

THE BEGINNING OF MARK'S GOSPEL

Mark 1:1-13

This morning we're beginning a new sermon series from Mark's gospel. This gospel was probably written by John Mark who is mentioned in Acts and some of Paul's letters. It was probably the first gospel to be written, perhaps as early as 50-60 AD – no more than 20 years after Jesus' crucifixion – and is one of the three similar or synoptic gospels along with Matthew and Luke. Mark himself wasn't one of the twelve disciples, but he spent time with Peter, probably acting as his interpreter, and also spent time with Paul – so he had plenty of access to eyewitness evidence. Mark's gospel is the shortest of all the gospels, but, as we shall see, Mark has his own unique perspective and it has lots of interesting and important things to say to us, so Heavenly Father I pray that as we study it together over the coming months you'll open our hearts and minds to what you want us to learn from it.

Our reading this morning forms something of a prologue to Mark's gospel similar to the first 18 verses of John's gospel. Mark tells us that it is the beginning of his gospel – look at verse 1:

“The beginning of the gospel about Jesus Christ, the Son of God.”
(Mark 1:1 NIV)

It's the beginning. As at the beginning of Genesis God was about to begin a new creative work. This verse is also something of a title to Mark's gospel – although he doesn't call it Mark's gospel, he calls it a gospel about Jesus Christ. For Mark the important thing about Christ is not his genealogy – Mark doesn't quote that – it's both Christ's person and his gospel message. Incidentally, if Mark was the first person to write down a gospel – as I believe is highly likely – then he's also the first person to apply the idea of “gospel” or “good news” to an account of the life and works of Jesus Christ.

The modern English word “gospel” derives from the Anglo Saxon word “godspel” which means ‘good news’. The original Greek word we translate as “gospel” was “evangel”, and evangel was not a word first used by Christians. On the contrary, the idea was important both in pagan and Jewish culture. In OT Jewish culture it usually meant the good news of victory in battle, but Mark's gospel was probably

written mainly for Roman Gentiles, which explains why he doesn't include too many OT references or ideas. Among the Romans, evangel meant "joyful tidings" and was associated with the cult of the emperor, whose birthdays and accession to power were celebrated as festival occasions for the whole world. The reports of such festivals were called "evangels" in the inscriptions of the Roman Imperial Age. A calendar inscription from about 9 B.C., found in Priene in Asia Minor, says of the emperor Octavian (Augustus): "the birthday of the god was for the world *the beginning of joyful tidings* which have been proclaimed on his account" (*Inscr. Priene*, 105, 40). This inscription is remarkably similar to Mark's opening line and it tells us of the essential content of an evangel in the ancient world: *an historical event which introduces a new situation for the world*. That's how the Romans would understand Mark's proclamation of Jesus the Messiah. But the Romans used the word "evangel" in the plural, the NT writers only use the word in the singular – there is only one item of "good news" and that's the coming of Jesus. Beginning with the start of Jesus' public ministry, Mark announces Jesus' coming as a unique event that brings about a radically new state of affairs for all mankind.

But, there is another aspect to the meaning of "gospel." Mark's own understanding of what constituted "joyful tidings" drew heavily on the prophetic tradition of the OT, as his quotation from Isaiah makes clear – look at verses 2 and 3:

"It is written in Isaiah the prophet: "I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way"— "a voice of one calling in the desert, 'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.'"" (Mark 1:2-3 NIV)

The beginning of verse 2 makes it clear that we can only understand the gospel in the light of the coming salvation promised in the second half of Isaiah. The NT depends on and follows on from the OT. This also shows that God's promises can be relied on – they WILL be fulfilled, although we may have to wait for that. Especially in Isaiah, the Hebrew terms signifying "good news" concern the announcement of future salvation, or of the time of salvation. So here, to proclaim salvation on God's authority is itself a creative act; in a sense it brings in the reality of which it speaks. Mark's verse 3 is a quote from Isaiah 40:3. This makes clear the difference between the biblical concept of joyful tidings and that found in the Roman imperial cult. For the Romans an evangel was backward looking, a reflection of the

joyous event which has already taken place. In scripture there is a forward-looking view. The messenger of joy will announce the beginning of the time of salvation and thereby introduce it (cf. Isaiah 52:7–10). Although Mark says “it is written in Isaiah the prophet” at the beginning of verse 2, this is actually a mixed quotation from Malachi (Malachi 3:1) and Isaiah. Malachi is referring to Elijah as the messenger, so we should see John the Baptist as a ‘type’ of Elijah – that is we should see him as an Elijah like figure.

