

As I said in last week's newsletter, we were in Christchurch last weekend for 70th birthday celebrations. I imagine if we were 30 years younger we would have driven back on Saturday night to be here on Sunday morning – it's the kind of thing we used to do. Hopefully the spirit is getting stronger as the flesh is getting weaker.

Our text for the second Sunday of Advent is from Mark:

Mark 1:1-8

The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God, as it is written in Isaiah the prophet:

**'I will send my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way' –
'a voice of one calling in the wilderness,
'Prepare the way for the Lord,
make straight paths for him.'**

And so John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him. Confessing their sins, they were baptised by him in the River Jordan. John wore clothing made of camel's hair, with a leather belt round his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. And this was his message: 'After me comes the one more powerful than I, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I baptise you with water, but he will baptise you with the Holy Spirit.'

Prayer

**Come, Lord Jesus! Come find us, even when we try to evade you or give you the slip.
Come, Lord Jesus! Be present to us, especially when we feel we're alone and on our own.
Come, Lord Jesus! Speak to us, particularly when we cry out and feel that there's only silence.
Come, Lord Jesus! Give us your work to do in the world, freeing us from our excessive self-concern and from working only for ourselves.
Come, Lord Jesus! Reach out to us who often don't know how to reach toward you. Amen.**

It's strange to have this passage today on the second Sunday of Advent. Mark in his enthusiasm to get to the essence of who Jesus is dispenses with the Christmas story (maybe someone at the council of his day put pressure on him). Mark is the earliest of the gospels by some years – Luke and Matthew, writing later, went right back to Jesus' birth and their unique sources meant they told of the events quite differently – wise men and Herod in Matthew, more detail and shepherds, Simeon and Anna in Luke. In their own way Matthew and Luke in their first two chapters record much of what we understand about the momentous events of that first Christmas. One thing we can be sure of, it was no such event as a happy holiday.

John writing later still has veiled references to Jesus' birth with statements like:

'The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.'

'We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.'

Mark however begins with:

'The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God,'

Nobody had ever written 'a Gospel' before. Mark somehow created a literary form unknown to the world. A gospel is sort of like a biography, but not quite; sort of like history, but more like a sermon. Mark wrote in a new way. He also told us about the beginning of a new era, a time and place in which God entered human history in an unprecedented way.

And according to Mark, John the Baptist, is the first to announce the dawn of God's kingdom; the first to call people to be ready to have their world rocked by Jesus (Mark 1:14-15). How did this new era of God begin? It began with Jesus, the Messiah and God's Son, who not only announced the dawn of God's rule but also enacted the beginning of that rule by the way he lived.

John the Baptist seems like an Old Testament figure – he is strange. His clothing (probably incredibly itchy camel hair) and his diet (locusts and wild honey...). He's seen as being the new Elijah. In fact, John is the new Elijah who has returned just as Malachi said he would.

'See, I will send the prophet Elijah to you before that great and dreadful day of the Lord comes. 6 He will turn the hearts of the parents to their children, and the hearts of the children to their parents; or else I will come and strike the land with total destruction.'

'I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me.'

John called people to get ready through a baptism of repentance.

'So John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.'

John's baptisms take place at the Jordan River, the boundary to the Promised Land. What can be done to prepare to cross over into God's promised realm? Confess your sins. Be baptized. Change your ways.

John's main intention was to draw attention not to himself, but to the one for whom he was the forerunner: 'After me comes the one more powerful than I, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie.' John's role is to point beyond himself to the one who comes.

The baptism of this one who is to come is different from John's baptism: 'I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit'. Whereas John's baptism pointed to another, Jesus' baptism with the Holy Spirit points to Jesus as God's son, the one whose ministry is empowered by God's Spirit.

John does his preaching in the wilderness, perhaps because someone as strange as John wouldn't be allowed to preach in any established congregation in town.

'You had better get washed up (inside and out),' he preached, 'because the long-awaited Messiah is on his way!'

Mark says that people surged out into the wilderness, despite the inconvenience, to hear John's sermons. Jerusalem emptied, and even residents in the back country of Judea all come to hear John preach.

Wow. John must have been quite a preacher.

If someone said, 'I went to church today, and the preacher's sermon was so great that I couldn't get a seat! You should have seen the crowd,' how would you respond?

Surely you would ask, 'Well, what did the preacher say? What about the sermon drew so many listeners?'

