could not find the point of Mark's gospel, it might help if you read John of the Cross. Although he was living in sixteenth century Spain, far removed from Mark in time and probably in space, his teaching illuminates Mark's gospel, written in the Roman Empire in the first century. To put it at its lowest, there is a similarity of through between these two great Christian writers. They both believed that God is beyond our experience; they are both saying, It is not this; don't hang onto anything; the arrows are beyond you. Or, if that is to say too much, could we put it like this: Might it be that if we came to Mark from John of the Cross we should find one way of reading that gospel that would yield a sort of Christian sense? No doubt there are endless ways of reading Mark's text; John gives us one, and it is one that has proved itself to many, over many centuries.

So thanks be to God, for Mark and for John of the Cross; for Robert Henry Lightfoot and for Eric Symes Abbott. May they all rest in peace; and may we come, with them, to that kingdom of God and union in love which was their hope and for which they longed.