

Good News: calling time on Rome and the Temple (Mark 1: 1-8)

The Proclamation of John the Baptist

1The beginning of the Good News of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

*2 As it is written in the prophet Isaiah,
'See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way;*

*³ the voice of one crying out in the wilderness:
"Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight" ',*

⁴John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁵And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. ⁶Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. ⁷He proclaimed, 'The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. ⁸I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.'

(Translation © Lawrence Moore, *Mark for Missional Disciples*, Walking the Walk Publications, 2018)

Commentary

Mark's gospel opens with a declaration of war. God is starting something in Jesus that is "gospel" – Good News – to a world under Roman occupation. At long last, God is responding to the agonised prayers of the people: "How long must we put up with this living hell? When will you send your messiah? Save us, O Lord!" Mark's gospel is the announcement that God's salvation is beginning. And God's answer to their prayers is a person: Jesus, the messiah/liberator. Not just Good News, but the Best Possible News.

Mark 1:1

This verse is one of the most directly politically confrontational verses in the Bible. It evokes echoes of Moses confronting Pharaoh in Egypt: "Let my people go!" Let's look more closely at just how "political" the opening verse is:

Euangellion/GoodNews/gospel:

There are no "gospels" in the Hebrew scriptures. But Mark didn't invent the term to describe "stories of Jesus": he borrowed it from Roman political theology. The Romans used the term to describe the actions of the Emperor. Whatever the Emperor did officially was assumed to be "good news" for the Roman world. Jesus was born under the rule of Caesar Augustus, the adopted son of Julius Caesar. Caesar Augustus was the first Emperor to be known and worshipped as "the Son of God".

So the birth of Caesar Augustus would have been announced: “The beginning of the Good News of Caesar Augustus, the Son of God!”

This makes Mark’s announcement a direct counter-claim to Rome: it is Jesus, not Caesar, who is the true Son of God, and Jesus alone who is worthy of worship. And his birth is Good News because he is the messiah (Christ) – the liberator who has come to save the world from Rome. The Kingdom of God that he announces is the world ordered according to God’s will, not Rome’s. Rome’s world is the world of military might, slavery, despair and death. God’s world is a world of liberation, healing and Life. It is God’s Kingdom that will be universal and last forever, not Rome’s – and it is Good News first and foremost for the very least of Rome’s occupation victims.

Mark begins his story of Jesus by calling time on Rome. It is not going to be a very likely story of liberation: it ends with Jesus being crucified – the appalling public punishment reserved for would-be messiahs and revolutionaries. It is the Way of the Crucified Messiah. It leads to resurrection – the death of death. And at the moment of his death, Mark has the Roman centurion – Rome’s representative – declare, “Truly, *this* man [ie not Caesar] was the Son of God!” (Mark 15:39)

Mark 1: 2-3

The Way:

Mark 1:2-3 is not a direct quotation from Isaiah 40:3, but a freely constructed composite of the LXX version of Isaiah 40:3, Exodus 23:20 and Malachi 3:1. Mark’s composition is deliberately subversive. The Exodus text speaks of a way being prepared for the Hebrew people’s journey of liberation. The situation of the people of Jesus’ time was compared to slavery in Egypt. Mark then identifies “the way” with that announced for Yahweh’s advent by the prophet Malachi. The stress on “the way” is not coincidental. “The Way” is a central motif – the way of discipleship of Jesus. The earliest Christians were followers of “The Way”; to be the church is to “walk the way of Jesus”. Jesus’ “way of the kingdom” is something *more* than just political confrontation with the powers; the point is that it is never *less*! This element of Jesus’ ministry has been emphasised by NT Wright.

The wilderness:

Mark does not complete the oracle from Malachi 3:1ff (in which the coming of God is to Jerusalem and the temple), but opts at this point to use Isaiah 40:3, which has the voice *in the wilderness* (the place of John’s appearance immediately afterwards in v4). The wilderness is a significant place. It is the place of a community in flight and liberation. It is a refuge for the persecuted who await God’s deliverance. It is the place where God is to be met, where the prophets come from and speak, and, significantly, the place where rebellion is plotted. There is, again, the hard political edge of resistance, which is part of the significance of Jesus.

The Temple:

But also, it is the place where God is doing this last, great, wonderful thing and it is *not* in Jerusalem, *not* in the temple! In other words, Mark is telling us, the way of Jesus is on the margins and in conflict with both the political and religious powers of the day. To be messiah is to be at a distance from the current political and religious overtones and expectations of that term. Jesus, in other words, will *not* be as they expect him. God's salvation *will* be most clearly revealed in Jerusalem, as people expected – but in the deadly conflict between Jesus and the religious and political powers of his day that ends in death on a Roman cross.

