

2nd Sunday of Advent 2023. Mark 1:1-8 The beginning of the good news.

Last week we spoke a little of how the gospel of Mark is the shortest and most urgent gospel, and at its heart asks the questions; 'Where can God be found?' and, 'Who do you say Jesus is?'

Mark, often called John Mark in Acts and the NT letters, was discipled by the apostle Peter, and Mark's gospel often seems to me to be imbued with the direct nature of Peter. So in typical Mark style, unlike Matthew and especially Luke, he forgoes all talk of Jesus' birth and childhood and cuts straight to the chase to open his gospel. "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God" (1:1).

All the gospels show Jesus' ministry being 'introduced' or 'prefaced' by John the Baptist. For Mark, and for all the early Church, John the Baptist was the start of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, that Jesus didn't just arise out of a vacuum or an empty space but that he was the continuation of what God had already been doing through the Jewish people.

The story of God's dealing with Israel, beginning with Abraham two millennia earlier, was now most recently seen in the ministry of John the Baptist.

John the Baptist himself, the last of the Old Testament prophets, is the continuation of the beginning of the Good News of Jesus Christ. The very phrase 'Good news' or 'gospel' is the fulfilment of Isaiah's prophesy; 'How beautiful ... are the feet who bring *good news* ... who proclaim peace ...who proclaim salvation, who say to Zion, 'Your God reigns!'" (Isa 52:7).

Isaiah was prophesying that the good news, the gospel, will be the breaking in of God's kingly rule into the world. The good news of Jesus that would tear all things asunder.

Jesus, the Messiah, is the embodiment of God's kingly rule over the world. In Jesus the Messiah, we see the ultimate victory of God over all that stands against God.

And then, to drive home the prophetic fulfilment attained in Jesus, he quotes Isaiah; "As it is written ... 'see, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way; the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight'" (v.3).

And then we are introduced to John's ministry, "John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins" (v.4).

Now as we spoke about last week, this Jesus who would come, will tear asunder all that separates God and mortals, he is not found in the temple anymore but on the cross. Not in the city, but outside the gates at the 'place of the skull', in the wilderness.

Mark, throughout his gospel, uses the idea of the wilderness as a metaphor for something new happening on a spiritual level. Whenever Mark wants to criticise formal, institutionalized, religion, he talks about Jerusalem. But whenever Mark wants to talk about a new work of God happening, it happens in the wilderness.

So, Mark says that John was baptising in the wilderness is a way of saying to us that, yes, John was part of the Jewish heritage - but as the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, he was signaling a new spiritual movement by God.

In John the Baptist, we see the heralding of a coming together and completion of the great and new family of God, comprising all tribes and languages and people.

If we want to engage with Jesus, we must metaphorically leave Jerusalem and head for the wilderness. As we watch and wait, we can begin by forsaking the comfort and predictability of our ritualism and be prepared to meet with a more unpredictable expression of faith in the wild-ness of God.

John says (my paraphrase), 'Look, I have washed you clean with water, but this Jesus will come and wash you with the Holy Spirit – you will be cleansed by him and through him' (v.8). John's whole context is the greatness of Christ. The contrast is not the two forms of baptism but between John as the lesser and Jesus as the greater.

Today's passage is a proclamation of who Jesus Christ is, as one coming out of the great Jewish faith but a precursor to all that is to come through him in his work as Messiah. Jesus is both the messenger and the message of 'Good News'.

So what does Jesus' baptism in the Holy Spirit promised by John tell us about Jesus himself? A few big things I think.

Firstly, that Jesus is *Messiah* (anointed one). Imagine the excitement when John the Baptist started preaching that the Messiah was coming. They had been waiting so long and they wanted to be ready. But the Messiah took them by surprise. He wasn't a regal King who would defeat the Roman Empire. He wasn't a revolutionary guerrilla with an army of civilian soldiers. He wasn't a well-known and respected religious leader with the backing of the Temple.

The Saviour of the World is a humble bloke from a humble town, a working man. A builder in wood and stone from a back-blocks village. A man of no repute from an area of no repute.

And yet, in this simple disregarded Jew, the hopes of Israel and all the world are fulfilled.

Jesus was the fulfillment of the Old Testament prophets; The King of Kings and Lord of Lords, the Prince of Peace, and the long-awaited Messiah. Jesus was anointed by God to fulfil his purposes and bring in his kingdom into the hearts and lives of those who believed in him.

And that same Jesus – the Jewish Messiah – the Anointed One - is our Messiah today. It is through Jesus that we can know God as our Father and so we want to give our lives over to him.

Secondly, Jesus is not just the anointed one of God, but the *Son of God*. Truly God the Son. This is the cornerstone of his ministry because, unless he is the Son of God, our faith is worthless. Who but the Son of God could heal the sick and receive sinners the way that Jesus did?

Who but the Son of God could turn a meaningless and shameful death into a moment of ultimate triumph? Who but the Son of God could be buried for three days and then be raised from the dead?

The Son of God became Man and dwelt among us. As God, he has the power to transform our lives and lead us to the Father. As Man, he has the ability to identify with our weaknesses and strengthen us in our times of need.

Jesus is the Messiah, the anointed one of God. Jesus is the Son of God. Jesus is greater than the prophets. Jesus is greater than the Mosaic Law. Jesus is the baptiser in the Holy Spirit. And this Jesus for whom we wait is also the great Redeemer and Saviour of the World.

This baptism in the Holy Spirit that John talks about means we who were, “baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life” (Rom 6:3-4).

All this is given to us by faith through the wonderful act of repentance. At baptism we publicly declare that we repent (i.e. ‘turn to Christ’), that we reject selfish living and all that is unjust, and renounce Satan and all that is evil.

We can only do these things through our wonderful King of Grace and Prince of Peace; our mighty Redeemer and Saviour for whom we so ardently watch and wait. Come Lord Jesus. Let me pray ...