

The Beginning of Good News

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Date: 12 June 2005

Preacher: Paul Barker

[0 : 00] Please be seated. You may like to turn in the Bibles in the pews to page 812 to the beginning of Mark's Gospel and today we're beginning a sermon series on the opening chapters of Mark's Gospel, chapters 1 to 4 over the next 6 or 8 weeks and tonight we begin a series in the evening service looking at Mark's Gospel chapters 5 to 8.

Let me pray for us firstly. God, our Heavenly Father, speak to us now we pray from your Word. Enlighten our minds, reform our wills, transform our hearts so that we may repent and believe in the good news of Jesus Christ.

Amen. When Augustus, who was later the Roman Emperor, was born, they publicly announced his birth. With what they called the Gospel, literally the good news.

Somebody would herald the Gospel of the birth of Augustus and presumably people other than his mother were meant to be pleased that he was born. The word Gospel, the Greek word is Evangelion, from which we get the words Evangelism, Evangelical, Evangelistic and so on. It's simply joyful tidings, good news, something to be pleased about when we hear it announced or proclaimed. It's not necessarily originally a religious word as it was the word used for the proclamation of the birth of Augustus.

[1 : 40] At the very beginning of Mark's good news, Mark's Gospel, we read the beginning of the good news, literally the beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

And first and foremost, we're meant to think and know, this is good news. And though we're very familiar, I'm sure most of us, with the accounts that follow in the chapters that we'll see in weeks to come, let us be reminded and remember, this is good news.

Something to be excited and joyful about. Not just something for which familiarity may breed, if not contempt, indifference, not at all. Joy, because this is good news.

Jesus Christ, the Son of God, which is the content of the Gospel, the content of the good news, is to bring us joy. It is good news.

Well, why? Why is it that this Jesus, the Son of God, is good news? Well, as we read through the whole of this book of Mark, 16 chapters, not too long, we see all sorts of things about why Jesus is the good news.

[2 : 53] But we'll see enough hints in today's passage to give us a sample for why this is the case. And though the book begins the beginning of the good news, it's not as though Jesus comes sort of completely unexpected and out of the blue.

Though in a sense the beginning comes when Jesus appears physically on earth, there's a long period of anticipation and expectation that has led up to this.

And we see that hinted at in the next two verses. For in verses 2 and 3 we're told here, as it is written in the prophet Isaiah, oddly we first get a quote from Malachi before we get the quote from Isaiah.

From Malachi the prophet, Malachi was a prophet about 400 BC, Isaiah was a prophet about 750 BC.

That is on either reckoning, there is a long period of anticipation for which Jesus is the culmination or the fulfilment, the realisation of what was long expected.

[4 : 08] So, though in a sense Jesus' arrival is the beginning of the good news, it was good news that was predicted and prophesied and anticipated for hundreds of years before his coming.

In particular, the context of the Isaiah prophecy is important. Isaiah was the prophet about 750 BC, thereabouts, and the last part of his book of prophecy is set within the context of the people of God in exile away from the land under Babylonian rule.

And from Isaiah chapter 40, where this quote's from, through to the rest at the end of Isaiah, the context is that God will come and bring salvation to the people of God.

He would do that in two ways and through two human figures. One is Cyrus, later the Persian emperor, who brought the people from exile in Babylon back to the land, but the more significant role anticipated by the prophet Isaiah is done by the servant figure.

who will bring the people, not back to the land, they're already there, but will bring the people back to God. And that servant figure appears at various places through those last chapters of Isaiah as the one who brings people to God.

[5 : 36] Cyrus will bring them to the land, this servant figure will bring them back to God. In 539 BC, Cyrus did exactly that.

Long predicted by Isaiah, he conquered the Babylonians and as the Persian emperor allowed the Jews to return to Judah. And they did, or some of them did at least. But not so much to God, much awaited fulfilment.

And another 500 and plus years before Jesus came on the scene. And these words from Isaiah are quoted here to show what Jesus has come to do, to bring people and God together.

