

Mark 1:1-8 John the Baptist

May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of our hearts be acceptable to you O Lord our strength and our redeemer Amen.

The gospel of Mark is believed to be the first gospel to have been written, so it was appropriate for Mark to start by writing, "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God".

Mark was writing to both Jews and Gentiles and Mark realised that the word 'Christ' wouldn't mean anything to Gentiles, so he added, 'the Son of God', which would be clear enough to his Gentile readers.

The word "beginning" is reminiscent of the start to Genesis, because while Genesis spoke about the beginning of all things and launched the knowledge of the existence of God, now the gospel of Mark launched the beginning of a new understanding of the true nature of God, and of the salvation work of Jesus Christ.

But Mark gets right down to the nub of the matter, he doesn't start at the birth of Jesus, he starts at the beginning of Jesus' ministry, with John the Baptist reminding the Israelites of what God told the prophet Isaiah, that he would be sending his messenger ahead to prepare the way of the Lord Isaiah 40:3.

In verse 5 Mark wrote, "And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him and were being baptised by him in the river Jordan."

That's not a handful of people that's a huge crowd, although I'm sure that there was a bit of an exaggeration by Mark there as well, nevertheless it was clearly a large number of people.

So how did the people of the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem make the connection that John was indeed God's messenger, and why did they go out to him in the desert and listen to him? There are several strands to the answer to that question.

The main reason why they came out to see him in such numbers was because he appeared from the wilderness, and he looked like Elijah, who the Bible describes as a hairy man with a leather belt around his waist see 2 Kings 1:8. Now we are told in verse 6 of our reading that John was clothed with camel's hair and wearing a leather belt round his waist; there's no doubt in my mind that John looked like Elijah.

The people came out to see John, and he held their attention, because the people recognised him as the messenger that the prophet Malachi wrote of in chapter 3:1 "See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me."

And even more significantly in Malachi chapter 4:5, which reads, "Lo, I will send you the prophet Elijah before the great and terrible day of the Lord come's."

Indeed, Jesus confirmed that John was Elijah, see Matthew 17:12 and 13 which reads, “But I tell you Elijah has already come,” and Matthew continued, “Then the disciples understood that he was speaking to them about John the Baptist.” That’s why they came out to him in droves, because they knew that Elijah had returned.

We know that Elijah, on his last journey, crossed the Jordan into the desert by striking the water with his mantle, and from there he was carried up to heaven in a whirlwind see 2 kings 2:11. And verse 4 of our reading tells us that John was now reappearing from the desert.

But John's message also rang true, because he wasn't claiming to be the Messiah, nor was he claiming any advantage for himself, after all he came dressed in the roughest of clothes and ate the simplest of food.

But that is only the start of the story, because having got the people out to him John’s message of repentance had to be powerful or they would all go back home disillusioned.

So, there is no doubt in my mind that the Holy Spirit was working powerfully through John at the river Jordan on that occasion, and indeed in Luke chapter 1 verse 15 we read that even before his birth he was filled with the Holy Spirit, this is another reason why they stayed and listened to him.

When I read that John ate locusts and wild honey, a question that eventually occurred to me was, what was the purpose of mentioning his diet.

locusts are mentioned in Leviticus chapter 11:22 as acceptable kosher food and was classed as a vegetable rather than meat.

The reference to eating locusts and wild honey according to some biblical scholars’ places John into the prophetic tradition; indeed, John was the last of the Old Testament prophets being born before Jesus, albeit by only a few months.

The desert had tremendous meaning to the Jews, and indeed still has; the 40 years desert experience for the Jews is the backbone to their very existence.

It was in the 40 years in the wilderness of the desert that God moulded the Jews into a nation and prepared them for the promised land; a huge amount of their history goes back to their desert experience.

And indeed, later in chapter 1 of Mark we can read about how Jesus was prepared for **his** ministry in the wilderness of the desert for 40 days and 40 nights see verse 12.

Before we move on just a few words about repentance. Now there is a difference between repentance and being sorry; repentance is more about a resolve not to do it again, being sorry may be more about being found out.

Repentance is turning oneself away from a present or current pattern of life, to a new way of living.

Now some of us may be saying to ourselves, yes, I've turned to Christ, but I still sin, I still do things that I know are wrong, why, as a Christian, do I still sin, why can't I turn away from sin.

St John the apostle, writing a general letter to fellow Christians, warned us when he wrote, "If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us," see 1 John 1:8.

Even if it is our intention and desire not to sin, we will still fail, which is why we need to continually turn to Christ in repentance, because he will always forgive a penitent heart.

Christ not only understands our frailty, but he also sees into our hearts, and he knows our intentions and motives and he will forgive a penitent heart.

St Paul in his first letter to the Corinthians wrote in chapter 5:7, "Clean out the old yeast so that you may be a new batch".

We are to throw out the old and bring in the new; we are to throw out the old prejudices, the old practises, the old desires, and embrace the new, which is the way of Christ.

It is the way of Christ that brings love instead of hate, which brings creation instead of destruction, which brings joy instead of sadness, which brings life instead of death.

John isn't telling us that we have to give up the good life; on the contrary he is inviting us to embrace a much better life, a life with Christ, a life that will make our previous life seem like so much dross in comparison.

Going back to our reading, now although John empowered by the Holy Spirit listened to the people's confessions and baptised them for the forgiveness of their sins; in verse 7 and 8 John declares that the person for whom he is a messenger will be more powerful than me, and that I'm not worthy to even untie his shoe laces.

This remark about shoe laces is significant, a powerful man would have many slaves and it was the slaves job to tie and untie his master's shoe laces, but if a slave happened to be a fellow Jew the master wouldn't ask him to do it, but he would ask a more menial slave, a non Jewish slave to do it.

Such was the huge gulf that John was illustrating between himself and Jesus, like the gulf between the lowest of slaves to the grandest of masters.

But John realises that the difference between himself and Jesus can't be measured by the difference between one human being and another, because the chasm is far too great; so he continues at verse 8 by saying, "I have baptised you with water, but he will baptise you with the Holy Spirit."

In other words, the chasm is infinitely greater than human slave to human master, it is the difference between the earthly baptism of water conducted by John and the divine baptism of the Holy Spirit, that is, the difference between humanity and God himself.

John's good news, which we will understand as we progress through Mark's gospel, is that God will no longer be somebody far away in the outer reaches of the universe, or wherever, God will be here with us.

This was, and undoubtedly still is, the exciting Good News that Mark wrote about right at the beginning in verse 1, that from now on God will dwell with us here on earth, initially as the Son but now in our hearts as God the Holy Spirit.

John was God's messenger of good news 2,000 years ago, and today we are to be God's messengers of his good news in our generation.

Now as I've said Mark starts his gospel with the verse, "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God".

But Mark didn't put an ending to his gospel; Mark's gospel originally stopped at chapter 16 verse 8. Have a look at the end of Mark's gospel after this service.

But others have added endings, one short ending and one a bit longer, but for me, St Mark is saying that there is no end to the Gospel of Christ.

We are baptised into Jesus' life, death and resurrection, and when we die and are resurrected to eternal life with our Lord it will be the beginning of the good news of Christ, not the end.

So, for us who are baptised there is still more work to be done, we all need to repent for our sins and turn to God.

Let us pray

Heavenly Father, you have taught us by your Son that if we do not forgive others, we cannot receive your forgiveness.

Make us merciful in our dealings with those who do us wrong, as we recall how mercifully you have dealt with us; that forgiven much, we may forgive much, for the sake of him who died that we might be forgiven, our Saviour Jesus Christ.

Amen.