

Sermon Advent 2 10th Dec 2023 Great Wishford

Isaiah 40:1-11; 2 Peter 3:8-15; Mark 1; 1-8

' *The Beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.*
Mark 1:1

So here we have it, in the first sentence of the first chapter of his account of the life of Christ – Mark makes clear his belief – that Jesus Christ IS the Son of God.

There is no room for ambiguity here. Jesus is the one of which Isaiah prophesies, and John the Baptist is the messenger who will prepare the way for Him, the Saviour of his people.

There is so much in these few verses worthy of exploration, but we will start at The Beginning. In the first verse of the first chapter of the first book of the Bible we read – in the Beginning God created the heavens and the earth. The spirit of God swept over the formless void and God said let there be light.

Mark uses the same word here, the Beginning, grounding his words in the Hebrew scripture showing a continuity of message, giving it form and order –and declares that this is a new beginning, and one of Good News, where the spirit of God is again bringing light to the world, this time in the form of Jesus Christ.

The Good News – in Greek is evangelion or Gospel. The term eventually came to describe the first 4 books of the NT but Mark uses it here to describe the content of the Xian message. It had previously been used to describe the birth of Caesar Augustus so there is a subversive element to its presence here to describe the person, teaching and life of Jesus, the son of God. *Jesus is the Real hope and real solution for all humanity, and deserves our ultimate allegiance.*

Mark quoting Isaiah, again rooting the xian message firmly in well-known scripture, giving it authenticity and consistency.

He quotes - The messenger is coming ahead of God's anointed, to prepare his way.

And in the next verse John the Baptist appears! This is typical Mark, no preamble, no build-up of atmosphere, it just happens. Mark can't wait to get to the important bits!

John proclaims baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. He doesn't do it politely as we will read later and I often wonder why people flocked to see this John. He can't have been the only odd ball in the desert?

Of course, word spread swiftly in those days when Roman roads and communication systems were efficient and I suppose, as there hadn't been a prophet for 400 years (Malachi), people were longing to hear from God. John was different to the usual religious leader, eschewing the elaborate robes of the temple personnel to wear something more akin to what Elijah would have worn.

Was this a key to his status as a prophet? Is this why people took him seriously. Did they recognise in his demeanour and language the voice crying out in the wilderness alerting them to prepare the way of The Lord? Was God's glory about to be revealed in their presence?

Putting myself in that place I can imagine the excitement, and also fear that John was evoking.

I, too, might have felt compelled to go, to see, to hear and do something which showed I was serious and intentional about turning to God.

The baptism that John was offering was unusual, in that Jews were used to baptising non-Jews who had converted to Judaism. But to baptise existing Jews as a visible sign of **repentance**, was a radical departure from Jewish custom. Baptism indicates a *visible* sign of giving up of a sinful selfish way of life to one which turns to God. John took an existing custom and gave it new meaning. Another beginning.

And then he pronounces that this baptism with water is a precursor to the completed process – the baptism with the Holy Spirit. This same Spirit whom we first encountered in Genesis, is the one who gives form and order, light and indeed life. Life - as we are promised – in all its fulness. Another new beginning. We think we are living, the Baptist says, but the life that Jesus offers is something else.

J the B wants his hearers to know that something special is on its way and that something is for all people. SO, John says, pay attention – this is Good News!

So what does this mean for us – this Good News, or tidings? Let's look at what Isaiah says. We are to be comforted, forgiven. This is salvation. God is coming, he rules with mighty power. Yet he uses his might and power by feeding his flock like a shepherd, gathering the young into his arms and carrying them close to his heart, gently leading.

This prophecy Christians interpret to be about Jesus Christ, our Lord, our saviour, our brother and friend.

So, now we are in Advent when we are preparing for and thinking about, not only Jesus' birth, but also about the next beginning – the one Peter describes as the Day of the Lord, when all things will be made new. As we saw last week, we are living in the in-between times, not knowing when

or quite how this will all turn out. So, while we wait, Peter says, strive to live well – be at peace, live with integrity and honesty.

We have a chance, and an **urgent** chance, to repent, to turn to HiM who changes things from chaos to order, from war to peace, from wrong to right. To put our trust in the one whose **word** will stand forever.

So finally, what is this WORD which, Isaiah says, will stand forever. This WORD – the ‘word’ which comes from his mouth, yes, but also surely The WORD who comes to us in human form, the one of whom we read on Christmas day – the Word made flesh, who was in the beginning, who was with God and who IS God. **This** Word is everlasting and will never fail. This Word, the One through whom all things have life. With this life comes light, the light which shines in the darkness, the light which no darkness can overcome. This Word is Good News indeed.