

The beginning of the gospel

Please read **Mark 1 v 1-13**, then re-read v 1-8. Then pray; *O Lord, open my eyes that I may see wonderful things in your Word. Amen!*

As we start on the journey of a new year together, 2021, having renewed our covenant with God last weekend, I am very conscious of **new beginnings**. A new year always presents us with an opportunity to make a new start, a new beginning, and perhaps with new resolutions. In terms of the Church calendar, we **begin** a new season – the season of Epiphany, which rejoices in the revelation of God’s glory unveiled in Jesus. As your Minister, today I **begin** a new series of sermons, all based around the great message presented in **Mark’s gospel**. And I hope as the year proceeds, and as our nation **begins** to emerge from a very dark and distressing period in its history, we as a Church in Gloucester, one of many around our country, may **begin** a new chapter in our life and mission together. Let’s pray for that with one heart and mind, and seek God’s healing, reviving and transforming touch of power.

Mark **begins** his epic and historic gospel (good news) with a bold statement which acts as *a title* for the story he wants to share with the world of his day living under the governance of the great Roman Empire, and with the world which we now live in, for this is the *eternal* gospel.

The beginning of the gospel about Jesus Christ, the Son of God. (v1)

Mark decided not to begin his gospel, which was the first of its kind to be written, with genealogy and birth narrative like Matthew and Luke, but with a starting pistol that fired with a loud bang from the Judean wilderness some thirty years after the birth of the babe in Bethlehem. A distinct prophetic voice (something not heard in Israel for over 400 years) **begins** to cry out to the nation of Israel. There is to be a **new beginning** for Israel and the world through God’s own initiative and intervention.

But before we consider the ministry of John the Baptist, let us take a moment to consider Mark’s opening remarks about the main personality and message of his gospel – **Jesus Christ, the Son of God**.

The gospel, which is good news for all the world, heralds the arrival into this world of a particular person – **Jesus Christ**. His name exudes power and significance. The name “**Jesus**”, deliberately given to him by his parents at the instruction of a mighty angel, means “God is Saviour” or simply “God saves”. And “**Christ**” is not a surname but a title – and it means “the Anointed One of God”. This gospel is fundamentally about **Jesus the Christ**, who is God’s specially anointed Deliverer and Saviour.

This is the declaration that Mark makes to the world under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. This is the declaration that **the Church** now makes to the world with the authority of the kingdom of God. *We are here to tell the world that Jesus Christ is the specially and uniquely anointed Saviour of the world*. This is, if you like, **our** opening statement and declaration to the whole world.

However, Mark adds one other very significant remark to his opening statement about Jesus. This Saviour who is unique and chosen of God, is actually **the Son of God**. This is truly staggering. The good news revolves around the “Son of God” himself – and Mark is about to reveal how the Son of God lived, ministered with power, died on a cross as a ransom for many, and rose again. This is the gospel. It is the precious good news that *God so loved the world that he gave **his one and only Son***. (John 3:16)

And the primary reason for Mark putting ink on papyrus scroll is to demonstrate and to persuade people that Jesus really is the Son of God. Jesus’ life and authority declared his unique divine Sonship. Mark will show us this through the story he tells so passionately and vividly – and he will want all his readers to come to the same conclusion that the centurion came to at the foot of the cross;

Surely this man was the Son of God (Mark 14:39)

Mark boldly declares this truth from the outset, and from the outset of Jesus's ministry which is to **begin** after his baptism in the river Jordan, he is declared to be God's beloved Son (1:11) with whom the Father is very pleased, and upon whom descends the Spirit without measure. (John 3:33-35)

Historically speaking though, as Mark reveals here, the gospel **begins** with a messenger who has a message and a prophetic ministry that *prepares the way* for the arrival of the Son who is the Christ. In the opening words of this gospel God speaks clearly about *his* "messenger" (v 2) and *his* Son (v 11). Both are specially chosen servant figures.

Let's pause for a moment to consider the one God describes as "my messenger" (v 2). From nowhere it seems, a prophet out in the Judean wilderness rises up, and begins to prepare the way for the arrival of God's Messiah – the long-awaited Christ. He does so by calling on the huge spiritually hungry crowds to repent and receive a baptism of repentance as they confess their sins and are immersed into the waters of the Jordan. The prophet is called John and he becomes known as John the Baptist.

