

# The Good News According To Mark - 20th June 2021

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Preacher: Matt Wallace

[ 0 : 00 ] Hey everyone, welcome to this week's Sunday session. My name's Matt, the vigorous and John's.

And it's decent to be back with you after a couple of weeks off and lying low from these YouTube things. Thank you for the various messages and emails before I went off. I had a good break, time with family, friends, a bit of football, a couple of solo days walking up in the Peak District.

We may well be landlocked here in the Midlands, but there's some cracking countryside in easy reach. So we're back with at least another month of these videos.

A month because best laid plans for a final unlocking have been somewhat scuppered with the renewed grip of this Delta variant. I won't dwell on the delays in putting India on the red list and all that.

But let's not be defined by despair at some of those decisions, as frustrating as they might be. Indeed, in response, it's the right move to hold fire on the final open up.

[ 1 : 03 ] But it does mean we'll need to postpone any plans we had to gather in person once again at St John's or even in the park next door. Small groups of folks, house group socials, football fixtures down the Vic and so on are all fair game.

But unless there are any further changes, we're now looking at Sunday the 25th of July as a first chance to open our doors and gather together once again.

I appreciate that means we're going to be in the summer holidays when numerous folks are hoping to get away. So we'll take it gently and gradually, but I'll fill us in over the coming weeks on those tentative plans for the summer, for September and beyond.

There's some good news for us here, though, as we've got our new curate, a term for a trainee vicar, starting with us from next week. Ruth Edmonds is her name.

She'll be getting ordained this Saturday at Litchfield Cathedral, so I'm chuffed that Ruth and her husband James will be part of our community life and Ruth part of the church leadership here.

[ 2 : 09 ] Do please pray for them as they settle in. All a bit strange trying to find your feet in a new home, a new town, a new church in these restricted times. But the future's looking brighter and we thank God for them.

Indeed, thank you God for the ways in which your provision has been in evidence in the diverse things we have to enjoy. For the fine weather overall which brightens our days of late.

For our ability to mix and mingle with family and friends, even within the limitations we're under. For the football, God, on is even the other night, I know.

But the escapism of sport is a welcome distraction in these times. With that, thank you for giving us the stamina to persevere in what is hopefully the home straight of this Corona marathon we've been on.

And yet we ask that your provision would be especially felt by those affected by these latest delays to the lifting of restrictions. Those working in hospitality, tourism, the arts and entertainment in particular.

[ 3 : 14 ] Would you lift those who are on waiting lists for treatment? Those struggling to find accommodation? Those who are in between jobs and the long term unemployed?

None of this is simple, God. So give each of us our daily bread, please. What we need, one day at a time. It's Father's Day today too, so give your joy to those who are celebrating all things decent about dads.

But also your peace, please, to those who find it a tough day because of grief or distance or disappointment. May we know you with us today. And for us here, now, God, may we know your presence through all we see, hear and consider, we pray.

Thank you, God. Amen. Alright, well, we're in week 66 of this lockdown life.

And so, perhaps with Route 66 in mind, I'd like us to set off on a little tour over these next few weeks. Taking us through an overview of the four individual gospel accounts of the life of Jesus to see what God might be wanting to say to us through each of these different ancient biographies.

[ 4 : 41 ] Gospel means good news. So we've got the good news of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Four different books in this library called the New Testament, which each look at the life of Jesus from slightly different angles.

I guess it's a bit like having four different newspapers giving their account at the same event. You know, each journalist giving a different interpretation of quite how and why things happened, whether they were there in the flesh or they're quoting from sources, their editing skills, all influenced by each writer's perspective and priorities, their prejudices even.

I mean, I'll leave you to work out which four newspapers Matthew, Mark, Luke and John might represent. Be a brave person who likens the gospel to the Daily Express. I tell you, but you get the idea.

Four different accounts, different angles on the life of the same person, Jesus. Now, the order of these accounts in the Bible is indeed Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, and we'll focus on one gospel each week.

But in the words of EastEnders Phil Mitchell, I'm going to be out of order and start this week with the gospel of Mark. Why Mark?

[ 5 : 58 ] Well, it's reckoned by most scholars to be the earliest written of all four. The account which was put together closest to the actual time of Jesus, maybe only 25, 30 or so years after everything happened.

