

## Sermon for Sunday 18 February 2024 – The First Sunday of Lent

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***Genesis 9.8-17; Psalm 25.1-9; 1 Peter 3.18-22; Mark 1.9-15***

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Please do be seated.

A few people commented before the service, it's very appropriate that we've had a bit about Noah's flood and baptism this morning. I don't know about you, but coming from Sudbury, I spent most of the time in the middle of the road, and wondered whether I did need an ark.

We could do some literary gymnastics today and link our readings together and talk about baptism, which seems to be the emphasis of the readings. But I'm not going to do that. I want you to put yourselves in the place of someone hearing, maybe reading, but more likely hearing, the gospel of Mark for the first time. So I'll give you just a moment to take your mind right back. If you go with my dating somewhere 60 Common Era, 60 AD, before the fall of Jerusalem. You there? Okay.

This week we start near the beginning of Mark's gospel, which seems a bit strange because last week we were in chapter 9 with the Transfiguration. I don't know what the lectionary readers do. Paul, you'll be happy I've made a reference to the lectionary. I don't know why we jump around. Any answers for that would be welcome on a postcard. But if we'd have read from the beginning of Mark's gospel, rather than jumping in at verse 9, we'd have realised that Mark 1 through to 15 is a little bit like the beginning of John's gospel, it's a prologue, it's an *inclusio*. There's a bookend of the beginning of the good news, Mark 1.1, and Jesus saying, believe in the good news. So everything in between is one section.

And I'd like you to note with me that in the beginning of Mark's gospel, it says this, 'The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the son of God'. Not Mark saying, I'm going to tell you some good teaching that it would be wise for you to follow, or a way of conducting yourself to make you acceptable to God, but the good news of Jesus Christ, the son of God; the evangelion, the good news, which, this is subversive, because this was spoken of Caesar. It was the good news of Caesar, who brings peace and so on. And here Mark is saying, no, the good news is the good news of Jesus Christ, son of God.

And then Mark links to the Old Testament. He calls on Isaiah and Malachi and Ezekiel. It's actually a mash up, even though he says, as is written in the prophet Isaiah, 'See, I'm sending a messenger ahead of you'. But Isaiah takes priority. Because God's people are estranged from God; there's been hundreds of years with no prophetic voice, and there is a need for the people of God to return to being in relationship with God; they are estranged. Hence John the Baptist has a cry for repentance and a baptism for repentance. That turning from sin and becoming the people of God, using the language of sonship.

In the Exodus, or before the Exodus, Moses went to Pharaoh and said this, 'Thus says the Lord; Israel, the people of God, is my firstborn son. Let my son go, that he might worship me.' So here Mark is alluding

to the Old Testament, this continuous, grand narrative of the story of God. He aligns John the Baptist with the Old Testament prophets; we have the description where he seems to be Elijah, the camel hair, eating locusts and wild honey. That sets the scene.

And then we have Jesus turning up. He's come from Nazareth of Galilee in the north. He's come down south to where John is performing this baptism for repentance. Mark says, 'In those days'. He's writing like the old Hebrew scriptures, 'In those days'. And he tells us what happens with Jesus at his baptism, a little bit in the wilderness and then the start of his ministry. It means that like the first heroes of Mark's gospel, we have no excuses. We read through the rest of Mark's gospel not to realise who Jesus is. The characters that we read of in the gospel take a while to get to realise who Jesus is, but right at the beginning, Mark says, 'this is the son of God'. So we've got inside knowledge as we read through Mark's gospel.

So in those days, at that time, Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee, was baptised by John in the Jordan. As he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart. Again, it's Mark alluding back very subtly to the Old Testament; because in Isaiah, Isaiah 64, the cry is this, 'Oh, that you, God, would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake your presence. Will you come out of heaven and intervene and put things right?' And here Mark tells us that Jesus saw the heavens torn apart. It speaks of God coming to put things right.

The Spirit descends on him like a dove; and then a voice from heaven. Matthew and Luke seem to imply that other people heard the voice. But here in Mark, it's very specific. It's to Jesus and Jesus alone, 'You are my beloved son'. Again, Mark is alluding to the Old Testament, Psalm 2 and verse 7, 'I will tell you the decree of the Lord, he said to me, you are my son. Today I have begotten you.' Can you imagine Jesus, he has been obedient in baptism, he has aligned himself with the people of Israel who are coming to repent. And he hears his father say, you are my beloved son. It can also mean unique son. With you I am well pleased or I delight.