That is, the announcement from the prophet applied to Jesus is showing that he has come to restore people to God, long awaited in the Old Testament. And that is good news.

You see, the great dilemma of human history is that God and humanity are largely estranged through our own doing, mind you, not through God's.

[6 : 44] Right from the very beginning when Adam and Eve failed to trust God's word and obey it and were thus expelled from the Garden of Eden, God and humanity have been estranged from each other.

And the story of the Old Testament shows various approaches by God to do something about it and to announce that he will do something final about it. And when Jesus comes it is God acting to remedy that estrangement, to bring himself and people together.

And the reason for the estrangement is that human beings have failed to trust God's word and to obey it, what the Bible calls our sin. not major wrongdoings necessarily like murder and child abuse which is what our society thinks sin is, but anything that falls short of loving God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength and falls short of loving our neighbour as ourself is in effect sin.

We may be very good and noble people, very generous people and yet we know that we fall short of God's standards. That's our sin. And it creates in a sense a barrier between us and God, estrangement between us and God.

And so this announcement of good news is that estrangement is over, reconciliation has come, God and humanity will be brought back together again by Jesus the Son of God, the one who is the anticipated servant from the prophet Isaiah who will enable this to happen.

[8 : 24] So at the heart of Christianity is not church services, it's not religious practices, it's not moralism or wishful thinking or hope for the future. At the heart of Christianity is good news, Jesus Christ, the Son of God, as Mark chapter 1 verse 1 declares.

As some of you know, I quite like reading crime fiction as a sort of relaxation and escape and I quite like trying to piece together the bizarre clues to work out who's done the murder.

The clues of course are always, it seems, mutually contradictory. They always lead you up dead ends and you can never pick who the murderer is anyway. Some have often thought that Mark's Gospel is a bit like that because through the Gospel people keep asking, who is this Jesus?

And we'll see at the end of this morning sermon series, at the end of chapter 4, the disciples asking that very question. Who is this man that even wind and waves obey Him? Who is this person of great teaching authority, great healing ability, the casting out of demons, the calming of the storm? Who is this man? But Mark in some ways spoils it as a mystery. I don't mean that totally of course because Mark is not wanting actually to write a mystery.

[9 : 44] He's wanting it to be very clear from the very first sentence who Jesus is and the first sentence tells us the beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

That is, we know who He is from the start. The followers and people around in the audience, well, they kept asking who is this Jesus? And in the end, of course, at the end of chapter 8, Jesus asks them, well, who do you say that I am?

And it's not really till the end of the Gospel that climaxes Jesus hangs dying that a Roman centurion, not even a Jew, declares truly this man is the Son of God.

That's who He is. There's no doubt about it. Despite what all sorts of people try to dream up in their fantasy minds these days and publish it in learned books and popular novels, Jesus Christ is the Son of God.

And Mark declares it at the very beginning and he shows us through his Gospel various people finally coming to the realisation that indeed that's who He is. And from the beginning, the focus is on bringing people and God together.

[10:57] So, the forerunner for Jesus, the one to announce His coming, also anticipated in the Old Testament is John the Baptist, John the baptiser, the one who baptised people, something slightly unusual in Jewish practices of the day.

We're told in verse 4 that he appeared in the wilderness proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. That is, his very focus is bringing people and God together by forgiving sins, dealing with the barrier of sin between God and humanity.

Not that John himself can totally take them away but in a sense as the forerunner he's pointing to the one who will do that himself and he preaches this forgiveness of sins and people from both the country and the city, from the Judean country and Jerusalem we're told in verse 5 went out to him and were baptised by him in the river Jordan confessing their sins.

As I said, John the Baptist is not the one long expected, he's the forerunner of the one long expected. Verse 6 describes what he's wearing and eating and it's just like Elijah the prophet with whom the book of Malachi makes some association as well as in other places in the New Testament.