And so John came ... (v4)

He looked and sounded like many of the prophets of the past, particularly Elijah. He wore desert clothes and ate desert food, and as the angel had told Zechariah, the father of John, he came forward and spoke *in the power and spirit of Elijah*. (Luke 1:17) Mark mingles together two OT prophecies from Isaiah and Malachi (v 2-3) to reveal that John's ministry is a direct fulfilment of God's plan. God's messenger is to come forward first and prepare the way; then the Christ is to rise up and come forward to begin the work of salvation. This was all in the divine order and plan as revealed through the prophets. Now the time is fulfilled and the kingdom is at hand! (Mark 1:15)

Many of the ordinary people throughout the land were ready to make a new start, a new **beginning**. Life under Roman occupation was very tough and there was a deep inner yearning for deliverance and hope. We hear how very large crowds came out searching for John, to hear and receive his message calling them to repent and to get themselves ready for the Messiah. The kingdom of God was now within touching distance! There is within Mark's story echoes of the mighty **exodus event** which had left an indelible mark on the heart of the nation of Israel. Once again, the people were being led "out" into the wilderness to meet and worship God. They now needed to come back with true repentance to the God of their fathers. The time was ripe for personal renewal and salvation from the hand of the Lord.

Perhaps within our own nation, at this juncture in our history, with the ongoing challenge of Covid19, many may now be hungry and thirsty for spiritual renewal, hope, comfort and salvation. Joy seems to have been sucked out of our land and population, and many people feel that they are living in a wilderness, even a waste land. These are strange times, emotions are running both high and low, but is the Spirit of God **beginning to move** in a new way? If so, it may be a time where people are looking to return to the God whom the nation has in a wide and general sense turned its back upon. Hearts need to turn back toward God - and to return to God with confession and repentance; our nation needs to repent, to change its mind about God and recognise the need for God at the centre of our lives, our dreams, our hopes, our priorities and even our politics. And we need to personally pray for ourselves;

Guide me O Thou Great Jehovah, pilgrim through this barren land; I am weak but Thou are mighty, hold me with thy powerful hand.

Do we not also need to pray and cry out to God on behalf of a shattered nation;

Open Thou the crystal fountain whence the healing stream doth flow;

We need to cry out in this wilderness for ourselves and for our nation. We need to cry out in repentance with penitent hearts. The Church needs *to lead the way in repentance*, and must point the nation toward the pathway of repentance, that there might be healing and restoration with God. We are very likely to have ample new opportunities to share our faith in **Jesus Christ the Son of God**. (Mark 1:1) Let's grasp those precious opportunities, and let us seek to lead people to the waters of baptism and the powerful salvation that comes in Jesus – God's holy and only Saviour. And I am not referring to an increase in the so-called christening of babies, I am referring to adults who have never seriously heard and considered the gospel, coming out to God, in order to repent of their sin, and to be baptised and filled with Holy Spirit! The two baptisms mentioned in our text are needed (v8) – the baptism of repentance and baptism with the Holy Spirit. One is spoken of in connection with John, the other, which leads people to knowing God's very power and presence in their lives, comes only through God's Son – Jesus.

And at this time, we must ourselves, as Christians, make and take time to be refreshed and renewed in the river of God's Spirit and presence. This is not a time to neglect worship but to prioritise it as never before. As the Psalmist describes, we must be like "the deer who pants for streams of water; we must pant for God" (Psalm 42:1) Our search for God's presence must be our earnest desire "in a dry and weary land where there is no water." (Psalm 63:1) Remember friends, please remember, that to worship is to come to God's own river of delights. (Psalm 36:8-9) We come to his river to be regularly cleansed and washed; we come to receive refreshing and empowering grace to live in God's way and in the gracious parameters of his love and care. We come to drink in God's healing mercy and the Spirit's life. We come to be filled with the Spirit, so that in our innermost being the life-giving streams of the Spirit may flow. (John 7 v 37-39). We come to the river to be dipped or immersed into God's grace and healing as the Syrian Commander Naaman once did in the river Jordon in order to receive healing and cleansing from a skin disease that had plagued his life. (2 Kings 5:10 and 14). The Church, with its varied and Spirit-filled worship should be like an **oasis** in the desert, or an attractive tree lined **river of life** like the Jordon itself.

As John the Baptist did so obediently, we must point people to the One who is mightier than all others and whose sandals we too are not worthy to undo or tie up. (1:7). We must point people to the One and Only Son of God who can forgive them completely and restore them to eternal life. John could preach and baptise – he could not forgive sin and heal the heart. However, John could point people to the **Lamb of God** (John 1:29, 36) who can do all things; the one who is also the **Son of God**, who we go on to learn from Mark's gospel, can overcome all evil, heal all pain and sickness, restore the dead to life, and command the very winds and waves to obey him.

Next week we will go on to consider how Jesus, the Son of God, one day joined the crowds that were flocking to John in the wilderness. He simply came from Nazareth and joined the queue to be baptised. He came as one of us, to be amongst us with all our needs and suffering. And yet, the one who came alone from a village of no reputation, who was anonymous in and among the great crowd – was different – and his baptism would be different – and embraced for different reasons to those of the needy and desperate crowd. And then John's ministry would fall away; his calling completed; his work finished; and Jesus's ministry in the dynamic power of the Spirit would explode on to the scene and become the great topic of conversation, excitement and wonder. (Mark 1:28 and 45 just two examples). And to him be all the glory! **Amen!**