Mark sees the coming of John the Baptist and Jesus to the wilderness as the fulfillment of the promised salvation of which the prophet Isaiah had spoken. Although I said Mark doesn’t focus heavily on OT references, these verses firmly and inseparably link the NT to the OT. Also the focus on the idea of a ‘way’ or ‘path’ in these verses prepares us for Jesus’ teaching that *he is* the way.

Before moving on we should remember that the word “gospel” didn’t yet mean a written document, it referred to a living word of hope from the lips of an appointed messenger.

We immediately move on to the actual coming of John the Baptist – see verses 4 and 5:

“And so John came, baptising in the desert region and preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him. Confessing their sins, they were baptised by him in the Jordan River.”
(Mark 1:4-5 NIV)

The Israelites believed that no prophet had appeared in Israel since Malachi – some 400 years before the coming of John the Baptist. Some thought this meant that prophetic work was finished, yet others clung to the idea that a faithful prophet who would signal the last days would appear. John the Baptist was this prophet. For Jews, baptising Jews who were already in good standing was a revolutionary idea. Jews reserved Baptism for initiation into Judaism. The idea of a “baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins” appears to be unique to John the Baptist. He was saying that Israel must come once again into the wilderness – as they had during the Exodus – and must again purify themselves – as they had before the acceptance of the Sinai covenant of the Law – to experience a radical separation and preparation. John the Baptist’s appearance heralded a radical change,

to speak of the gospel of Christ is to speak of the good news which began with John.

But we don't really know much about who the man John really was. He might have been part of the Qumran community – to whom we owe the so called Dead Sea scrolls – after all his message like theirs derived from Isaiah 40:3 “A voice of one calling: "In the desert prepare the way for the LORD; make straight in the wilderness a highway for our God.” – which, as we've already seen, Mark quotes in verse 3 of his gospel. John's ministry of baptizing was unique – that's why he came to be known as John the Baptist.

We've already seen that John the Baptist was an Elijah like figure – look at verse 6:

“John wore clothing made of camel's hair, with a leather belt round his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey.” (Mark 1:6 NIV) these were almost identical to the garments worn by the prophet Elijah and also make it clear that John was a man of the wilderness.

But, Mark's main intent is not to relate John to Elijah but to relate him to Jesus. For Mark, John is not important for himself, but as the beginning of the unfolding drama of Jesus – look at verses 7 and 8: “And this was his message: "After me will come one more powerful than I, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I baptise you with water, but he will baptise you with the Holy Spirit.”” (Mark 1:7-8 NIV)

John thought himself unworthy to remove Jesus' sandals – a duty which only gentile slaves could be made to perform. John's baptism with water is merely a preparation for the Messianic baptism with the Spirit which is to come. Later, Paul required disciples of John to be re-baptised “in the name of Jesus” so that they might receive the Holy Spirit.

Although later in the first century AD, John the Baptist became an important figure – indeed the historian Josephus devotes more space to him than to Jesus – Mark is saying that we don't need to know John as a person, what we need is an encounter with his summons to repentance and baptism into a new life.

Mark then tells us that Christ was baptised by the Holy Spirit in preparation for his ministry – see verses 9-11:

“At that time Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptised by John in the Jordan. As Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.”” (Mark 1:9-11 NIV)

The prophet Isaiah longed for the day when God would tear the heavens open and come down – as it says in Isaiah 64:1 – Mark tells us that this day has now arrived. Verse 9 clearly links the baptism of Jesus with the previous baptisms by John, so Jesus accepts John’s call to the wilderness where Israel’s relationship with God must be vitally renewed. But, it also places Jesus centre stage, the cosmic significance of this event is indicated by the vision of the rending of the heavens, the descent of the Spirit and the testimony of the voice from heaven. This is a wonderful passage affirming the Trinity as it links God the Father with Jesus the Son and the Holy Spirit. The descent of the Spirit is ‘into Jesus’ and not ‘on Jesus’ as the NIV (and almost all English translations) render it. Mark presents Jesus as having the power of the Spirit within himself. These signs clearly mark Jesus both as the Messiah and as the unique Son of God, beloved of the Father. They also remind us of the enthronement of the king of Israel in Psalm 2:7, so they also confirm Jesus as Israel’s king. In the first Exodus, God would not come down until the people had washed their clothes and consecrated themselves – so here Jesus must consecrate himself before his ministry can commence.

