

Parish of Central Exeter
4th Sunday of Epiphany
Morning Worship and Spiritual Communion

31st January 2021

Authority and Identity



Welcome everyone.

Our reflections this morning have been written by Sheila with the Intercessions by Keith. Sheila also provided material for Coffee Break. Many thanks.

Opening Sentences

O Lord, open our lips and our mouth shall proclaim your praise.

The night has passed, and the day lies open before us; let us pray with one heart and mind.

Silence is kept.

As we rejoice in the gift of this new day,
so may the light of your presence, O God,
set our hearts on fire with love for you;
now and for ever. Amen.

Gathering Hymn

'Praise to the Holiest in the Height.'

This is from the choirs of Grimsby Minster. Just one voice, but beautifully sung. The words are not on the screen, but the voice is so clear and the words are well known.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=La-s8-titiA>

Confession

Jesus says, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is close at hand.' So let us turn away from our sin and turn to Christ, confessing our sins in penitence and faith.

When we have failed to recognise your love
in the actions of friend or stranger
forgive us.

When we have failed to recognise your presence
in the world in which we live
forgive us.

When we have failed to remember your gospel
in our actions, thoughts and words
forgive us.

(pause)

Renew our hearts in worship,
our minds in wisdom
and our hands in service.

Take our lives and use them,
as a sacrifice of love.

Psalm

The psalm appointed for today is Psalm 111

Praise for God's Wonderful Works

- ¹ Praise the Lord!
I will give thanks to the Lord with my whole heart,
in the company of the upright, in the congregation.
- ² Great are the works of the Lord,
studied by all who delight in them.
- ³ Full of honour and majesty is his work,
and his righteousness endures for ever.
- ⁴ He has gained renown by his wonderful deeds;
the Lord is gracious and merciful.
- ⁵ He provides food for those who fear him;
he is ever mindful of his covenant.
- ⁶ He has shown his people the power of his works,
in giving them the heritage of the nations.
- ⁷ The works of his hands are faithful and just;
all his precepts are trustworthy.
- ⁸ They are established for ever and ever,
to be performed with faithfulness and uprightness.
- ⁹ He sent redemption to his people;
he has commanded his covenant for ever.
Holy and awesome is his name.
- ¹⁰ The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom;
all those who practise it have a good understanding.
His praise endures for ever.

Prayer of response to the Psalm

The works of your hands are justice and truth,
gracious God who are full of compassion.

May we who long for your kingdom to come
rejoice to do your will
and acknowledge your power alone to save
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Collect for Candlemas (Feb 2)

Lord Jesus Christ,
light of the nations and glory of Israel:
make your home among us,
and present us pure and holy
to your heavenly Father,
your God, and our God.

The Lord's prayer

Gathering our prayers and praises into one,
as our Saviour taught us, so we pray:

Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our sins
as we forgive those who sin against us.
Lead us not into temptation
but deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the power,
and the glory are yours
now and for ever. **Amen.**

Worship song

Through all the changing scenes of life. Sung by the Bath Chorus. Words are on the screen.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VBguBVam5-0>



The Gospel Mark 1:21-39

The Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ according to Mark

Glory to you, O Lord.

²¹⁻²² Then they entered Capernaum. When the Sabbath arrived, Jesus lost no time in getting to the meeting place. He spent the day there teaching. They were surprised at his teaching—so forthright, so confident—not quibbling and quoting like the religion scholars.

²³⁻²⁴ Suddenly, while still in the meeting place, he was interrupted by a man who was deeply disturbed and yelling out, “What business do you have here with us, Jesus? Nazarene! I know what you’re up to! You’re the Holy One of God, and you’ve come to destroy us!”

²⁵⁻²⁶ Jesus shut him up: “Quiet! Get out of him!” The afflicting spirit threw the man into spasms, protesting loudly—and got out.

²⁷⁻²⁸ Everyone there was spellbound, buzzing with curiosity. “What’s going on here? A new teaching that does what it says? He shuts up defiling, demonic spirits and tells them to get lost!” News of this travelled fast and was soon all over Galilee.

