

Keep Listening

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[0 : 0 0] Many years ago, I was told that if you're ever giving a talk of any kind whatsoever, you must be really careful in choosing your opening lines. That's because listeners will decide within the first few seconds whether they're going to either keep listening or switch off. And ever since we've been doing these online services, I've been even more aware that you really can quite literally switch off. Are you still listening? Good. I mention this because in today's reading, the opening verses of Mark's gospel, Mark starts by saying the beginning of the good news about Jesus Christ, the Son of God. Mark, whose account of Jesus is the shortest and most succinct of the four gospel writers, has a style that is notoriously to the point. His narrative is fast moving as he wastes no time telling the story of Jesus. That's all in great contrast with

Matthew and Luke who begin their stories with accounts of the birth of Jesus, and John who opens with a deep reflection on how Jesus is the incarnate Son of God. But for all his succinctness, even Mark begins his story of Jesus by going way, way back hundreds of years to the prophecy of Isaiah, and then telling us about how John the Baptist prepares the way. You see, Mark knew, and we need to know this too, Mark knew that when we begin to hear that story of Jesus, there is so, so much more to it and first meets the eye. We need to keep on listening. We need to keep on finding out more and more. On the 18th of June 1815, the Battle of Waterloo was over. The British had won. Wellington needed to send news of his victory to England. His men set up a series of line of sight communication stations, and a coded message was sent. But only the first part of the message got through.

Halfway through sending the message, the fog set in and the signalers couldn't see each other. All the English received was the terrible news that said, Wellington defeated. It was only later, as the fog lifted, that the whole message could get through, which was not Wellington defeated, but Wellington defeated Napoleon at Waterloo. If you switch off too quickly, you miss the message. Now, there would have been many who would have taken one look at John the Baptist and just written him off as some weird eccentric preacher. And many responded to Jesus in much the same way. And of course, 2000 years on, many people do the same now. But isn't it intriguing how 2000 years on, we're still talking about him? My message this morning is simple, and it's this. However much we think we know about the gospel of Jesus Christ, we need to keep listening. We mustn't switch off or we'll miss something very important. When Mark opens his account of Jesus by saying, this is the beginning of the gospel, he really means it. Our first hearing of it is just the beginning. And you can never get so much of it that you've heard it all. Let me break that down a bit.

[3 : 3 8] First, at any given time, there will be vast numbers of people who will say they know about Jesus and they like what he stands for. But they're just not that sure about whether they want to go so far as to say that they would confidently regard him as the son of God. They might say that they like his teachings. And in that regard, they would say that they uphold Christian values. But they wouldn't feel that they could go so far as to call themselves Christian believers as such. Now, to anyone in that position, I would simply say that while Christian faith does involve belief and of course involves values, it's more than that. Essentially, it's about relationship. It's about knowing Jesus Christ as a real living presence in your life. For example, you could tell me all about a friend of yours that I've never met, to the point that I know quite a lot about them. I could have all sorts of information about what they're like and what they stand for. But I won't really have an understanding of what that person is or who that person is until I've met them and experienced their friendship for myself.

That's what Christian faith is, friendship with Christ. It's freely available to anyone who wants it. But if we do want that for ourselves, we've got to keep listening and keep listening and keep listening.

Secondly, there will be a great many of us who do regard ourselves as Christian believers and have done so for many years. And if we're in that position, it's especially vital that we remember the importance of ongoing listening. There's a danger that can become more acute the longer we've been Christians. I'm talking about our perceived familiarity. Over time, we can dry up spiritually because the more we pick up our Bibles, pick up our hymn books, pick up our prayer books, we can start to kid ourselves that by now there's not a lot we haven't discovered already.

The good news is that's total nonsense. No matter how much experience of faith you've had, you can't exhaust the Spirit of God. You never can. There's always, always, always more. And it's always better, always bigger, always wider, always deeper, and always richer than we've previously encountered. So keep listening.

On Wednesday morning, I picked up a headline piece of news. I didn't get anything other than the headline, but the headline was enough. The headline was simply that a COVID vaccine had at last been approved, and that the mass rollout is about to commence. Now, when I heard that headline, I suddenly found myself asking a lot of questions. Like everyone else, I suddenly wanted to know more details and to find out and work out the implications of it. But in a sense, the headline was all I needed.

[6 : 46] Something really life-changing for the world had just been announced. It was good news indeed. When Mark says the beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, he means the beginning of the good news.

It's his headline. Working out what that headline means for us is an invitation and a challenge that can and should take place every day for the rest of our lives. As we unpack it, our faith becomes more deeply rooted. We get to know God more. We discover new riches. We become stronger and better equipped for life. And we grow. It's what we call discipleship. It's good news. And we should expect to be taken by surprise by it more and more because it only gets better. So keep listening. Keep listening.