It's again Mark, alluding to Isaiah, here is my servant, who I uphold, my chosen, the one in whom I delight. The father delights in the Son. I have put my spirit upon him. He'll bring forth justice to the nations. The hearers of Mark's gospel, they would have known the scriptures. Mark doesn't need to do what I've done this morning, say Isaiah 43, Isaiah 42, they would have known. Oh, Mark's tying this Jesus to the promise of when God intervenes.

It also has allusions to Ezekiel. Ezekiel; in the fourth month of the fifth day of the month, I was among the exiles. Remember the people of Israel estranged from God? It speaks of being in exile. The heavens were opened, and I saw visions of God. All of this is here. This is the beginning of the fulfilment of the promises that God has made in the Old Testament, that he will one day intervene and put things right.

What happens? Jesus is obedient in baptism. He is told that he is the beloved son. He sees Heaven opened. God says, 'I'm well pleased; I delight in you'. And what happens? He lives happily ever after. No. The spirit hurls him into the wilderness. It's really violent language. Matthew and Luke say something like,

the spirit led him into the wilderness. Was it? Yeah. But here the spirit immediately **drove** him out into the wilderness; the Greek is ekballō; it means to hurl, to throw.

And Jesus is in the wilderness for 40 days. Again Mark is echoing 40 days of Noah's flood, 40 years in the wilderness, 40 days that Moses spent on Sinai waiting for the law. Elijah's 40 day dash to horror. Maybe the 40 days between Resurrection and Pentecost, 40 speaks of testing. But that testing always ends with something new. With Moses, the covenant. With Noah, the covenant. Testing always is followed by something new, provided you stand up to the testing.

The wilderness is not a nice place. Wild beasts were there. Wild beasts are spoken of in the same way that the talk of the Satan. Can we note, Mark doesn't bother with what the temptations were. He just says, Jesus went into the wilderness. He was tempted. Angels ministered to him. He came out.

And I think this morning that's really helpful for us; so often with the other accounts of the temptations, I don't know about you, but I have heard some where we're encouraged to put ourselves in the place of Jesus. Jesus was tempted, so you're going to be tempted. This is how Jesus dealt with the temptations. This is how you deal with the temptations. Yeah? Hello! Have I lost you completely this morning?

We have to be so careful with scripture that when we put ourselves into it, which is a good thing to do sometimes, we don't put ourselves into the wrong character. I hate to tell you that none of you, and me, we are not Jesus. We are not the Messiah. Our applications, if we've made them to join the Trinity, have been rejected.

Jesus is the one who was tempted by Satan. Jesus is the one who overcame the temptations and was victorious, which meant that he could go on and do the new thing which would ultimately lead to the cross. We are not the Messiah. So Jesus comes out, having faced Satan and been victorious, and then he starts his ministry. He goes back to Galilee proclaiming the good news of God, saying, the time is fulfilled.

As I was preparing for this and going through the commentaries and seeing what they said about this, I was struck by the fact that if the time is fulfilled, it means there was a plan. This was no accident. There was a plan in God's timing and the time was being fulfilled. I was just struck afresh by the fact that God always had a plan, to intervene and put things right. In the incarnation, God, with the tearing apart of heaven, had come in the incarnation to be with his people, to be human and to put things right.

But that's all very well and good. And I think as we come to Lent, this is the point that I want to land on today. The kingdom of God has come near. But there's a twofold response needed; to repent, to turn around, to face the opposite direction; in the Hebrew shove, to turn from sin, to live in holiness, to be a set apart people. John the Baptist, had called people to repentance, Jesus is doing the same, it's continuous. But more than that, to believe, to trust in and rely on, not just give mental assent or understanding, but to **rely on** the good news, good news of God, the good news of Jesus his son, that Mark will unfold through the gospel.

So a challenge through Lent. Maybe sit with the beginning of Mark's gospel, read it repeatedly, let it soak into you, let it challenge you to repent and believe so that we might better celebrate Easter, when we get there. Amen.