John the Baptist is like the prophet Elijah the way he wears, the clothes he wears, the things that he eats. He's a prophet who is still looking to the future, to the one who is yet to come and so he says in verse 7, the one who is more powerful than I is coming after me.

[12:31] I'm not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I've baptised you with water but he will baptise you with the Holy Spirit. Well if you were to dream up a way of eradicating sin from human lives, what sort of measures do you think you would try and take?

Well the sorts of things that people would usually respond to and indeed have tried in various ways through human history are these. Better education.

We educate people better, they'll be better people and therefore less likely to do bad things. Some would advocate censorship, that is stop people seeing or hearing bad things and therefore they'll do good things.

Let's have more laws. That of course is what governments try and do to curb sin. As they see people acting in a bad way they'll throw in a new law that stops people doing what they're doing. Maybe to add a few rewards and incentives. That is if you do the right thing well we'll reward you in various ways. A sort of spiritual frequent flyer point system or something like that.

[13:47] Maybe associated with that stricter punishments, harsher punishments so that it'll turn people off doing bad things. Well you know as well as I that for all the governments or institutions in world history that have tried to curb sin in any or all of those methods in the end it's to no avail.

The Old Testament's got all of those things anyway. Laws, incentives, warnings, punishment, education, censorship in a sense but in a sense to no avail for sin is curbed by changing the heart for that's where sin comes from, our insides.

And all the laws and the incentives and whatever all on the outside may in fact touch on the symptoms but they don't actually change the human heart and that's what needs changing.

And the Old Testament knew that the human heart needed changing. The Old Testament knew that its laws and sacrifices wouldn't change the insides of people. The Old Testament knew that God in the future needed to act on an internal mechanism in human life and it awaited that.

It looked forward to it. So in the Old Testament prophets you get the expectation that God will come and circumcise the hearts. He'll give a new heart in place of the old one.

[15:08] He'll write the law on the heart rather than on stone. He'll change the heart of stone into a heart of flesh. That's the sort of language the Old Testament uses to expect and wait and await this future act of God to change the human heart.

And those expectations associate that change with God's spirit at work. For example in the prophet Joel and Jeremiah. So when John the Baptist says the one coming after me will baptise you with the Holy Spirit that's what he's referring to.

to deal with sin at its root not just to provide forgiveness of sins that are done acts done wrongly or things not done that should have been done but to actually get to the core of the problem.

And that's what Jesus baptising with the Holy Spirit is about. It's dealing with the barrier between God and humanity that's caused the estrangement so that God and humanity can be brought back together in a harmonious relationship once again.

Well some think that it's fairly odd that John the Baptist then baptises Jesus having announced this is baptism for the repentance of sins and Jesus then submits himself to this baptism is it saying that Jesus is a sinner who needs his sins forgiven before he can go on and do God's task.

[16:30] Well that's not the way that the New Testament as a whole understands it of course. Jesus is declared very explicitly on several occasions to be without sin himself sinless the only human being ever who's been perfectly sinless.

Jesus submitting to baptism himself is to identify with humanity which is fallen but also to show what he himself is on about that is his identification with humans in their sin is order to bring about their repentance and forgiveness and the eradication of sin from their life.

That's why Jesus submits to the baptism of John the Baptist. I was talking to friends last night and one friend who catches the tram into work said that his tram survey agrees with the best-selling book list that you read in the paper that more people are reading the Da Vinci Code than any other book.

That's his informal survey of what he sees people reading on the tram. The Da Vinci Code for those who've read it and presumably if so many millions of copies have been sold then some people at least must have read it at least.

It's fanciful and fictional and stupid and nonsense in effect but the whole book is structured around all sorts of clues that are meant to lead to some sort of understanding about Jesus Christ that is heretical and rubbish.

[18:05] In a different sort of way in a more important and in a true way the Old Testament is like a book of clues that help us understand who Jesus is.

Let me illustrate with the declaration of the voice as Jesus is baptised for in verse 11 after Jesus is baptised by John in the Jordan a voice came from heaven saying you are my son the beloved with you I am well pleased.

