

Mark 1 v 1-13 - Sunday 4th April 2021

For a little over a year, we have been praying about what it is that we should do here. In February 2020 we had a prayer meeting here to begin to discern what God wanted, if anything. We felt God wanted to do something, but we were not sure what.

Over the course of the past year, the feeling many of us have had is that God is calling us to do something and that we should start with worship, as a foundation for all we do.

In recent months, we've had this scripture given to us. We believe this is for St. Andrew's in Canterbury and here in Littlebourne. Isaiah 43 v 18-19:

*“Remember not the former things,
nor consider the things of old.
Behold, I am doing a new thing;
now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?
I will make a way in the wilderness
and rivers in the desert.*

We're looking this afternoon at the first 13 verses of Mark - all set in the wilderness - and we'll see that God certainly was doing a new thing there as we trust He is doing a new thing here too.

Mark is first of the four gospels to have been written, and the shortest. Mark's gospel doesn't start with Jesus' birth. There's no genealogy either. No, Mark is very much straight into the action, there's barely an introduction, and as we go through Mark we'll see that he likes to fit a lot into a small space. Compared with the other gospel accounts of John's baptising, Jesus' baptism and subsequent temptation, Mark is very succinct.

Jesus Introduced - Who is this Jesus?

Verse 1:

The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

There's a lot here already in just this one verse. Jesus is the Greek form of Joshua, meaning 'The LORD is salvation'. Jesus' human first name is a fitting name for Him who is called the Christ, that is the Messiah or anointed one, the promised King who will be the saviour of the Jewish people, as foretold in countless prophecies in the Old Testament.

And He is the Son of God - not just a son of God, but the Son of God. He is God come to earth.

Mark starts by saying that this gospel, this good news, is all about Jesus Christ. Everything we look at as we make our way through Mark needs to be looked at in light of this first verse; Jesus is what this book is about.

Verses 2 and 3:

as 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 wilderness,
'Prepare the way for the Lord,
make straight paths for him.'"*

Jesus was foretold - the culmination of centuries of prophecy in what we know as the Old Testament. There's actually two quotations here, Malachi 3 : 1 and Isaiah 40 : 3. Malachi was the last prophet of Israel, 400 years before Jesus' birth. For four centuries of no prophets, the Jewish people have long awaited their messiah. Mark is making quite clear that Jesus is not just another prophet in a long line of prophets, no, he is the promised Messiah, more than a prophet and greater than all who proceed Him.

John, the messenger who prepares the way, prepares it for whom? For the Lord! He is not preparing for anything less than God's coming. In Isaiah it is 'prepare the way of the LORD' - YHWH. There's no ambiguity in who is coming. The promised messiah is God Himself.

John's job is to "make straight paths for him" or in the original text of Isaiah, "make straight a highway for our God". And in verse 5 of Isaiah 40 we read that when this is done, "the glory of the LORD shall be revealed". John is preparing the way for God's glory revealed in Jesus Christ.

John isn't literally building a highway. But he is fulfilling the role of a forerunner - one who goes before the coming King, preparing the way. He not only makes sure the roads are passable, that there is a clear path for the King, but he alerts the people to the imminent arrival of the King.

Jesus Proclaimed - How are we to make Jesus known?

So how exactly did John prepare the way?

Verses 4 and 5

And so John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And all the country of Judea and all Jerusalem were going out to him and were being baptised by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

John is first said to preach "a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins". John does something unusual in his day - he baptises Jews. Baptism was not a new concept, it was used as part of the process of a gentile becoming a Jewish convert. But John's use of baptism and the application he used for it was new. His one time baptism of those Israelites already within the covenant was a new innovation. The baptism John practices was not quite the same as we practice baptism now - we baptise in the name of the triune God, and the symbolism of our union with Christ in His death and resurrection is not something that John would have known about. But this radical call to repentance (as we'll see Jesus preaches next week) and the expectation of forgiveness of sins is pointing us to the new covenant and Him who embodies it.

We believe baptism is not to have our sins forgiven - rather we get baptised *because* our sins have been forgiven by the work of Jesus Christ. John was pointing those he baptised towards Him that would accomplish the forgiveness of their sins.

Verse 6

Now John was clothed with camel's hair and wore a leather belt around his waist and ate locusts and wild honey.

These details might seem a bit out of place. Not really in keeping with Mark's characteristic brevity. Why does he include these strange details?