²⁹⁻³¹ Directly on leaving the meeting place, they came to Simon and Andrew’s house, accompanied by James and John. Simon’s mother-in-law was sick in bed, burning up with fever. They told Jesus. He went to her, took her hand, and raised her up. No sooner had the fever left than she was up fixing dinner for them.

³²⁻³⁴ That evening, after the sun was down, they brought sick and evil-afflicted people to him, the whole city lined up at his door! He cured their sick bodies and tormented spirits. Because the demons knew his true identity, he didn’t let them say a word.

³⁵⁻³⁷ While it was still night, way before dawn, he got up and went out to a secluded spot and prayed. Simon and those with him went looking for him. They found him and said, “Everybody’s looking for you.”

³⁸⁻³⁹ Jesus said, “Let’s go to the rest of the villages so I can preach there also. This is why I’ve come.” He went to their meeting places all through Galilee, preaching and throwing out the demons.

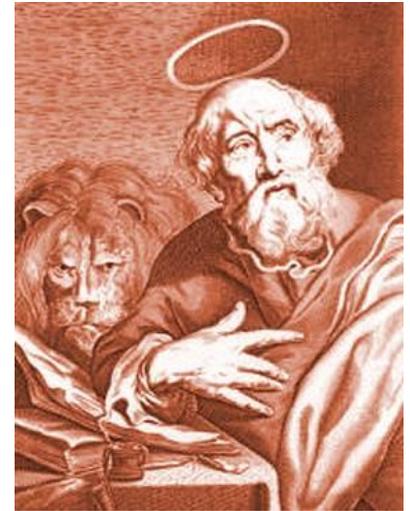
The Message Copyright © 1993, 2002, 2018 by Eugene H. Peterson

This is the Gospel of the Lord

Praise to you, O Christ.

Reflection

Who is Jesus? What is a gospel? These were important questions when the gospels were first written and read, and remain important today. I have always understood 'gospel' as meaning 'good news' and that the four gospels, included in the canon of scripture by the Early Church, tell the good news about Jesus. More recently I have learnt that they have similarities with Graeco-Roman biographies in being accounts of a person's public life and/or writings. In his short book *'Meeting God in Mark'* (text of the Lent lectures from 2014) Rowan Williams shows that though the Greek 'euangelion' or 'good news' in Paul's letters meant a summary of the Christian message, for others it was the term for a public announcement. He gives examples such as the royal proclamation of a birth, or capture of a town, or 'something that has happened to be glad about' which will 'change things in public life' (p6).



St Mark with the symbolic animal of his Gospel – the lion. Often shown as winged, but this one just looks grumpy!

This means that a Greek reader would understand the opening verse 'The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God' to announce a 'regime change' undertaken by a person called Jesus - a common name - who is also called Christ or 'anointed'. Such a reader would wonder who Jesus is and what do these titles mean? The first words that Mark gives to Jesus do announce such a regime change and Williams offers this translation:

'After John had been handed over for imprisonment, Jesus went into Galilee announcing the official proclamation about God. "The time has arrived", he said, "the rule of God has come close, so change your minds. Trust this proclamation"' (Mark 1:15) (p7)

I find this approach to the gospel refreshing. In his introductory chapter Williams continues with comments around the possible identity of Mark, his possible links with Peter, and his language which reflects trading or business Greek rather than literary Greek. He discusses the nature of storytelling and miracles. Stories and anecdotes are refined over time, and the importance of a miracle lies in what it tells us about the person performing it, and the relationship between that person and the recipient or witnesses. He summarises his section on miracles as follows:

'It is to read about a person around whom extraordinary things happened, whatever the exact detail, and to see that such storytelling about these events becomes credible because it has changed the teller and the hearer, has created a relationship of utter confidence which is now offered to the reader/listener to share.' (p23)

As we follow the gospel of Mark in the coming months we are encouraged to think about our response to Jesus, and to the change his life has brought about (the rule of God).

Three weeks ago, we read Mark 1:9-11 with its brief account of Jesus' baptism and the voice from heaven announcing his identity. This week we read of people in the synagogues being surprised by the authority of Jesus' teaching (1v27). At the same time, we read of demons also recognising his authority and identity (1v24,34). In the words of another Williams –

Charles Williams, writing in 1938, 'Witness is born out of heaven and on earth and from hell.' I owe this quote to Rowan Williams (p24) who rightly says it is a great summary of Mark's first chapter.

