

20-12-98 PM - Prepare the Way of the Lord - Mark 1:1-8

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Date: 20 December 1998

Preacher: Paul Barker

[0 : 00] This is the evening service at Holy Trinity on Sunday the 20th of December 1998.

The preacher is Paul Barker. His sermon is entitled Prepare the Way of the Lord and is from Mark chapter 1 verses 1 to 8.

Please be seated. There's a chocolate here which is very nice so thank you to whoever put it here. I think most of the enjoyment about Christmas is in the preparation and the anticipation.

The excitement of counting how many sleeps to go. The enjoyment of buying presents, sending cards, receiving cards if you're lucky.

The anticipation of looking forward to seeing family and friends that you haven't seen for a while. Enjoying the carol services in the month leading up to Christmas.

[1 : 07] The work parties in the two months leading up to Christmas. And going to see the Myers windows in the three months leading up to Christmas. In fact all of the anticipation of Christmas often far exceeds the enjoyment of the actual day.

Because we're so worn out and tired and husky from singing and we get so irritable and grumpy and so on. That the actual day can sometimes be a bit anticlimactic. Now some of us might think that Christmas decorations in the shops in early September is a little bit excessive.

But the build up to the original Christmas took a lot longer than three months. Several centuries in fact. Because the announcement of the coming of the first Christmas began hundreds and hundreds of years before Jesus was even born.

For example, and this is not the earliest example. In about 730 BC. Far before Australia was settled by white people. The prophet Isaiah spoke of the coming of Christ.

Several times in fact. Little glimpses of the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ. He called. He announced that the child who would be born would be called Emmanuel.

[2 : 27] As Jesus was. We're told in Matthew's Gospel. God with us. Isaiah predicted in another place that the child who would be born would also be a son given.

As Jesus Christ was. The son of God. Given by God the Father for us. He predicted that he would have world government on his shoulders.

He would be a wonderful counsellor. The Prince of Peace. Words fulfilled in Jesus Christ. And in his actions. In another place.

Isaiah as we've already heard tonight. Said that one would come preceding this Messiah. Saying to the gathered peoples. Prepare in the wilderness or desert.

A highway for our God. For the Lord. All of those are just a few of many examples. Just from one of many prophets. Announcing hundreds of years.

[3 : 23] Before Jesus was born. That he would come. Now in Isaiah's day. The people of God. The Israelites. Were rather rebellious.

Idoltrous people. And their sin. Their rebellion against God. Their deafness to God's word. Meant that they fell under God's judgment.

And that judgment. In the end. Resulted in them losing their land. Being defeated by enemy powers. Assyria and then Babylon. And carted into what is called exile.

Away from their land. But Isaiah promised. That beyond that judgment. Would come a great and glorious. And lasting salvation.

A salvation that would far exceed. Even the heyday of Israel's earlier history. And would be a glorious future. That would last forever. And never be vulnerable.

[4 : 21] To being defeated by any enemy. Again. And this promise of Isaiah. Of this glorious salvation. Was accompanied by the promise. Of a glorious saviour.

Who would bring that salvation. For God's people. 750 years. After Isaiah. Began to speak. Probably well after.

People really thought. That his words were ever going to be fulfilled. After all. Who believes a word. That was stated 750 years ago. And is yet to be fulfilled. Today. But Isaiah's words were.

A man called John the Baptist. Appeared. Almost in a sense. Out of nowhere. And he said these words. As we heard in the last reading. Prepare the way of the Lord.

Make his paths straight. He's quoting Isaiah the prophet. Of 700 plus years before. But now he's saying.

[5 : 23] That those words. At last. Are fulfilled. For one is coming. The Lord is coming. To fulfill all the expectations.

Not only of Isaiah. But all the other prophets. And parts of the Old Testament. As well. And some of them stretch far beyond. Even 730 BC. And he quotes a particular part of Isaiah.

From the fourth third reading tonight. Isaiah chapter 40. Where Isaiah promises. That beyond the exile. And the loss of land. God would bring his people.

Back to their land. Prepare a highway in the desert. For the Lord. To come and get you. And take you back home. To your promised land. Is in effect. What that reading was saying.

Now a couple of hundred years. After Isaiah. The people did begin. To return to the land. But what was the problem was. Was there was no Messiah. There was no glorious. Reinstitution of the nation.

[6 : 21] Or even a king. It remained just a province of Persia. And then Greece. And then Rome. When John the Baptist. Announced these words.

And applied them to Jesus Christ. He's saying that the real return. To glory. Comes in Jesus Christ. And not to a geographical land. That's not what God's promises.

In the end are about. But rather to God's heavenly land. To God's eternal. And heavenly. Glorious kingdom. And it is Jesus. Who has come.

To take his people there. When John baptizes. In the Jordan River. I think it's symbolic. Of the fact that the Jordan. Was the boundary to the land. When Israel first entered the land.

Under Joshua. They crossed the Jordan. And when they would come back. From exile. They would cross the Jordan. And when John baptizes people. In the Jordan River. He's saying in a sense. This baptism is a mark.

[7 : 16] Of your entry. Not into the geographical land. But into God's heavenly. Land. And kingdom. Far more glorious. Than the geographical land.

Of Palestine. Ever was or is. Jesus. John is saying. Came. To bring us. To heaven. John.