What we see here is an allusion to John being, as Luke 1 puts it, "in the spirit and power of Elijah". The return of the prophet Elijah is foretold right at the end of Malachi and in Matthew 17 Jesus makes clear that Elijah has come, in the person of John.

In 2 Kings 1 we see that Elijah "wore a garment of hair, with a belt of leather about his waist." John's appearance is that of the Old Testament prophet.

In Zechariah (13 : 4) we read about those false prophets that "put on a hairy cloak in order to deceive". Mark shows that John was not just poor in appearance, prophet in appearance only, but in lifestyle too. His diet of what he could find in the wilderness shows his appearance is consistent with his actions, he practised what he preached. His private life of poverty was consistent with his public poor prophet appearance.

Verses 7 and 8

And this was his message: "After me comes the one more powerful than I, the straps 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."

John prepared the way of the Lord by announcing His coming. Different translations render this differently, but in most it says "he proclaimed", "he announced" or "he preached". John's ministry to prepare the way of the Lord was about preaching Jesus. And he makes clear that the focus is on Jesus, not himself.

John not only says that Jesus is more powerful, but that he will baptise not outwardly with water, but inwardly with the Holy Spirit. John's baptism of water was an outward sign of cleansing or repentance for the forgiveness of sins, but Jesus will grant us a baptism of inward cleansing, being immersed or drenched in God the Holy Spirit - with the true cleansing that comes with that.

Application

What are we to learn of John's ministry as we start a new ministry here in Littlebourne?

First, John prepares the way of the Lord in humility and repentance. Before we expect God to come and reveal Himself in glory, we must examine ourselves, repent of our sins and seek His forgiveness, being baptised not only with water, but with the Holy Spirit. As we saw, John practised what he preached and so must we if we are to prepare the way for Jesus' coming into the hearts of those in this village.

His actions and appearance were in no way showy. He was not concerned about a good building to base himself in or in the right publicity. He didn't seek to make himself the centre of attention or to show off. His concern was altogether the message.

John, compared to those he was baptising may have seemed a very holy man. And we all can be tempted to compare ourselves to others and say 'see, I'm not that bad, at least I'm not like them'. But in verse 7 John compares himself to Jesus and his response to this is to say "I'm not worthy to even untie his sandals", in those days the work of a slave. Our right sense of humility is found in our seeing Jesus as the standard. We humble ourselves

before God, in looking to Him above all, in knowledge that our outward actions are worthless compared with the inward work of the Holy Spirit. And this requires to know not just who we are, but more importantly to know who God is, which brings us to our next point.

John preached Christ. His message was one that was centred on Jesus, focused on what mattered. He didn't water down his message or avoid talking about difficult topics like sin and repentance, but talked about these things in the light of Christ who was to come. We too should look at everything in the light of Christ. Our sin in contrast to His perfection, salvation in His death and resurrection, our example in His life, church as His bride, scripture as His word, and so on.

Verse 5 tells us that people came from far and wide for such a message. John may have been in the wilderness, but his message spread to cities and towns beyond because it resonates with us all.

Jesus our example and substitute - He has already done the real work.

Verses 9 through 13

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptised by John in the Jordan. 10 And when he came up out of the water, immediately he saw the heavens being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. 11 And a voice came from heaven, "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased."

12 The Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. 13 And he was in the wilderness forty days, being tempted by Satan. And he was with the wild animals, and the angels were ministering to him.

Now Jesus appears in verse 9 and His first appearance in Mark's gospel is not what we might expect given the description of Him in verse 1 and John's preaching. The heavens being torn open, the Spirit descending and the Father speaking from heaven all fits. But the baptism, that John has described as 'of repentance for the forgiveness of sins' followed by temptation in the wilderness doesn't sound like the coming King the people were expecting.

In Matthew (3 : 13-15) we see that John had the same idea.

Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to John, to be baptised by him. 14 John would have prevented him, saying, "I need to be baptised by you, and do you come to me?" 15 But Jesus answered him, "Let it be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfil all righteousness." Then he consented.

'Fitting to fulfil all righteousness'.

In Jesus' baptism and temptation, we see Jesus in His deity and His humanity.

His deity is fully on display as all three persons of the Trinity are present as heaven is torn open. The Spirit descends visibly and audibly the voice of the Father is heard "You are my beloved Son". In John's gospel it is made clear that this is not a metaphor or something only Jesus experienced, but a real event - John the Baptist testifies that he saw the Spirit descend on Jesus. It's both public and personal, as the Father speaks directly to His Son and those with Him see and hear the same.