I chose to use The Message translation this morning to remind us of the vividness and directness of Mark's language and the impact that Jesus's ministry had on the people he met. How to share the excitement expressed in these verses with people today, when talking about Jesus, is a real challenge to me. I need the Holy Spirit to transform me, as the alternative collect for today requests, to give me the courage and wisdom to use opportunities and to find the words which witness to the reality of God's presence today.

God of heaven,
you send the gospel to the ends of the earth
and your messengers to every nation:
send your Holy Spirit to transform us
by the good news of everlasting life
in Jesus Christ our Lord.

Affirmation of Faith

We believe in God the Father,
from whom every family
in heaven and on earth is named.
We believe in God the Son,
who lives in our hearts through faith,
and fills us with his love.
We believe in God the Holy Spirit,
who strengthens us
with power from on high.
We believe in one God;
Father, Son and Holy Spirit.
Amen.

(cf Ephesians 3)

Intercessions

Tuesday is the Feast of Candlemas when we remember that forty days after his birth, Mary and Joseph brought their infant son to the Temple to be 'presented to the Lord'. Forty days was sufficient time to believe that the risk of early mortality for both infant and mother had passed. It was therefore a time to celebrate a new start with some optimism that life would flourish.

It seems that at this moment with the first month of 2021 over, there are some unprecedented opportunities for a new start.

The roll out of the vaccine.

As more and more people are getting vaccinated with the hope that it is the most likely way of keeping this virus in check, we pause and consider what this implies, for ourselves as people treated

or waiting. What are the emotions we are feeling; what are we thankful for, what are we still worried about? What are our concerns about the way it gets distributed around the world?

Lord in your mercy: hear our prayer.

Brexit

The sky didn't fall in on January 1st, nor did paradise emerge, but whatever the road ahead is leading to, it is a bumpy start. Whatever our views were before, they have probably not changed. A bit like the vaccine, supplies of new forms and systems are emerging, and eventually no doubt exporters and importers alike will have had their job, and some sort of order gets restored.

We pause and consider what this implies, for ourselves whichever way we voted. What are the emotions we are feeling; what are we thankful for, what are we still worried about? What are our concerns about the impact on Britain's role in the world?

Lord in your mercy: hear our prayer.

New US president

Although the transfer of power was far less laudable than it should have been, the new president is now installed, and apparently determined to set a new direction for America. How easily this can be achieved is another matter.

We pause and consider what this implies, for ourselves as people watching from a distance, yet aware that decisions taken on the other side of the Atlantic have repercussions for us and the whole world. What are the emotions we are feeling; what are we thankful for, what are we still worried about? What are our concerns about Trump's legacy?

Lord in your mercy: hear our prayer.

Ourselves and others

We have considered just three issues here. There are of course many more, some of which will be personal for you. Take a few moments to hold before God your other hopes and worries especially for those who are near and dear to you.

Lord we ask these prayers in the name of your Son, our Saviour, Jesus Christ.

The Peace

If alone, smile and hug yourself (God does). If otherwise, share the Peace as appropriate.

A short Spiritual Communion

The Book of Common Prayer reminds us that if we offer ourselves in penitence and faith, giving thanks for the redemption won by Christ crucified, we may truly 'eat and drink the Body and Blood of our Saviour



Christ', even when we cannot receive the sacrament physically in ourselves.

Lord, have mercy.
Christ, have mercy.
Lord, have mercy.

O God,
help me to trust you,
help me to know that you are with me,
help me to believe that nothing
can separate me from your love
revealed in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

An offertory prayer

We may not be in church, but we can still offer ourselves and our talents to God.

Blessed are you, God and creator of the universe,
as we offer you our activities, thanksgivings and our life.
We present ourselves, and our world, as we are and as you can make us,
for everything in heaven and on earth is yours,
and of your own do we give you. Blessed be God for ever.

