

## TRINITY 1 – SERIES ON MARK’S GOSPEL – NO 1

Readings: Mark 1: 1-8, 9-13 14-28

Lord, may now your written word become to us the living Word, in Jesus Christ. Amen.

As you will have noticed, today’s readings were rather different. Why was that? (they were all from Mark, I’m glad some of you were awake!). The reason for that, as I hope some of you will be aware, is that today we are starting something that may feel rather different in this parish, namely a seven week sermon series on the gospel of Mark. Why is that the case, you may be wondering, what’s wrong with the usual lectionary? Well, there’s nothing wrong with that at all, but on occasions (in what we call ordinary time in the church’s calendar, that is periods like now going through the Trinity season which runs until the end of October) we are encouraged to consider using alternative forms of readings in order to focus on some particular theme or biblical book. So why focus on Mark’s gospel then? The word gospel is derived from the Greek ‘euangelion’ which means good news. The good news of Jesus Christ lies at the very heart of our faith, so as a staff team, we felt it was an ideal opportunity to remind those who are regulars in our three churches as well as to encourage those who may be new or occasional visitors to find out more about that faith and to try to make more sense of that by reading bite sized chunks of it together. In addition, as you may be aware, we are in year B of our three year lectionary cycle of readings which this church year focuses on Mark, so it makes good sense to use his gospel from that point of view as well. Consequently, over the course of the seven weeks of this series, we shall be reading through the gospel together, and the relevant sections will be made available here in church each week on an A5 sheet (or you may prefer to bring or use a bible to read from – we will be using the New Revised Standard Version). On the notice sheet, there will also be a short reflection, to enable us to go on thinking about the readings during the week, whether on our own or in our small group.

Now that I hope it is clear what we are doing, I thought it might be helpful if I said a little about the context of Mark’s gospel before going on to look at today’s readings and then thinking about their relevance to our lives. Mark’s gospel is written by the person known as Saint Mark, an early follower of Jesus, who is probably the person referred to as John Mark a number of times in the New Testament. He was a Jew, a cousin of Barnabas and a companion of Peter. He went on Paul’s first missionary journey but returned home halfway through it (perhaps it was too hard or he found Paul too difficult?). Either way, he was given another chance by Barnabas who took him on a subsequent mission and he later won over the respect of both Paul and Peter. His gospel is considered to be the earliest of all four gospels and was probably written in the period from AD 65-70, when the memories of Jesus were still in the minds of his early followers. It is often considered to have been written in Rome, but some commentators such as Rowan Williams (show book), think it was more likely to have been written in North Africa, an area probably teeming with refugees, as it is now. Though Mark was a Jew, he wrote the gospel mainly for non-Jews or Gentiles, hence he often takes great care to explain Jewish customs to his readers. The sources of the gospel are probably four-fold. Mark, as already mentioned, was a companion of Peter, and it is likely that his preaching had some influence upon the book. Mark would, of course, have had his own memories of Jesus to draw on, and it is likely that he also drew on an oral tradition (largely Semitic in its colouring & atmosphere) that was around at the time as well. Finally, it is assumed that Mark also made use of some documentary material, a source that scholars refer to as Q (not the James Bond variety though!).

So much for some brief background to the gospel, now on to the meat of the text itself (says he a vegetarian!). Our first reading this morning, chapter one verses one to eight, is in essence Mark's introduction to his gospel. And it begins with that very simple phrase – 'The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God'. So right from the beginning Mark is wanting to assert Jesus' divinity, he is the Son of God. Perhaps that is why he does not feel the need to start with the birth of Jesus unlike Matthew and Luke who use a birth story as a way of proclaiming that Jesus was not just a human being. This opening phrase does raise a very important question for us though – is the good news the good news about Jesus or is Jesus the good news himself? Discuss. Then Mark quickly moves on to the character of John the Baptist, the one prophesied by Isaiah, who would prepare the way for Jesus. The purpose of his ministry of preaching and baptising in the desert was twofold. Firstly, it was to call people to repentance. It's worth noting here that the Greek word for repentance, 'metanoia', is not simply about expressing sorrow for one's sins or wrongdoings but a complete change of heart or direction, a desire to try to walk in God's ways instead. Secondly, it was about pointing people to Christ, the one more greater than he, who would baptise people not with water but with the Holy Spirit. As John puts it elsewhere, 'He must increase, I must decrease'.