The nation of Israel was designated as the chosen people in the wilderness and the prophet Hosea pointed forward to a time when God would renew Israel’s sonship in the wilderness. The dove symbolizes peace and gentleness, but also reminds us of the spirit hovering over the waters at the time of the original creation, so this represents a new creation. Likening the spirit of God to a dove was unusual but not unknown in Judaism. God’s confirmation of Christ as his son confirms his selection for his coming ministry and his affirmation of him as his unique son. God does not *adopt* Jesus as his son but declares that he *is* his Son. This explains why throughout the gospels Jesus is able to act not just *for* God but *as* God.

Mark commences his account of Jesus with his baptism – that shows us how important he thought it was. William Hendriksen says: “The demand of Jesus to be baptized by John signified Jesus’ solemn resolution to take upon himself the guilt of those for whom he was going to die. In a sense, by means of baptism Jesus was fulfilling part of his task of laying down his life for his sheep.”

I think we can say Jesus identifies with our sin so much that he was baptized for the forgiveness of it! This should greatly encourage you! When you fear your repentance has been weak, your confessions shallow and your feelings of guilt insincere – don’t try and find value in your feeble works, but look to the perfection of Jesus’ work! Jesus has taken our sin; Jesus has confessed our sin; Jesus has repented of our sin; Jesus has been baptized for our forgiveness and Jesus died for our forgiveness! Our deeds don’t entitle us to go to heaven; Jesus’ acts do entitle us to go to heaven!

The theme of the significance of the wilderness is continued in verses 12 and 13 where Jesus is sent into the wilderness:

“At once the Spirit sent him out into the desert, and he was in the desert for forty days, being tempted by Satan. He was with the wild animals, and angels attended him.” (Mark 1:12-13 NIV)

the other synoptic gospels say that Jesus was led into the desert by the Spirit. Mark says he was sent by the Spirit. Actually sent is a bit of a weak expression, the Greek word used here might be better rendered driven out or expelled. So, for Jesus, this is necessary. It is the Holy Spirit who forces Jesus into the wilderness, so this experience is divinely ordained. The account of Jesus’ baptism is immediately followed by his temptation. Frequently in our own lives a time of great blessing is immediately followed by Satanic attack. We also have wilderness experiences. These verses summarise what it means for Jesus to heed the summons to the wilderness heralded by John. The wild animals of temptation sometime devour us, but they didn’t devour Jesus. Mark’s use of the word “Satan” makes it clear the tempter is not some immaterial evil force but a personal and supernatural enemy of God.

Jesus stays in the wilderness for forty days, a fixed time of symbolic significance. The reference to the forty days recalls Moses’ stay on Mount Sinai, Elijah’s wandering through the wilderness to Mount Horeb and also Israel’s wandering for 40 years in the wilderness.

It's significant that Mark does not report the victory of Jesus over Satan, nor the end of the temptation. It's Mark's distinctive understanding that Jesus did not win the decisive victory during the forty days, nor did he cease to be tempted. Jesus is thrust into the wilderness in order to be confronted with Satan and temptation. It is this confrontation which is itself important, since it is sustained throughout Jesus' ministry. This explains why Mark doesn't say anything about the content of the temptation: his whole Gospel constitutes the explanation of the manner in which Jesus was tempted.

So what have we learnt this morning. We see that Mark writes to proclaim the gospel message of Christ and the singular unique event of his incarnation. We saw that this 'good news' was the announcement of our salvation to come through Christ. This 'good news', this radical salvation, was heralded by and commenced with the appearance of John the Baptist. John prepared the way for Christ. John's ministry of baptizing was unique – but it was merely a preparation for the baptism in the Spirit which Jesus would bring. We also saw that Jesus consecrated himself with John's baptism in preparation for his own ministry. Here God the Father affirmed Christ as his unique son. It's important to remember that Jesus always was the son of God and here the Father is just confirming that to the world.

Let's just close with a few words of prayer. Father we pray that we might all receive afresh the good news of the gospel of Christ in this New Year and carry that good news out into the world. Let us be like John and prepare the way for Christ in the hearts of those we meet. I pray that we may all turn to you in repentance and have a renewed baptism, a renewed infilling of the Holy Spirit, and thus be empowered to resist the wiles and temptations of the evil one. Amen.