Mark 1: 4-8

The Elijah figure of the Last Days:

John the Baptist is portrayed as the reincarnation of the prophet Elijah. The Hebrew scriptures close with the promise of his return: "Lo, I will send you the prophet Elijah before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes. He will turn the hearts of parents to their children and the hearts of children to their parents, so that I will not come and strike the land with a curse!" (Malachi 4: 5-6).

John's baptismal ministry is to prepare the way for Jesus. His role is to prepare the way for Jesus –to ensure that the people are receptive and ready to hear Jesus' call, "Follow me!" Because that is where salvation is to be found.

For reflection:

1. How comfortable are you with a gospel that is overtly political? How would you describe the relationship between the political and spiritual aspects of our lives?
2. What would sound like Good News in our own political context? What are the contemporary manifestations of Empire that make life a living hell? Where is this most visible in the news? Who are the worst-off victims? What announcement are they most hungry to hear?
3. Jesus' contemporaries assumed that the Temple was the obvious place to hear and experience God's Good News, yet it was to be the place where The Way of Jesus was most deeply resisted. It needed transforming. In what ways are churches Bad News to people – especially to those on the margins? In what ways do we need to be transformed?
4. How would you issue a fresh challenge to people to get ready to hear Jesus' call, "Follow me"? How will you cut through the years of familiarity that make it difficult to be surprised or shocked into beginning a new phase of discipleship?

Resources

General

<http://www.textweek.com/yearb/adventb2.htm> (1-stop shop)

Images/Multimedia

<http://seedstuff.blogspot.co.uk/2014/11/advent-2-b-december-7-preparing-road-in.html> (especially the Lion King video)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p-Wh-A20dSg>

Music

<http://lectionarysong.blogspot.co.uk/2014/11/songs-and-hymns-for-advent-2b-december.html>

Children

<http://worshipingwithchildren.blogspot.co.uk/2014/11/year-b-second-sunday-of-advent-december.html>

<http://faithformationjourneys.org/?p=1826>

Prayers

<https://revgalblogpals.org/2011/12/03/prayer-for-advent-2b/>

<http://rev-o-lution.org/2014/11/28/worship-resources-for-december-7th-2014-second-sunday-of-advent/>

Christ has

No body now on earth but yours;

No hands but yours;

No feet but yours;

Yours are the eyes through which Christ's compassion

Is to look out to the world;

Yours are the feet

With which he is to go about doing good; yours are the hands

With which he is to bless people now.

(St Teresa of Avila)

Come, risen Christ

and let our hearts burn within us

as you speak to us along the road.

(Christopher Irvine)

ORDER OF SERVICE (Daleen ten Cate)

Call to worship

For the joys of growing discipleship and learning together

We praise the living God

For the hospitality of welcome and belonging

We praise the living God

For the challenges of sharing stories and Scriptures

We praise the living God

For the adventure of commitment and deepening faith

We praise the living God

Prayer of Approach and Thanksgiving

Eternal Father, You planted the earth and all life,
and called a people to be your light in the world.
When they were taken weeping into exile,
you promised through your prophets
to bring them home to Zion, singing and laughing.

Salvation has come in your Messiah, Jesus,
— the one to whose coming light
your servant, John, bore witness.
Filled with your Spirit,
Jesus came proclaiming good news for the poor,
healing for the broken hearted,
and the day of freedom to all who are bound.
He was killed by the proud and powerful,
but with your wonderful power you raised him to life.
In his presence we are filled with expectant hope and joy,
and eager to embrace your eternal covenant.

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Prayers of Confession

Forgive us Lord when we as your church, are not Good News to the world

Forgive us when we do not walk the way of Jesus

Forgive us when we do not stand up against the powers and enables salvation

Forgive us Lord, in your mercy

Amen

Words of Commitment (spoken after the sermon)

When we struggle with questions
And challenges to our convictions,
Living God, help us step into a place of exploration

When we are reluctant to accept difference,
Resisting the unfamiliar and unknown
Living God, help us to create a place of safety

When we seek to respond to your call,
Sharing your justice and peace in today's world
Living God, may our lives be shaped by your Gospel

When we discover greater depths of faith,
Sharing together in new understandings,
Living God, empower us for mission and ministry in your name
Amen

Sending Out Prayer

We stand on the threshold of a new week,
held in the arms of the God who created us,
touched by the nail-torn, love-scarred hands of the Son who died for us,
filled with the inextinguishable Life of the Spirit who dwells within us.

Be with us in our work.
Strengthen us when we feel weak, or undermined, or apathetic.
Create new habits in us:
eyes that are alive to your presence in the people around us,
ears that are attuned to your voice in the events of our days,
hearts that are open to the deep needs of others,
lives that thrum with the presence of your Spirit.
And grant this day that we, by your grace, might be the answer to the prayers of
others.
In Jesus' name.
Amen.
(Lawrence Moore)