*As we prepare for communion you might like to listen to 'The Table of the Lord' – words by
Rischar, music by Nigel, sung by the Langford Singers.*

Words are on the screen.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KCZmrj81t8o&feature=youtu.be>



*Because there is no Breaking and Sharing we can
have only Spiritual Communion with Christ. I'm
sure you can find a way to use a few minutes of
silence or conversation to enjoy this, and make it
a sacramental moment.*

*Giving thanks for Christ's death and resurrection
you may wish to say*

Thanks be to you, Lord Jesus Christ,
for all the benefits you have given me,
for all the pains and insults you have borne for me.
Since I cannot now receive you sacramentally,
I ask you to come spiritually into my heart.
O most merciful redeemer, friend and brother,
may I know you more clearly,

love you more dearly,
and follow you more nearly, day by day. Amen.

Post Communion Collect

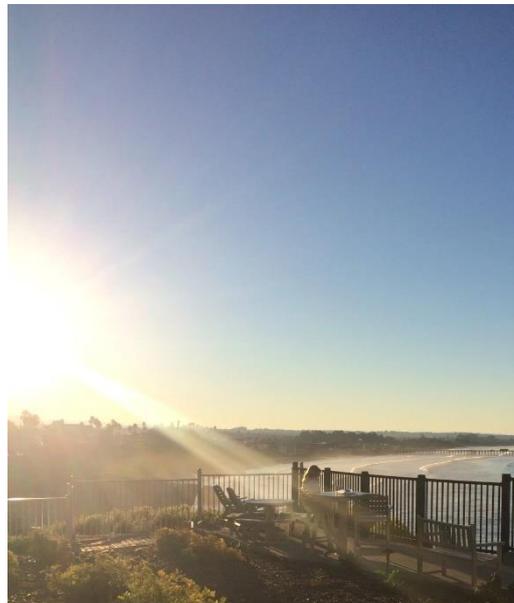
Generous Lord,
in word and eucharist we have proclaimed the mystery of your love:
help us so to live out our days
that we may be signs of your wonders in the world;
through Jesus Christ our Saviour.

Commission

Lord, you are ever watchful
and bless us with your gifts;
as you provide for all our needs,
so help us to build only what pleases you,
through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.

Blessing

The Lord bless us and watch over us,
the Lord make his face shine upon us
and be gracious to us,
the Lord look kindly on us
and give us peace;
and the blessing of God almighty,
the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit,
be among us and remain with us always.
Amen.



Closing Music

We are returning to Psalm 111. This is a slide show following the words of the psalm which appear on the screen and set to reflective music. It has a slightly slow start, and brings our service this morning to a quiet end.

www.youtube.com/watch?v=168IXSO4-Kg

Scroll down for Coffee Break

Coffee Break

The Presentation of Christ 2nd February

On the first Sunday of February in 2019 and 2020 the Celebrate Together service marked this event, also known as Candlemas. In 2019 we met at St Mark's church and looked at their stained-glass window by the font with its depiction of the story. Last year we were in St Thomas' church hall and everyone received a card with this simple portrayal by Richard Frost.



Joseph and Mary bow before Simeon, holding the baby Jesus (in yellow: symbolising the light of the world) with the prophetess Anna in attendance. Yellow crosses indicate their belief in the Messiah.

From *A Story to Tell* by Richard Frost. © Copyright Richard Frost 2019

In the book Richard focusses our thoughts on Joseph and Mary, trying to imagine their lives and thoughts but remembering that they are ordinary people who trusted God. He concludes by suggesting this reflection 'Think back to the times when your future has been uncertain: how has God guided and supported you in such times?'

I have had this card on my chest of drawers since 2 Feb 20 – a reminder of the Celebrate Together community who have not met since March 20. On the back we added this short prayer -

Lord Jesus, help us to trust you,
following the example of Mary and Joseph. Amen.

Scroll down for Night Prayer

Night Prayer

4th Sunday of Epiphany
31st January 2021



Candlemas, Imbolc, Groundhog Day

Introduction

February 2nd has a lot riding on it! It lies half-way between the Winter solstice and the Spring equinox. Because the seasons drag behind the earth's actual progress around the sun, it does not actually feel as if Spring is just around the corner, although you must have noticed daylight is getting longer.