Indeed, the author it's attributed to, Mark, is reckoned to be the same Mark who's known as John Mark in the Book of Acts, cousin of a guy called Barnabas, and a fellow missionary in the early church with Barnabas and Paul.

Mark is traditionally associated with Peter too, friend of the family maybe, and he was probably one of the widest circle of followers of Jesus. Indeed, there's a fascinating little clue in Mark's gospel that might be revealing in more ways than one, as when Jesus is arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane, we're told a young man wearing nothing but a linen garment was following Jesus. When they seized him, he fled naked, leaving his garment behind. It's a pretty random detail about this anonymous teenager, and it only really makes sense if it's Mark talking about himself, you know, a little cameo appearance in a book which indicates that he's writing from first-hand experience.

And yet, if it is Mark making this fleeting, dare we say, flashing appearance, well, it ties in with the tone of the book as a whole, because when we read Mark's gospel, it comes across as a very quick-fire, almost urgent account of Jesus' life.

[ 7 : 36 ] You see, for Mark, he doesn't bother with any of the birth story of Jesus. There's no Christmas crib scene for him. Nah, this is no slow-build origin tale.

Instead, Mark's gospel kicks off by getting straight to the point. He opens with this line, And bosh, we're off.

You know, no chit-chat, because from here on, Mark launches into telling us about John the Baptist appearing in the desert to prepare the way for the adult Jesus to arrive on the scene.

And so, from the word go, in chapter 1 alone, Mark goes on to tell about Jesus' baptism by John, Jesus' temptation in the wilderness, Jesus calling his first disciples, Jesus driving out an evil spirit, Jesus proclaiming the kingdom of God and healing many people, including Peter's mother-in-law. Mentioned, no doubt, because Mark was his friend of the family. We've got Jesus getting up early to pray on his own, Jesus travelling around Galilee, visiting a whole host of towns in their synagogue, Jesus healing a man of leprosy, and so on, because, as we're told at the end of chapter 1, the people came to him from everywhere.

[ 8 : 55 ] I mean, as opening chapters of a book go, it's all killer, no filler, you know, an incredibly speedy start to this most important of stories.

And this speed is reflected in the language Mark uses to convey these events. So, Mark doesn't really focus on Jesus' parables. Indeed, he only really includes four of them in his gospel, as they would simply slow the story down.

Now, Mark is big instead on miracles, outlining 17 miraculous events from Jesus' life. But when describing Jesus' miracles, Mark doesn't tend to call them signs or even wonders.

No, rather, he prefers to use the Greek word *dunamis*, a word we've looked at before, which we get the English word dynamite from. For Mark, Jesus' miracles are explosive stuff, you know, dynamic acts of power, of momentum, of excitement.

What's more, in line with this idea, Mark's constantly using urgent words like immediately, at once, and straight away in how he frames his stories. In fact, in the original Greek Mark was writing in, he often slips into the present tense when describing things.

[10:16] So, we're told early on that the spirit drives Jesus into the wilderness. Or when Peter's mother-in-law is poorly, Mark writes this immediately, the disciples tell Jesus about her.

You know, it's all present tense stuff. Now, our English translations often polish all this up by changing things to the past tense. So, instead, we read that the disciples told Jesus about her.

You know, it's a far more passive, far more tame way of talking. But no, Mark's original hand, he's telling us in the present tense, as if reliving the events there and then.

Almost like he's commentating on a replay of Jesus in action. There's energy to it. It's compelling stuff from Mark. You know, I wonder for us, I wonder for you, if you've ever felt that same energy, that same buzz as Mark conveys on discovering who Jesus is and the kinds of things he does.

I know for me, Marie, our parish administrator, often tells me, I've got two speeds at work, either dead leg back or warp speed.

[11:29] And those times I'm thinking or bouncing ideas about church stuff around with her are often at warp speed, when I almost feel like I've got God's bit between my teeth. You know, new ideas, new passion, new excitement at what this life and especially our community could look like if the ways of Jesus can be put into practice.

