

Read Mark Lent

Day 1: Mark 1.1-15

The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

*As it is written in the prophet Isaiah,
'See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way:
the voice of one crying out in the wilderness:
"Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight."'*

John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. He proclaimed, 'The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.'

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.'

And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness for forty days, tempted by Satan, and he was with the wild beasts, and the angels waited on him.

Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, 'the time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.'

Reflection

Of the four Gospel narratives in the New Testament, the one according to Mark is by some distance the shortest; and even from these first fifteen verses you can see why. There is no lengthy introduction or prologue. There is not even any account of Jesus' birth. After the opening line and a quotation from the prophet Isaiah we are plunged straight into the action, which moves at a pace. Even the forty days that Jesus spent in the wilderness is covered in just a couple of sentences.

Mark's is a Gospel that is remarkably single-minded, focused throughout on the one central question. Who is this Jesus of Nazareth? Other characters in the story wrestle with this question, as they witness the remarkable things that Jesus does, and respond with wonder and astonishment. Only little by little does the truth dawn, even for his closest disciples.

But for us, the readers of the Gospel, we are told the answer to that question in the very first line of the book. This is the beginning of "the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God". Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah, the one who had been foretold in the scriptures would come to set God's people free. Moreover, he is "the Son of God", the one in whom and through whom God is present and at work, bringing in his kingdom. The truth of Jesus' identity and calling is reinforced in the words of the divine voice, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased".

And all of this is "good news" or "gospel". Both are translations of the same Greek word, which is found at the beginning and end of this passage. It was a word that was often associated with official

or royal proclamations. If the emperor were to visit a city within his realm, heralds would go ahead of him to proclaim the “good news” of the imminent arrival of the ruler. In this passage, the true good news is proclaimed, by John the Baptist in preparing the way for the Lord through his baptism of repentance, by Jesus in his preaching throughout Galilee, and by Mark in telling this account of Jesus’ life and work. The book that he wrote is not to be seen as just interesting information about an extraordinary person; rather, it is “Gospel”, good news for all who are ready to receive it.

Day 2: Mark 1.16-45

As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the lake – for they were fishermen. And Jesus said to them, ‘Follow me and I will make you fish for people.’ And immediately they left their nets and followed him. As he went a little further, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John, who were in their boat mending the nets. Immediately he called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men, and followed him.

They went to Capernaum; and when the sabbath came, he entered the synagogue and taught. They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes. Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, and he cried out, ‘What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God.’ But Jesus rebuked him, saying ‘Be silent, and come out of him!’ And the unclean spirit, throwing him into convulsions and crying with a loud voice, came out of him. They were all amazed, and they kept on asking one another, ‘What is this? A new teaching – with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him.’ At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.

As soon as they left the synagogue, they entered the house of Simon and Andrew, with James and John. Now Simon’s mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they told him about her at once. He came and took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them.

That evening, at sunset, they brought to him all who were sick or possessed with demons. And the whole city was gathered around the door. And he cured many who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons; and he would not permit the demons to speak, because they knew him.

In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed. And Simon and his companions hunted for him. When they found him, they said to him, ‘Everyone is searching for you.’ He answered, ‘Let us go on to the neighbouring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do.’ And he went throughout Galilee, proclaiming the message in their synagogues and casting out demons.

A leper came to him begging him, and kneeling he said to him, ‘If you choose, you can make me clean!’ Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him, and said to him, ‘I do choose. Be made clean!’ Immediately the leprosy left him, and he was made clean. After sternly warning him he sent him away at once, saying to him, ‘See that you say nothing to anyone; but go, show yourself to the priest, and offer for your cleansing what Moses commanded, as a testimony to them.’ But he went out and began to proclaim it freely, and to spread the word, so that Jesus could no longer go into a town openly, but stayed out in the country; and people came to him from every quarter.

Reflection

Before all the theatres closed because of the pandemic, there was a new musical that was becoming very popular in the West End and beyond. It was called, “Everyone’s Talking About Jamie”. If we had to choose a subtitle for this second passage from St Mark’s Gospel, we could do worse than calling it, “Everyone’s Talking About Jesus”. As he begins his ministry after emerging from the wilderness, Jesus quickly creates quite a stir in the area around his hometown. As people hear of his teaching in the synagogue and his healing of the sick and deliverance of those afflicted by demons, excitement and astonishment builds. His fame, we are told, begins to spread throughout the region of Galilee.

Until this last year, we might have felt more comfortable talking about the news of Jesus “going viral”, or “spreading like wildfire”. Neither of those metaphors seem quite the same now we are so aware of the devastating impact of their literal equivalents. But the relevance of those figures of speech is that they indicate something spreading in a way that has got out of control. Not even Jesus himself seems to be in control of the buzz that is going around. Instead of encouraging people to talk about what is happening, as we might expect, Jesus issues calls to keep quiet, and makes attempts to withdraw from the clamour of the crowds. But there is no respite. The more Jesus commands silence, the more it seems people talk. Jesus’ withdrawal to a deserted place is interrupted by Simon and his friends, insisting, “Everyone is searching for you”. Everyone is talking about Jesus.

We live in a world in which fame is often seen as an end in its own right. There are celebrities who are famous for no other reason than being famous. Jesus is not fooled by the lure of instant or shallow fame. His focus stays resolutely on the purpose for which God has called him. He will not succumb to the temptation of staying in the places where he has become known and meeting the incessant demands that confront him there. He moves on, to other towns, other villages; but even there the word has spread. Jesus is the one about whom everyone is talking.

