

Tidenham and Tutshill 10/12/23

## Mark 1: 1-8 –Jesus – the Gospel

Prayer

There are quite a few who deliver sermons here, and I don't know what the others think but I often find that the hardest line to write is the first. Anna's different – she tells me she doesn't know when to stop, sorry I mean, how to stop. There were four chaps who had a go at writing the story of Jesus. We just heard how Mark started. Matthew and Luke gave a lot more background and told the story of Jesus' birth. John waxed theological, but Mark... well if the Gospel writers were the Strictly Come Dancing judges, Mark would be Craig Revel Horwood – straight in there, tell it like it is. Mark doesn't soften us up with a Christmas story. He also – like Anna – had problems with ending but you can look that up at home!

*The beginning of the good news, the Gospel, of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.* This is a good news story – and that should make us sit up because we are hearing plenty of bad news, especially from Jesus' homeland. One of the more disturbing things I read was about the very sophisticated Artificial Intelligence system Israel is using with its drones and the like – has the name *The Gospel*. That is beyond irony. Let's reclaim the word Gospel – good news about Jesus Christ – the Messiah – same word as Christ – which was not Jesus' surname, it was his job description – the Liberator sent by God, more than that says Mark – Son of God. Those are big terms and Mark is not going to explain them here. It's as if he was saying – if you want to know more, read on...

Mark does have something of an introduction, even if it's not a Christmas story. We shouldn't be surprised by Jesus, because God has been preparing the way for him all along. This is what the Old Testament is all about. If we compare Mark's Gospel with Matthew, particularly, Mark has very few quotations or direct references to the Old Testament. Matthew is stuffed with them but Mark doesn't bother for the most part – except in verses 2 and 3:

*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.*

Now you won't find that anywhere in the Old Testament – not like that, because it isn't a single verse; it's a compilation album of greatest hits – from Exodus, Isaiah and Malachi. So right at the beginning of his Gospel Mark tells us that Jesus has come to fulfil the Old Testament story.

How are your preparations going for Christmas? Anna and I were in Cribbs Causeway on Friday and then sorting out cards yesterday. Advent is a story of preparation, and God prepared for Jesus by sending the character we know as John the Baptist. Out and about preparing people for Jesus – prepare in one particular way – *Repent!* And show you are repenting by being baptised. *Repent* – is a very practical word – it means change direction. When you are driving to get somewhere and you realise that you're going the wrong way – you just have to turn round and go the right way. Anna will tell you I hate doing that. You have to admit you are going the wrong way in the first place. And not many of us like doing that.

It was John's business to call people to repent – to go God's way not their own sweet way. John was a rather strange creature with an interesting dress sense and diet. When we lived in Uganda I did actually eat both locusts and wild honey. Locusts are really tasty when fried, although you have to remember to remove the wings before eating them. And wild honey is delicious. Back to the story. Mark was identifying John with the great Old Testament prophet Elijah. That was important because the last book of the Old Testament – Malachi – promised that Elijah would return. He didn't mean literally that Elijah would come back from the dead, but that a character like Elijah would arise. It was exciting because if John was the new Elijah it meant God was keeping his promises. It's happening, but this was not it – John the Baptist was not the Messiah, God's liberating agent. He was the warm-up act. One is coming who will not baptise with water – an outward sign, but with the Holy Spirit – something internal, spiritual, life-changing. We'll leave Mark there – It's rather like getting off a bus quickly before it heads off round the corner – probably on two wheels.

Let's catch our breath. And ask if this is good news for us. It is but it is not easy news. The good news begins with a couple of things we may not want to hear. Repent – means us too. We need to acknowledge the ways in which we have put ourselves and our wants and desires first before thinking about what is right, about what God requires. The season of Advent reminds us to consider what we need to put right, our attitudes and sometimes the way we behave and speak to others. And secondly the good news reminds us that it's not all about us, ourselves, me, me, me... the good news is about Jesus not you. John the Baptist pointed people away from himself and to Jesus.

This morning we have the joy of asking God's blessing on \_\_\_\_\_ as they recommit themselves in their marriage. Always a happy occasion. The Bible teaches us that at its best marriage is a picture, a symbol, a signpost to the close and loving relationship between Jesus and his people. For those of us privileged to be married, marriage is the arena where we have to work out what it means to follow Jesus – to live in a way of repentance – being willing to say sorry and change to live more in Jesus' way, to recognise that it's not all about us. Marriage for a Christian is much more than a private arrangement between two individuals; it is a relationship in the community blessed by God. Marriage is a good news story, but like following Jesus it is not always an easy story.

We need all the help we can get to be good news people.

Prayer