

Mark sermon series: Week 1

07/06/15 09:45 St Peter's

Mark 1:9-13; Mark 1:14-28; Mark 1:1-8

Today we begin for our readings and sermon something rather different.

We are abandoning for a few weeks our usual pattern of Old and New Testament readings, followed by a Gospel - all focussed around one theme that changes each week. Instead we are beginning a sermon series on Mark's gospel.

But why Mark's Gospel?

Well, this year the C of E annual cycle of readings focuses on Mark - his writing is the dominant Gospel text used throughout the year. In other years it will be Matthew or Luke, with John used at major festivals.

We have decided it would be good to have a series of sermon that allow us to drill down into Mark's Gospel. We should allow ourselves the opportunity to encounter the Gospel as a whole, and not just in scattered fragments. It will allow us to grow in our faith as we consider some of the big questions lying behind our faith. And in turn become equipped to share this Good News with others.

Our purpose in this sermon series is very clear - it is about growth. Growth in our understanding of scripture - that we might understand more of our faith as we seek to draw others to Christ. Growth in our relationship with God in Christ - that as mature disciples we might be better equipped to reveal and speak of Christ to the world. All of those will in turn lead us to growth in the number of disciples - as people witness our lives transformed by Christ, so they will want to know why we have such hope and peace.

So to a bit of background about this Gospel. Mark is the shortest, least cluttered account of the Gospel of Jesus - at 16 chapters it is much shorter than any of the others. It is generally believed to be the first written Gospel, probably written somewhere around 66-70 AD by Mark, an associate of St Peter, shortly after Peter's death. These were dangerous times - the Great Fire of Rome in 64 AD, for which Nero is said to have blamed Christians and savagely persecuted them. In 66 AD the frontier province of Judea revolted against the Emperor, and four legions were sent to recover the situation. So it was a dangerous time to be talking about the 'good news' of the Son of God.

Because his is the first gospel to be written, Mark is doing something no one done before. We will see his style is vivid and dramatic - Mark wants to touch us and transform us. His writing has real pace - we sense an urgency, and a directness that means he does not include text that he considers unnecessary.

So to today's readings from Mark 1.

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

Unlike other Gospel writers, Mark begins directly. He announces who Jesus is straight away. We should note something obvious here - for Mark there is no birth narrative (no angels, shepherds, wise men, or

indeed need to explain about Mary and Joseph). Why? Because he needs to cut to the chase - this is a book of Good News - and the good news is Jesus Christ, and nothing else is important.

Now we need to remember that "Jesus" was a very common name in the 1st century (hence "Jesus of Nazareth" is used frequently to differentiate him from others.) So Mark's Gospel is biographical - it is about Jesus.

But it is about "Jesus Christ" - better "Jesus the Christ". We always need to remember that "Christ" is not Jesus' surname! Christos - Greek for Messiah, or anointed one. Mark seems to be saying "my gospel is going to show that Jesus is the one who is anticipated, the Messiah". So the first half of Gospel, until Mark 8, leads up "Who do people say that I am? - John Baptist, Elijah". Which in turn leads to the question at the heart of the Gospel "Who do you say that I am?" - Peter answers "The Christ". Mark wants us to be clear that Jesus is expected Messiah, the anointed Son of G - and to leave us in no doubt he quotes Isaiah about preparation for this moment: "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight". It is from the preparation culminating in John the Baptist's ministry, that J comes on the scene immediately and is baptised for the start of his ministry. And there Mark again leaves us in no doubt who we are witnessing: "You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased". Further authentication of who this Jesus is.

But we come back to the start of the Gospel. Mark begins telling us about the Good News "of", or is it "is", Jesus Christ? This is not just a biography or account "of" Jesus, who is the anointed Son of G. But is itself the Good News - God reaching out to connect with us through these words. Mark is offering us the opportunity to know God through Jesus - to heed the call to "follow me" from 3rd reading. Those fishermen heard the call and proceeded at a pace - "immediately" they left their nets and followed.

Jesus is not our moral example - a good guy - but our saviour. To be followers of Christ is our calling - Christ likeness is what we are called to be. This series will ask of us whether we have a consciousness to be Christ-like, to follow.

So in the next few weeks we are going to follow this account of Jesus written by Mark. Each week our pew sheet will contain some reflections for you to take away, ponder and pray through. We will follow Mark in his direct way to hear about Jesus. But also to discover, for some the first time, for some of us once again, the good news. For the word "Gospel" means good news. Mark only one who uses that phrase to herald his writing. As we follow Mark we will encounter the good news who is Jesus. The call to follow him - to become his disciple - is truly to be people of that Good News. A call that we might have a life changing commitment to Jesus. Might we find time in these coming few weeks to open our hearts to J and be transformed by him?

Mike Smith