Is in effect saying. In these words. In Mark's gospel. That now. Is the time. Of this fulfillment. Of promise. Now. Is the time. Of the restoration. Of God's people. To God's presence.

And glory. Now. Is the time. For God himself. To come. And bring his people home. Now. Is the time. Of God's promised one.

Come. Mark doesn't begin. His gospel. With the story. Of Bethlehem. Indeed. It's not the usual. Gospel. We hear at Christmas. Luke and Matthew.

[8 : 12] Are those. Mark jumps straight. To Jesus adult life. When he's about. 30 years old. But he clearly. Identifies him. As the one. Promised long ago.

The very first words. Of Mark's gospel. Say the beginning. Of the good news. Of Jesus Christ. The son of God. Jesus was his personal name. Like. Fred.

Or George. Or Wilma. Or something like that. It does mean. God saves. It does have that. Significant. Significance. But it is just. His personal name.

It's clear. In this. Opening of Mark's gospel. That he's not just a person. Though. He's divine. When God. Said through the prophet Isaiah. Prepare the way of the Lord. And now.

John the Baptist. Applies that to Jesus. He's saying. In effect. Jesus. Is the Lord. God himself. Come. To rescue his people. Not just a man. But God.

[9 : 07] But there are two names. That are used also. In these opening words. Christ. We're so familiar with it. That we may not even. Remember its significance. Christ. Is the Greek word. For Messiah.

Messiah. The promised one. The anointed one. From long, long ago. And he's also called. The son of God. Two titles. Given to this person.

Jesus. Now if you read through Mark's gospel. You see that the first half of the gospel. Deals with the first title. The Christ. The Messiah. And Mark concentrates.

On what Jesus does. And shows that they fulfill. Exactly what the prophet Isaiah. And other prophets. Expected the Messiah to do. Heal. Teach. Preach. Etc. And so the turning point of Mark's gospel.

Is the climax. When Peter says. To Jesus. Question. You are the Messiah. The Christ. At the end of chapter 8. Then the gospel turns.

[10:02] Denotes a sinister turn. Because now Jesus' death. Comes to the fore. And the second half of Mark's gospel. The last eight chapters. Lead inexorably to the cross.

But there comes another highlight. Where somebody else makes a confession of who Jesus is. But he doesn't say you're the Messiah. He says this other title.

Truly this man. Was the son of God. At the point when Jesus hung. On the cross. Mark goes on you see to prove.

What he says in his opening verse. Jesus is the Messiah. Promised long long ago. But not only that. God's own son. If you'd like to read Mark's gospel.

It doesn't take long. And I'll give you a free copy afterwards. If you're interested in an easy to read English version. It's worth reading again. How if this story leads inexorably to Jesus' death.

[11:02] Can Mark say at the beginning it's good news. Precisely because his death is the means of salvation of course. It's through his death that Jesus brings God's people back to God.

Not to a geographical land. But to God's presence and heavenly kingdom. It's through his death that salvation comes. It's through his death that the promises of the Old Testament are fulfilled. And that is good news.

Even if it costs Jesus his life. It's good news for us. Now I suspect that for most of us. Christmas means familiarity breeds indifference if not contempt.

We become dull of heart. Deaf of ear and blind of eye. To see the challenge and significance of the Christmas story. If we are to return to God.

If we are to allow Jesus' death to take us into God's heavenly kingdom. Then we must repent. As John the Baptist says in verse 4.

[12:06] Proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. As Jesus' own first words a little bit later in Mark chapter 1 said. His first words were repent. Repent. That's our obligation.

If the Christmas story is to have any enduring significance for us today. To repent. To abandon our wrong ways. To turn from them.

And turn to and embrace God's good ways. Repent. That's how we make straight a path for the Lord. To welcome him. By turning away from our wrongdoing.

Our selfishness. Our God lackingness. And turn rather to a God centeredness. Embracing God in Christ. It may be that you think that this no longer applies to you.

That you've done it all before. But let me remind you that Jesus' words were to very religious people. People that would have been at the equivalent of a carol service in those days.

[13:08] His ministry and words to religious people were repent. For John to baptize Jews for repentance was scandalous.

Jews didn't need baptism. The non-Jews. The Gentiles. They needed baptism if they were to become Jews. Because John is almost defending them. By calling them to be baptized for repentance.

But the same applies to us. If we do not repent. Turning away from our wrongdoing and turning to God. Then Christmas means nothing.

Isaiah the prophet knew his words would fall on deaf ears. And Jesus in Mark chapter 4 quotes Isaiah to say the same thing about Jesus' words. He knew that they would fall on deaf ears.

Let not our ears be deaf to the story of Christmas. Let us repent. Let us turn from our wrongdoing.

[14:18] Our sin and evil. Our selfishness. Our lack of concern for God. And placing him first. And let us turn wholeheartedly to God.

Embracing his ways. Loving him with all our heart, soul, mind and strength. And our neighbour as ourself. Now is the time to repent. And now is the time of salvation.

And forgiveness of sins. Let us pray. Let us pray. God, we thank you that in your great eternal plan and faithfulness, you kept your promises made hundreds of years ago to Isaiah the prophet by sending John the Baptist and then Jesus, our Saviour, the Messiah and your Son. We thank you that through his death, the way has been paved for us to be in your eternal glory forever. Help us to have ears to hear, eyes to see and hearts to respond with faith and repentance that we may follow him all our days.
Amen. Amen.