Well it sounds like just a nice general commendation but for those who know their Old Testaments they see where the clues of the Old Testament are pointing.

Psalms 2 you are my son quoted here Jesus is fulfilling the Psalm 2 and the expectations of a king. At the end of this quote comes again from prophet Isaiah.

The part that says with you I am well pleased arises out of Isaiah 42 a description of the servant who would come whose role as I've said in the second half of Isaiah is to bring God and humanity together.

[19:22] So the announcement at Jesus' baptism draws on Old Testament words, language and expectation and so it's actually telling us who Jesus is.

He's the servant who will bring God and humanity together. That's why he's here. That's why he's come and of course in Isaiah 40 to the end of Isaiah that servant does that pre-eminently by suffering and dying bearing the sins and iniquities of the people so that many may be made righteous.

You see Jesus is that long awaited servant. The hints are there for those who know the clues that the purpose of Jesus' coming in that declaration of verse 11 is not to heal or to teach or to be a good person but to die carrying the sins of the world so that God and humanity can be restored in a relationship together.

Jesus who we're told will baptise with the Spirit himself receives the Spirit of God like a dove we're told at the end of verse 10 and these days if somebody says that they're a Christian who's received the Holy Spirit or been baptised in the Holy Spirit or language like that usually they make the association that you'll be full of peace and joy and enthusiasm and excitement for being a Christian but now things are really working out well.

We'll see the impact of the Spirit on Jesus' life in verse 12. He immediately drove Jesus out into the wilderness he was there 40 days tempted by Satan and he was with the wild beasts and the angels waited on him.

[21:14] I suspect that if that happened to you after some experience of the Holy Spirit you'd begin to wonder what God is on about or whether you'd even receive the Spirit. The reception of God's

Holy Spirit doesn't necessarily mean everything working out well everything coming up roses.

Indeed often the experience of the Holy Spirit of Christians is in fact for tough times strengthening refining purifying times. that's in a sense what's happening for Jesus here time of deprivation rather than a time of bliss and peace and joy everything on hand.

Jesus is driven out into the wilderness the very place in effect where the people in exile were so in a sense again identifying with people estranged from God identifying with Israel coming out of Egypt in 40 year period in the wilderness but unlike the people of God of the Old Testament without sin resisting the temptations of Satan which are given to us in more detail in both Matthew and Luke's Gospel and account of these parts.

That is Jesus is proving his sonship by resisting temptation in the wilderness in a time of deprivation under the guidance or indeed the driving of God's Holy Spirit.

So don't limit in a sense what you should what you expect the Holy Spirit will do for you to think it will only be good and exciting things. It's much bigger than that as well.

[22 : 55] Well John the Baptist is later arrested later he's put to death indeed and Mark chapter 6 recounts that and after the arrest of John we're told that Jesus came into Galilee proclaiming the good news of God or the gospel of God and saying the time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God has come near repent and believe in the gospel or the good news.

The kingdom of God firstly is not so much a place a geographical land it's not the land of Israel bounded by the seas the Med the Red the Dead and the Sea of Galilee but rather the idea of the kingdom of God is it's the kingship the rule of God the sovereign rule of God the place where God's in charge that's what's come near in Jesus' proclamation here in verses 14 and 15 one writer sums up the aim of God in the scriptures in a helpful way I think God is on about getting God's people in God's place under God's rule in a sense from the exile at the time of Isaiah in his prophecy at least God's people are out of God's place and not under God's rule later on in the Old Testament they go back into God's place but they're still not under God's rule Jesus you see here announcing the kingship of God is announcing the rule of God that will come over God's people that is the restoration of God to his people and that's what he's announcing here it's not in a particular geographical location but wherever