Our second reading, verses nine to thirteen, focuses on the baptism and temptation of Jesus. Note that his baptism is seen as a Trinitarian act – God the Father calls his beloved Son on whom the Spirit has descended like a dove. Jesus' baptism is different to the baptism of others in the Jordan by John though. It is not a baptism of repentance, for Jesus was considered to be without sin, but it is an act of self-identification with sinful humanity, as well as an act of dedication to his ministry, and of fulfilling all righteousness, as Matthew records it in his gospel. Some commentators note here the contrast between the time of dedication in Jesus' baptism, followed by the time of his testing in the wilderness. It's worth remembering here that the temptation Jesus endured in the desert was not an isolated experience for him but one that went on throughout his ministry – at every demand made by the Pharisees for a sign, when Peter rebelled against the idea of his Master suffering and Jesus had to say, 'Get behind me Satan', and even in the last hours on the cross when the crowds tempted him to come down from it and to save himself.

In our third reading, verses fourteen to twenty eight, Mark moves us on to a different aspect of Jesus' ministry, his public proclamation of the Kingdom of God to which his hearers are invited to repent and believe. The Kingdom of God is one of those concepts about which many people have written many words and about which there is often much misunderstanding. In essence though, it is about the reign or rule of God in people's lives and indeed in society itself, rather than some kind of utopia of material well-being. For Jesus, the Kingdom was always something which was both present and future orientated, to be known now and yet always waiting to be fully realised in the future. And hence in the Lord's prayer, he taught his disciples to say, 'May your kingdom come on earth as in heaven' – may it come now on earth as it is already known in heaven – and which according to the book of Revelation will be known in all its fullness here on earth at the end of time. But for Jesus, the Kingdom was not only to be proclaimed in words but also in deeds. And hence we have the first account of his miracles in Mark's gospel, the driving out of an evil spirit from a man. However we might interpret such a miracle today, it is clear that in Jesus' time, the belief in demons was a reality. Introducing the reign of God here on earth involved for Jesus confronting the power of evil or Satan, something he has of course just encountered for himself in the wilderness. And people are astonished by his authority, demonstrated not just by his words ('Come out' to the evil spirit) but by his deeds, the evil spirit comes out.

So what do these readings have to say to us then? I offer three thoughts for you to think about. Firstly, what is the good news for us here in Caversham in the twenty first century? What is the good news for you, for me, and for others, those we are called to reach? Is the good news the same for each one of us or is it different in some ways? I remember when I lived in Guildford diocese that one of its former bishops, Michael Adie, invited anyone in the diocese to write in to tell him what is the good news for you about the Christian faith. I was of the people who wrote in, and was eventually asked to be filmed (with others) for a diocesan video that was produced outlining people's very different responses to that question, although there was some sense of commonality too. So may I ask you to ponder – what is the good news of Jesus Christ for you? And can you find a way of sharing that with at least one other person – a family member, friend, or work colleague, for example? Secondly, as I have already mentioned, Jesus always emphasised that the Kingdom of God (the reign or rule of God) was to be proclaimed through words and deeds. How do we reflect something of the Kingdom of God not only through our words but also through our deeds today? I want to suggest that we need the power of the Holy Spirit, which Jesus received at his baptism, to help us to do that. Thirdly, how do we deal with the highs and the lows of following Jesus? Jesus experienced the positive affirmation of his Father at his baptism and yet this was followed by the testing of the devil in the wilderness. In my experience, there have been many positive moments in following Jesus as well as many testing times too. Perhaps this is why in the letter of James, we are told to 'Rejoice with those who rejoice, and to weep with those who weep'. And maybe God is sometimes able to use those difficult, testing experiences to keep us humble and dependent upon Him, as indeed Jesus learnt to trust in His Heavenly Father too?

To conclude, Mark's gospel is about good news. The good news of Jesus Christ, who was proclaimed by John the Baptist in the wilderness and by His Father in the river Jordan, and then proclaimed that good news to others in both word and deed throughout his public ministry. May I invite you to take home your Scratchdial and to think about the reflection on it this coming week, and to come back next week for part two of our series as we go on to look further at Jesus' ministry.

Let us pray..

God, grant us fresh eyes to see Jesus like one of those first receiving the good news, not only this week but in the coming weeks ahead as well. Amen.