Before Christianity was established in these islands the people celebrated this time as Imbolc. The word in Old Irish suggests it is about the pregnant sheep getting ready to give birth, so is associated with the start of the lambing season, but also with the first early sowing and the flowering of the blackthorn tree. Fires, lights and purification were important elements of the celebrations, and it was easy for the Christian church to introduce instead the celebration of the purification of Mary. It also became the time when people brought their house candles into the church to be blessed.

A tradition also grew up that if the weather was clear at Candlemas, it foretold a longer winter. This weather lore developed in German speaking areas, where the forecasting animal was the badger, to a belief that if the badger emerged from its sett and its shadow was visible, winter weather would continue. German settlers arriving in America had no badgers but plenty of ground burrowing groundhogs, so the belief was transferred to this little animal. Sadly, there is no statistical evidence to confirm any correlation between a clear Feb 2 and the arrival of spring-like weather.



A celebration of awaiting Spring

Let's just spend a moment or two in quietness. Consider the winter that is drawing to a close, the bareness of trees awaiting spring's warmth, the first snowdrops to emerge and flower, fallen leaves from winter that now are taken up once again by the soil as a source of nutrients (nature's endless cycle of life and death), signs of life within our own gardens as plants that seemed dead just a month ago are now beginning to show green.

We say

A sleeping world emerges to new possibilities,
weakening winter's icy grip,
and birdsong and bleating lamb
announce to all the promise
that in due season
creation bursts into life.
And whilst leaves that fell in winter
lie upon the ground,
soon to feed the earth
in nature's wondrous cycle
of death and rebirth,
within the tree is a stirring of new growth.



Springtime!
the promise of new life
Springtime!
the potential for growth
Springtime!
the hope of harvests to come

(Silence)

'Let us live in awe of the Lord our God,
for he gives us rain each spring and fall,
assuring us of a harvest when the time is right.'
(Jer 5:24)

'Where man sees but withered leaves,
God sees sweet flowers growing.'
(*Albert Lighton*)

'The day the Lord created hope was probably the same day he created Spring.'
(*Bern Williams*)

Music for Candlemas

Nigel has sent us this music to celebrate Candlemas, sung by the virtual choir of St David's.
Sound only. Words are below.

<https://www.parishofcentralexeter.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/converted-1.mp3>

When candles are lighted on Candlemas Day
the dark is behind us, and spring's on the way.

Refrain:

*A glory dawns in every dark place,
the light of Christ, the fullness of grace.*

The kings have departed, the shepherds have gone,
the child and his parents are left on their own. *Refrain*

They go to the temple, obeying the law,
and offer two pigeons, the gift of the poor. *Refrain*

We say

In the lengthening of days,
Snowdrops emerging
from winter's frozen ground
we see the creator's hand

In the sight of a tiny lamb,
joyfully bounding
across hillside farm
we see the creator's hand



Creator God, forgive our moments of ingratitude,
the spiritual blindness that prevents us
from appreciating the wonder that is this world,
the endless cycle of nature,
of life and death and rebirth.

Forgive us for taking without giving,
reaping without sowing.
Open our eyes to see,
our lips to praise,
our hands to share,
and may our feet tread lightly on the road ahead.

Psalm 8

3 When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which
you have set in place,

4 what is man that you are mindful of him, the son of man that you care for him?

5 You made him a little lower than the heavenly beings and crowned him with glory and
honour.

6 You made him ruler over the works of your hands; you put everything under his feet:

7 all flocks and herds, and the beasts of the field,

8 the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea, all that swim the paths of the seas.

9 O LORD, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!

We say

For the cycle of life
Which brings death and rebirth
We rejoice in the promise of Spring

For lengthening days
And sunlight's warmth upon the soil
We rejoice in the promise of Spring

For a snowdrop's beauty
Reflecting its Creator's artistry
We rejoice in the promise of Spring

For new-born lambs
Their joy and exuberance
We rejoice in the promise of Spring

For all of creation
And the majesty of its Creator
We rejoice in the promise of Spring



'Spring makes its own statement, so loud and clear that the gardener seems to be only one of the instruments, not the composer.'
(Geoffrey B. Charlesworth)

The seasons are what a symphony ought to be: four perfect movements in harmony with each other.
(Arthur Rubenstein)

This is your garden, Creator God
a thing of beauty
beyond understanding,
a poem that is being written
not in words,
but in colours,
wind's whisper,
soaring bird,
snowdrop's petal,
gentle rain,
sunlight's warmth.