God and his people are together again and the people are submitting under God's rule there is the kingdom of God last year some of us were involved in helping one of our Mandarin service families to gain a visa that enabled them permanent residency in Australia there was a whole lot of stuff that we had to do forms we filled in a couple of us were referees for them three or four of us had to provide financial backing for them they had to pass an English test they had to pay certain amounts of money bonds had to be lodged certain skill had to be there on the part of the father etc etc a whole lot of what some people would say hoops and hurdles in my opinion though it's a long process is a fair and actually a good process but through all of those hoops and hurdles finally in February this year they arrived back in Australia as permanent residents which is a good outcome all sorts of requirements needed to become permanent residents which in time will mean the opportunity for them to become citizens of

Australia here at the end of this passage in verse 15 we get in a sense what are the entry requirements to be citizens of God's kingdom they are simple there are two repent and believe in the good news to repent is literally to do an about face it's as though your world's been turned upside down and now you respond aright to the world as it is that is to God as he is it means the reorientation of life towards God and therefore the reorientation of life away from our own sins and bad practices our selfish living etc it's a turnaround because all the values have been thrown up in the air in a sense being confronted by the kingdom of God that's the first thing the second is to believe in not just to believe the gospel as though yes there's a list of facts here that I believe are true I can tick them off singularly here the expression is to believe in to trust to entrust your affairs into something in the gospel of God about Jesus Christ that is because the gospels about Jesus Christ whom we've been already told in those clues from the Old Testament is about Jesus who died to bring God and people together it's trusting in the cross in the death of Jesus to take away our sins and in the spirit that Jesus will baptise us with to finally eradicate sin in our life in the next few weeks as we go through these early chapters of Mark we'll be looking at passages which for many of us if not all of us are familiar may be very familiar but nonetheless at each point we'll be confronted by Jesus Christ we'll read of people who will marvel and say who is this man who teaches like this who heals like this who calms winds and waves like this let's try and put

ourselves back as though we're first time readers of these events let's try and join the marveling the amazement of the events that occur let's see perhaps if as we're confronted afresh by [28 : 04] Jesus Christ elements of our world may well be flipped upside down and that is we'll be brought to repent and to believe in the gospel of Jesus Christ but the greater question associated with that is not the question who is this man though that's important to get right Jesus Christ the Son of God Jesus flips that question back to those around him when he says to them who do you say that I am who do you individually say that Jesus is for don't feel in a sense that you can get swept into the kingdom of God on the shirt tails of your husband or your wife or someone else at the entry point so to speak the question will be asked who do you say that I am these are powerful words in

Mark's gospel as indeed the whole Bible is powerful many years ago at university there was a first year student there in my third year Michelle and she came to the college a Christian college and not as a Christian and in the first few months she was feeling lonely and homesick and one evening my recollection is a Friday evening as people around in other rooms went out to watch films or go to the pub or whatever they were doing she just stayed in her room feeling a bit miserable and in each room was a Bible so she decided to read and she began here with the passage that we're looking at today the beginning of Mark and she kept reading all the way through Mark came to Jesus' declaration on the cross my God my God why have you forsaken me and she burst out in tears surprising even herself her whole world was thrown upside down by reading the gospel of Mark she was brought to repentance and to belief in the gospel of Jesus Christ I hadn't kept in touch with her but she came to mind in fact yesterday because at the front of my first ever commentary on Mark is an inscription that she wrote in a very fine calligraphy a set of commentaries that I was given for my 21st birthday and she was asked to write at the front of Mark some sort of inscription on behalf of a group of friends three years ago I met her again at a reunion she's still a very active Christian laywoman in a church in the blue mountains out of Sydney now married with children very involved all of them in their local church Mark's gospel threw her life in a sense upside down and in the reorientation she repented and believed in the gospel and still does it reminds us that we are being confronted here at the heart of

Christianity with Jesus Christ who may well trouble some aspects of our life who may well throw some aspects of our life upside down because Christianity is not about being comfortable in the way we live it's not about the paraphernalia of church services or buildings it's not about religious righteousness it's not about being a good person it's about being confronted by Jesus Christ the Son of God who do you say that he is I Thank you.