Great crowds came to hear John preach. Okay, tell us, Mark, what did John the Baptist preach?

'After me comes the one more powerful than I, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I baptise you with water, but he will baptise you with the Holy Spirit.' (7-8)

And then...what else did the preacher say?

That's it? I know that Mark is the shortest of all the Gospels, but don't you think we deserve a bit more than two sentences of the John the Baptist sermon that drew such crowds of enthusiastic listeners out to the wilderness? Surely there was more that was said.

John the Baptist wasn't attempting to describe Jesus, or spin out some theories about what Jesus thought. John simply pointed to Jesus. John's significance was by being the very first to point to this unassuming young man from Nazareth and say, 'Look; God's Son!'

Note again the first sentence: **'the beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God'**

Mark doesn't say, 'This is an introduction into the philosophy taught by Jesus Christ, or these are some of Jesus' basic principles, Mark says, 'This is good news of the arrival of *Jesus the Messiah*, God's Son.'

Mark doesn't say, 'I've got some good news for you, and if you carefully listen to this news and try hard to put its principles into practice, you will find that your life will improve.' This isn't after all Joel Osteen....

Mark says, 'Good news! God is here! God is with us!'

It's said by Muslims that Mohammed cared enough about humanity to leave a book that contains the truth.

Jesus, in another Gospel, doesn't say, 'I have come in order to dictate a great book' or, 'I have come to tell you some prescribed truth.' Rather he says, **'I am the way, the truth, and the life.'** Jesus didn't just bring us beautiful words about God or share great insights about God. Jesus, Mark says, was none other than 'God's Son,' that is, God with us.

Our needs are deeper than the need for more words about God - nothing less than God will do and that's what we have in Jesus Christ; God with us. We sing 'He's all I need' or 'Jesus is all I need' and often live as if we don't need him at all. Jesus did preach some stirring sermons and pronounced beautiful truth. **But:** mostly what he gave us was himself; touching the untouchables, reaching out to the forgotten and dispossessed, sharing a meal with outcasts and sinners. At the end of the story John the Baptist begins, Jesus will gather in an upper room, break bread and share a cup of wine saying, **'This is my body, my blood, given for you.'**

John preached, 'God is here, now, with us,' and I think that's why so many came out from town, venturing into the wilderness to hear John preach. It wasn't what he said in his sermons that attracted them; it was the one to whom John pointed in his sermons.

Christianity isn't some new and useful philosophy of life. The Christian faith isn't faith in some knock-down, surefire collection of principles that can make your life go better. Christian faith is **faith in Jesus**, the conviction that God is with us, that God refused to be relegated to an idea, an abstraction or a memory; God with us!

And that's good news indeed. I bet you haven't come here today to hear helpful words; give you a manual for financial and relational success or a few good ideas about God. You've come hoping to meet and be met by God. You don't need more good ideas; you need Jesus to be present. You need to know that God is here, for you. That's the beginning — and the end, too — of good news, the best news of all; news worth getting ready for - God with us.

Karl Barth, the wonderful Swiss theologian said that the greatest Christian painting of all time was by Matthias Grunewald. It's the Isenheim Altarpiece, a rendition of Christ on the cross. It is on display at the Unterlinden Museum at Colmar, Alsace in France – it's over 500 years old. Has anyone here seen it live?

It's a work of excruciating detail as the flayed, tortured, dead body of Christ hangs limp from the cross. On one side stands Mary, Jesus' mother, on the other side John the Baptist. It was the figure of John the Baptist that most interested Barth. John the Baptist, of course, wasn't present at Jesus's crucifixion – he'd been through his own tortuous death. And yet he stands there, holding an open Bible (which is also surreal) pointing with a long bony finger toward Jesus on the cross.

Barth said that this wasn't only a deeply Christian painting but also a painting that illustrated the task of preaching. John the Baptist, said Barth, is the model for all Christian preachers. Preachers are at their best when they point to Jesus, when they witness to the mystery of the cross, when they point away from themselves and toward Jesus.

And the sermon, well the sermon, said Barth, is merely that long, bony finger of John the Baptist, pointing away from the preacher and toward the crucified Jesus.

The significance of a message isn't the words about Jesus but its witness to Jesus.

And once again, as I trust I have done for the last not quite 34 years in this Christian community I recommend him to you!

And in the spirit of John's message will you let him this Advent season baptise you afresh with his Holy Spirit?