This is your garden, Creator God,
a thing of beauty
beyond understanding

A time of intercession

We pray
for areas of the world where humankind is not in harmony with creation,
places of war,
places of famine
places where there is exploitation of the world's resources.

Lord in your mercy, hear our prayer.

Invitation for prayer by the Archbishops of Canterbury and York

Although I have tried to keep an upbeat approach for both today's acts of worship, it would not be right to gloss over the fact that we have now exceeded 100,000 deaths from the virus. I am therefore including this letter from the Archbishops of Canterbury and York.

Dear friends

As we reach the terrible milestone of 100,000 deaths from COVID-19, we invite everyone in our nation to pause as we reflect on the enormity of this pandemic.

100,000 isn't just an abstract figure. Each number is a person: someone we loved and someone who loved us. We also believe that each of these people was known to God and cherished by God.

We write to you then in consolation, but also in encouragement, and ultimately in the hope of Jesus Christ. The God who comes to us in Jesus knew grief and suffering himself. On the cross, Jesus shares the weight of our sadness.

We therefore encourage everyone who is feeling scared, or lost or isolated to cast their fears on God. We also know that poorer communities, minority ethnic communities and those living with disabilities have been afflicted disproportionately and cry out for the healing of these inequalities. During this pandemic, we encourage everyone to do all they can to live within the guidelines and constraints given by government following the advice of the Chief Medical Officer and Chief Scientific Adviser. We show our commitment, care and love for one another by ensuring we do everything we can to stop the virus spreading.

None of this is easy. Very many of us are experiencing isolation, loneliness, anxiety and despondency like never before. Many people have lost their livelihoods. Our economy struggles. Also, the necessary restrictions we live with have also prevented us from being alongside loved ones as they died, or even at their graveside. All grief profoundly affects us, but this pandemic grief is so hard.

Therefore, we need to support each other. We do this by following the guidelines. But we also do it by reaching out to each other with care and kindness.

One thing we can all do is pray. We hope it is some consolation to know that the church prays for the life of our nation every day. Whether you're someone of faith, or not, we invite you to call on God in prayer. Starting on 1 February we invite you to set aside time every evening to pray, particularly at 6pm each day. More than ever, this is a time when we need to love each other. Prayer is an expression of love. A number of resources will be made available on our website.

Finally, we write of hope. We are grateful for the hope we have because of the service of our NHS and social care staff. What a blessing and lifeline for our nation. We are grateful for the service given in local communities by clergy, other frontline workers and so many good neighbours. We are grateful for the hope of the vaccine. It is a testimony to the God-given wisdom and gifts of scientists and researchers. We urge everyone to take the vaccine as soon as it is offered to you.

Most of all, we have hope because God raised Jesus from the dead. This is the Christian hope that we will be celebrating at Easter. We live in the hope that we will share in his resurrection. Death doesn't have the last word. In God's kingdom, every tear will be wiped away.

Please be assured of our prayers. Please join us.

Blessing

Together we say

We bless you,
God of Seed and Harvest
And we bless each other
That the beauty of this world
And the love that created it
Might be expressed through our lives
And be a blessing to others
Now and always
Amen

Closing music

We close with the final verses from the Candlemas music we heard earlier. Sound only. Words are below.

<https://www.parishofcentralexeter.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/converted-2.mp3>

But Anna and Simeon recognize there
the Christ-child who came at the turn of the year. *Refrain*

They gaze at God's wonderful answer to prayer,
the joy of the Jews and the Gentiles' desire. *Refrain*

The candles invite us to praise and to pray
when Christmas greets Easter on Candlemas Day. *Refrain*

Thanks

Thanks to everyone who has participated, especially Sheila for the reflections this morning and material for Coffee Break, Nigel and friends for the Candlemas music. The material for Night Prayer is from Praying through the Celtic Year on faithandworship.com. Material taken or adapted from other websites has an attribution made where possible.

Our closing photo is inside St Mark's Basilica, Venice, at night. St Mark is allegedly buried under the High Altar.