That's my kind of warp speed. Now, I'm not always fired up. I'd be pretty insufferable, more insufferable than I am if I was. And sometimes I'm as flat as a pancake, but those moments of energy I get, those tingles of excitement about what God's doing, well, they're a sign to me that, yeah, this Jesus stuff does add up.

You know, it gets me going. So as I say, I wonder for you, where or how often or even ever of those moments of spiritual adrenaline, of inspiration, of that fire within come in your faith journey.

Could be from certain conversations or prayer times, certain songs of worship might get you going. You might have these mountaintop experiences with God in nature.

Might be those dreams you have about the future. Could be just the joy of meeting with other people and that gets you fired up. I don't know. But I wonder when you'd say you've been or are most energized by God.

[12:56] And yet I also wonder, maybe over this past year and more, through no fault of our own, especially if we're someone who tends to feed off the energy of other people around us, maybe you'd struggle to identify those kind of moments, those kind of feelings about or with God of late.

Maybe you know that the fire has gone out a bit for you. And I think that's okay. As we know, we've been through tough, sobering times.

If we know that, how much more does God? But maybe, maybe, as with Mark's gospel, we might just want to ask God to stir that passion within us again, or even for the first time, you know, asking God maybe to meet us in those Pentecost ways we were talking about the other week.

Lighting our fire, filling our sails, and so on. You know, try it. Ask God. Next time you're praying or out walking or running, having us sing, next time you're a few beers in and able to be more honest with God or whatever, you know, let's follow Mark's example of Jesus here as someone who can fire us up with the good news of his love.

That's the energy of Mark's gospel. But what else might we pick up from his gospel, though? Well, although Mark sometimes writes in this almost frantic way, actually, his gospel is anything but scattergun or chaotic.

[14:32] No, there's a host of ways in which Mark has skillfully woven his different stories about Jesus together. So, for example, Mark often puts his stories together like a kind of sandwich, you know, where one story provides the filling between another story which comes before and after it, like slices of bread.

So, probably the best example of this is from Mark chapter 5, when a guy called Jairus comes to Jesus and pleads with him to come and heal his daughter who is dying. Mark tells us Jesus sets out to go with him, at the bottom, slice of bread, if you like. But then Jesus' journey is interrupted by a woman who'd been bleeding for 12 years and comes to touch his cloak in order to be healed.

That's the filling in this story sandwich. And then once this woman has been healed, Mark then takes us back to the story of the little girl, Jairus' daughter, who again, Jesus heals and brings back to life the top slice of this sandwich story.

Indeed, the fact that Mark tells us that Jairus' daughter is 12 years old and that the woman had been bleeding for 12 years, well, there's a deliberate design and cohesion often to his storytelling in that, yeah, Jesus is on an urgent mission, but it's all part of a prepared plan, a way prepared for the Lord to come, as Mark himself quotes from Isaiah early in chapter 1.

[16:06] What else is special about Mark's gospel? Well, although the Jesus Mark presents us with is certainly one who grabs our attention, and Mark writes in a way which reveals a plan, a structure to Jesus' mission and ministry, Jesus also comes across in Mark's gospel as a pretty enigmatic kind of guy.

There's a mystery to him, a secrecy even. Indeed, although Mark has started his gospel with that clear statement of who he thinks Jesus is, you know, the beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God, only we as readers hear those words, whereas everyone else in the story that follows, well, it's a truth that Jesus seems keen for people to work out for themselves. And yet what's interesting is that for the first half of Mark's gospel at least, pretty much everyone seems to misunderstand who Jesus is and what he's about.

The crowds who see him healing people are pretty quizzical. Where did this man get these things? You know, what's this wisdom that's been given to him that he even does miracles, they say. The religious authorities think he's possessed. The disciples are often baffled. So after Jesus calms a storm, for example, they ask, who is this?

[17:31] Even the wind and the waves obey him. And then even Jesus' own family question his sanity. At one point, we're told they went to take charge of him, for they said, he's out of his mind.

But then even when some folks do seem to understand or appreciate who Jesus really is, Jesus tells them to keep stum.

He gave strict orders not to let anyone know, or Jesus commanded them not to tell anyone, as it says in Mark. Now what's going on here?

Wow, Mark portrays Jesus as someone who isn't interested in numbers for numbers sake. You know, people who follow him because it's a popular thing to do. Nah, he knows anyone can draw a crowd.