His humanity is also on display - most obviously in His temptation, that he could be tempted at all. But also in what we read about the Spirit's role in His life.

The Spirit's descending on Jesus is fulfilling prophecy - Isaiah 11 (verses 1 - 3) tell us that the Spirit will rest on the Messiah. Isaiah 42 (verse 1) says

*Behold my servant, whom I uphold,
my chosen, in whom my soul delights;
I have put my Spirit upon him;
he will bring forth justice to the nations.*

So prophecy is fulfilled, but why does Jesus need the Spirit? What does God incarnate have need of the Spirit for? Because He came into the world to live as a man, and righteousness for men is total reliance on God and following where the Spirit leads, empowered by the Spirit.

Notice that the last verse of our passage tells us that the angels were ministering to Him. Righteousness for us is not self-reliance. It is reliance on God.

Philippians 2 tells us that "He emptied Himself, taking the form of a servant". Jesus' humanity doesn't diminish his deity, rather Jesus laid aside His authority, power and glory, that He might live a perfect human life, with the limitations that come with it.

Jesus being the sinless man, His baptism is one of obedience to God, fulfilling righteousness. I think also in His baptism, he identifies with His people - similarly to His death being for and on behalf of those who are 'in Him', his baptism is on behalf of all who are 'in Him'.

And as he is led into the wilderness by the Spirit, we see that the Spirit guides Jesus to another situation where His perfect obedience and righteousness in His human life can be fulfilled - in victory over the worst temptations Satan can muster.

Application

Why is it important that Jesus lived a life of perfect humanity, in all righteousness?

Firstly, because it makes His death meaningful. At Easter we rightly remember Jesus' death and resurrection, but His life was essential to God's plan of salvation as well. No ordinary life was enough to be given as the sacrifice required for our sins.

Sacrifices in the Old Testament had to be 'without any defect' (Deuteronomy 17 : 1). The first Passover required a 'lamb without blemish' (Exodus 12 : 5). And those sacrifices at Passover, in the Temple and elsewhere in the Old Testament were not final, once for all sacrifices.

We all deserve to die for our sin. Only the sinless man could die for the sins of others.

Secondly, Jesus' perfect life is important for us, because by it we can be counted righteous.

2 Corinthians 5 : 21

God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

Our sins are taken from us, the slate is wiped clean. Far more than we deserve. But that's not all - Jesus' very righteousness is applied to us. In His resurrection, we gain new life in Him - and no ordinary life, but life in Him in His righteousness.

We're plucked out of the long line of sinners that started with Adam and are joined into Jesus' life, united with Him so that we can be counted as righteous as He is.

Romans 5 verses 17-19 puts it like this:

For if, because of one man's trespass, death reigned through that one man, much more will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man Jesus Christ.

18 Therefore, as the trespass of one led to condemnation for all men, so the act of righteousness of one leads to justification and life for all men. 19 For as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous.

Consider this contrast - Adam, in literal paradise, has but one thing he is expressly and unambiguously prohibited from. He fails miserably. This is the nature we inherit from him. Jesus, living in the wilderness, in a fallen world, tempted by the worst that Satan has to offer. He triumphs. This is the nature we are given when we are 'in Him'. In our lives now, this nature is slowly and steadily being applied to us by the Holy Spirit and will reach its fulfillment in our resurrection bodies when Christ comes at the end of the world and all is made new.

In baptism, there is not only the symbolic death to sin and to our sinful nature, in being submerged in the water, but also symbolically raised to new life as we come out of the water, washed clean and reborn.

Conclusion

A lot has happened in these first 13 verses of Mark. There's a lot more that could have been said, but I hope that I've set the scene as we look through Jesus' life in the coming months, so we can all see the importance of who we are reading about, seeing that his life as outlined in this gospel has meaning for us.

In closing, I want us to revisit those verses from Isaiah 43. We've seen John proclaim his message in the wilderness, one of preparing the way of the Lord. I want us to take John's example and do likewise.

But our verses in Isaiah 43 say 'Behold, I am doing a new thing'. Who is this I? Verse 16 of Isaiah 43 that introduces our verses says 'Thus says the LORD'. It is the Lord God who does this new thing.

These streams in the wilderness and the life that springs up around such streams is the work of God. Now God may well use our words and actions here to accomplish some of this, or may use whatever other means he deems fit. We must understand that it is God that does the real work, and we are those who are 'unworthy to even untie the straps of His sandals'.