Day 3: Mark 2.1-12

When he returned to Capernaum after some days, it was reported that he was at home. So many gathered around that there was no longer room for them, not even in front of the door; and he was speaking the word to them. Then some people came, bringing to him a paralysed man, carried by four of them. And when they could not bring him to Jesus because of the crowd, they removed the roof above him; and after having dug through it, they let down the mat on which the paralytic lay. When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, ‘Son, your sins are forgiven.’ Now some of the scribes were sitting there, questioning in their hearts, ‘Why does this fellow speak in this way? It is blasphemy! Who can forgive sins but God alone?’ At once Jesus perceived in his spirit that they were discussing these questions among themselves; and he said to them, ‘Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, “Your sins are forgiven”, or to say “Stand up, and take your mat and walk”? But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins’ – he said to the paralytic – ‘I say to you, stand up, take your mat and go to your home.’ And he stood up, and immediately took the mat and went out before all of them; so that they were all amazed and glorified God, saying, ‘We have never seen anything like this!’

Reflection

Here we see the flipside of fame. The buzz of excitement around Jesus has not diminished, to the extent that the gathering of the crowd at the house at which he is staying creates its own problem. So many want to hear Jesus and to see him that others who really need to be in his presence are excluded. You know it is a large and densely packed crowd when it is easier for four men to carry a paralysed man on a stretcher on to the roof of a house, and to make a large enough hole in the roof to then lower their friend down than it is to say, "Do you mind just letting us through here?" The story offers a dual challenge to followers of Jesus today. The first is: are we willing to overcome all barriers in order to be in his presence? But the second, and perhaps the harder challenge: do we (intentionally or otherwise) create barriers in the way of others who would seek Jesus?

The flipside of fame includes the practical difficulties and invasions of privacy when so many want access to the one of whom they have heard so much. But there is a more dangerous flipside, that we see often, and that emerges in this passage. It sometimes surfaces as what has been called the "tall poppy syndrome", when after somebody has been built up by the adulation of the people, there is a backlash. People will step forward who are determined to cut the celebrity down to size.

Here it is the scribes who lead the backlash. They seize on Jesus' words about the forgiveness of sins with outrage, real or pretend. Who does he think he is? Only God can forgive sins. How dare this upstart put himself in the place of God! Who gave him the right to do and to say these things?

The issue is one of authority, and where that authority comes from. We have already been told, in the previous chapter, that Jesus taught "as one having authority, and not as the scribes". There is an irony in that observation; the scribes are precisely those who might be regarded as properly authorised teachers of the law. They have received the training and the official validation that have never been given to the carpenter's son from Nazareth. But the authority exercised by Jesus does not come from the religious institution. There is only one source for this kind of authority; and that is God and God alone. The scribes may ask, "Who does this man think he is?", but are they willing to receive an answer?

Day 4: Mark 2.13-22

Jesus went out again beside the lake; the whole crowd gathered around him, and he taught them. As he was walking along, he saw Levi son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax booth, and he said to him, 'Follow me.' And he got up and followed him.

And as he sat at dinner in Levi's house, many tax-collectors and sinners were also sitting with Jesus and his disciples – for there were many who followed him. When the scribes of the Pharisees saw that he was eating with sinners and tax-collectors, they said to his disciples, 'Why does he eat with tax-collectors and sinners?' When Jesus heard this, he said to them, 'Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I have come to call not the righteous but sinners.'

Now John's disciples and the Pharisees were fasting; and people came and said to him, 'Why do John's disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?' Jesus said to them, 'The wedding-guests cannot fast while the bridegroom is with them, can they? As long as they have the bridegroom with them, they cannot fast. The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast on that day.'

'No one sews a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old cloak; otherwise the patch pulls away from it, the new from the old, and a worse tear is made. And no one puts new wine into old wineskins; otherwise, the wine will burst the skins, and the wine is lost, and so also are the skins; but one puts new wine into fresh wineskins.'

Reflection

"Follow me." These words of Jesus to Levi are a direct echo of the same words that had earlier been spoken to Simon and Andrew, to James and John, at the shores of Lake Galilee. "Follow me" is the simplest possible expression of the invitation to be a disciple. As soon as we answer the call of Jesus to follow him, we embark on the path of discipleship. To be a disciple is to follow and to learn. It is to be an apprentice, spending time in the presence of the master carpenter, watching him, copying him, and (in some small way) becoming like him.

Perhaps the most surprising part of this passage is not that Jesus has disciples. We knew that already, even if we scarcely dared to count ourselves in that number. Rather, is that others do too; we are told here about the disciples of John the Baptist and also of the Pharisees. There are similarities between them, but also big differences. The disciples of Jesus, of John, of the Pharisees are all seeking to be obedient to God and to grow in the life of faith.

But there is a key difference that finds its focus here in the issue of fasting. Jesus is asked, 'Why do John's disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?' There is a time to fast and a time to feast, and Jesus answers the query by using the image of a wedding. When the bridegroom is present is the time for guests to celebrate and throw a party. A wedding feast is often used in scripture as an image of the kingdom of God. The disciples of John and of the Pharisees fast, because they seek to purify themselves in readiness for the coming of that kingdom; but for the followers of Jesus that kingdom is already in their midst, in the presence of Jesus, the bridegroom.

For the Pharisees, Jesus eating with tax-collectors and sinners is a source of scandal. Does he not know what kind of people they are? But for Jesus, this meal in the home of Levi, the tax-collector turned disciple, is a vivid illustration and embodiment of the reality of God's kingdom, where are all invited to sit and eat at God's table.