Rather, Jesus intentionally calls people to work things out for themselves. Not spoon feeding them, but giving them something more substantial to chew on.

[18:33] Miracles that challenge assumptions. Teachings that provoke a response. Engagement, which enlightens, rather than simply entertains. The good news is, that means it's totally okay for us to question, to wrestle, to doubt.

Jesus isn't afraid of that. In fact, he seems to positively welcome it in Mark's gospel. Now, to be fair, at times, Mark's Jesus does seem to have set the bar for his disciples' engagement pretty high. Occasionally calling them out when they failed to think for themselves. Are you so dull? He says at one point, as they don't quite grasp what he's trying to tell them.

Yes, the disciples could, it seems, be a bit dense, but Jesus is trying to train them to go deeper in their faith. Tough love, at times, maybe, but he never gives up on them.

And that should give us immense encouragement, that even in our biggest struggles, struggles of faith, of understanding, of confidence, of behavior, Jesus will always, patiently, persevere with us too.

[19:51] And so again, even if the fire of your faith has gone out somewhat, even if you're questioning things more than ever, don't worry, God's got you.

And he's not going to let you fall. Now, know any importance Jesus places on enabling us to draw our own conclusions in response to him. And knowing how fond Mark is as a writer of structure. What's fascinating is that these two principles come together in a key place in Mark's gospel. You see, Mark's gospel is 16 chapters long.

And because he likes structure, that means the midway point in chapter 8 is likely to be significant for Mark. A hinge, a fulcrum, a pivot for the whole thing.

And indeed it is, because in the middle of chapter 8, Jesus asks his disciples, perhaps the most central question of all, when we looked at the other week, who do you say I am?

[ 20 : 54 ] Now, it's a question in chapter 8, which comes hot on the heels of Jesus miraculously healing a blind man in two stages. You know that story when, after first being touched by Jesus, this man can see blurry images of people as if they're trees walking about.

But then, after a second touch, the man's sight is perfectly restored. You know that story, you know, it's about progressive insight. And that progressive revealing, progressive revelation, is what Mark's gospel has been leading to.

And so Jesus challenges and questions his disciples. How much do you really see me? Says Jesus. Now, let me take those blinkers off.

Now, who do you say I am? For Mark, this is the central question of his gospel. Mark says Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, in those opening words.

But who do the disciples, who do we as readers, who do you say Jesus is? And after Peter's response to Jesus, when he says, you are the Christ, you are the Messiah, the chosen one, and so on.

[ 22 : 13 ] Well, after that, in Mark's gospel, we then see a shift in tone as knowing who Jesus is, means we can understand more fully why he's come. Because the focus of Mark's gospel then turns to the way Jesus will suffer.

Suffer on the cross, yeah, but suffering, which points to Jesus as our Saviour, the one who suffers in order to save us from death and decay, and instead to know God's loving, living, resurrecting presence for all eternity.

Indeed, right at the end, when Jesus is on the cross, Mark records, of all people, a Roman centurion, echoing Mark's opening statement about Jesus, when he realises, saying, surely, this man was the Son of God.

That's the trajectory, the direction, the destiny, of the second half of Mark's gospel. Jesus being revealed as God himself, the Saviour of the world.

Now, we've recently looked at the whole Easter story in a bit more detail, so we'll not delve too deeply into that today. Instead, just to round things off, let's skip right to the end of Mark's gospel, and its final few verses.

[ 23 : 32 ] In fact, if you look in most Bibles, there's a dozen or so verses added onto the end of the gospel, which bring it to a nice, neat conclusion.

But it's highly likely that these were a later addition, and not originally part of Mark's composition. Instead, here's a clip of how the original version of Mark's gospel seems to finish.

When the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome, bought spices so that they might go to anoint Jesus' body.

Very early, on the first day of the week, just after sunrise, they were on their way to the tomb, and they asked each other, who will roll the stone away from the entrance of the tomb?

But when they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had been rolled away. As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side, and they were alarmed.

[ 24 : 47 ] Don't be alarmed, he said. You are looking for Jesus the Nazarene, who was crucified. He has risen. He is not here.

See the place where they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter. He is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you.

Trembling and bewildered, the women went out and fled from the tomb. They said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid. When Jesus rose early on the first day of the week, he appeared first to Mary Magdalene, out of whom he had driven seven demons.

She went and told those who had been with him, and who were mourning and weeping. When they heard that Jesus was alive, and that she had seen him, they did not believe it.

Afterwards, Jesus appeared in a different form to two of them while they were walking in the country. These returned and reported it to the rest, but they did not believe them either.

[ 26 : 03 ] It's a strange way to finish, isn't it? Open-ended, open-minded, afraid, even.

What's happened? Has Jesus really risen from the dead? If he has, what happens next? And this uncertainty leads some scholars to reckon that the original ending of Mark's gospel has been lost, because it's a too abrupt, too inconclusive way to finish.

Maybe it has been lost, and who knows, one day we might find the parchment, you know, the original ending of Mark's gospel. Or maybe, maybe Mark has deliberately left his gospel open-ended, because he knows that, actually, the story of Jesus can never be concluded.

It's a thought which certainly ties in with the enigmatic, active, mysterious ways in which Mark has tended to portray Jesus. And so we could say that, instead of a conclusion, the Jesus story continues with us, to this day.

We are the continuation of those events. His story becomes our story, as we're called to work out with Jesus what this resurrected life is all about now.

[ 27 : 35 ] And if you recall, Mark starts his whole gospel with these words, the beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God.

The beginning of the good news, says Mark. I reckon Mark knew all along that in his gospel, things were only just getting started with Jesus.

Since the same Jesus of those gospel stories is still the one who brings good news to us and our world today. I wonder what part you and I might have to play as that same story of good news continues.

All right, well, as we perhaps reflect on that and all that we've looked at today, the St John's Band have helped put together a version of a classic hymn as a way of soundtracking our prayers, our thoughts, our worship maybe today.

It's to him, holy, holy, holy. Holy, holy, holy, holy, Holy Lord God Almighty Early in the morning Our song shall rise to Thee Holy, holy, holy Merciful and mighty God in three persons

[ 29 : 40 ] Blessed Trinity Holy, holy, holy Though the darkness hide Thee Though the eye of sinful men Thy glory may not see Holy, thou art holy There is none beside Thee Perfect in power In love and purity

Hallelujah Jesus praise Holy, holy, holy Lord God Almighty All Thy works shall praise Thy name In earth and sky and sea Holy, holy, holy

Merciful and mighty God every person's blessed Trinity Hallelujah Hallelujah Hallelujah Hallelujah Jesus reigns the Lord Hallelujah Hallelujah Hallelujah Hallelujah Hallelujah

Hallelujah Jesus reigns And let all the earth proclaim All the people sing You are holy You are holy Let all the heavens sing Worthy is the King You are holy You are holy Let all the earth proclaim All the people sing All the people sing You are holy You are holy Let all the heavens ring Worthy is the King You are holy You are holy You are holy You are holy You are holy Jesus you are

Holy, holy, holy Holy, holy Holy, holy Holy, holy Holy, holy Holy, holy Lord God Holy, holy Holy, holy Holy Thy Lordny God in three ■■ Blessed Trinity Blessed Trinity You are the Blessed Trinity And that song, along with all of the band's other offerings, are available on our Worship Songs playlist here on YouTube.

[ 34 : 49 ] Equally, we've got an additional extra time video to accompany this session today. A few questions to consider on your own or with a small group, house group maybe, so do check those out at your leisure.

It's been good to be back with you today though, nice to be back in the saddle. And all being well, we'll move on to Matthew's Gospel next week. Do remember to pray for Ruth and James as Ruth gets ordained next Saturday.

And let's look forward to some kind of in-person gathering from towards the end of next month. I'm sorry it's delayed a bit, but we will get there. Until then though, allow me to pray a prayer of blessing over us to send us on our way with God.

And so, may the blessing of God Almighty, the Father, Son and Spirit, the One who is Holy, Holy, Holy.

May you and I know God's blessing resting on us as we continue to work through and live out the ongoing story of the good news of God's love, both today, tomorrow and for all eternity.

[ 36 : 05 ] Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen.