

Sermon

Sunday 6 December 2020

Mark1: 1 to 8

Introduction

Mark's account of Jesus' arrival seems to have missed out anything to do with Christmas.

Where are the angels? The shepherds? The donkey? The star?

It makes the story simpler. I have always struggled with the idea that the birth of Jesus could be surrounded by such wonderful if not miraculous events only for the family to disappear into obscurity of 30 years. How did he avoid being a teenage celebrity?

What is clear is that in Mark's gospel account it all starts with a big bang and the big bang is a John the Baptist bang.

Difficulties

Not that Mark's approach does not bring its own difficulties. Mark seems to assume we know all about Jesus.

Like someone coming out of unconsciousness in a hospital bed, there is a "where am I feeling" at the start.

No “in the beginning God created” or “in the beginning was the word”. Simply, “You are at the beginning of the book.”

What book? How did I get here?

Mark’s opening is about as helpful as waking in a hospital, asking the nurse” where am I and being told, “you’re in your pyjamas”.

A book. A book of good news? That is all that Gospel means. Good news.

Not any-old good news. The sort of news announced after a trumpet blast and the unfurling of a scroll. Good news of great importance.

No angel here to make the point. Or maybe there is: John the messenger rather than Gabriel the messenger.

[Picture in a Picture.](#)

What good news? Is this the good news about Jesus or a retelling of Jesus’s message about good news.

Mark is deliberately being ambiguous.

[Picture](#)

Right from the start we have the “picture in a picture”. An old artist’s trick. Or children’s picture book. Or the cover a 1969 Pink Floyd album. Pictures within pictures within pictures.

Mark

Did Jesus preach the Gospel or is Jesus the Gospel?

No time to dwell on it.

Isaiah might help.

"I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way. A voice of one calling in the desert, prepare the way of the Lord, make straight the paths for him."

It is not a quotation you will find in your Bible. There is some Exodus in here. (23.30) Also some Isaiah (40.3) Also some Malachi (3.1).

It is a synthesis of prophesy. Everything - from pre-history to the prophet Malachi 400 years earlier. All roads lead to this time and this place.

The Whole

And what a time to be at and a place to be in.

Mark shows us this amazing spectacle as important than any star or angel.

Remember Luke's Gospel account has the whole world on the move. Chapter 2. *In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world.*

Mark describes something equally impressive. Picture the brightest sunniest day you could imagine. For skiers it

might be a day on the snow. For others, a brilliant noon in the white Mediterranean town square.

As your eyes adjust to the light you realise that you can see a crowd on the move. A man in the waters of a great river, baptising.

John is preaching repentance and the forgiveness of sins. Everyone is flocking to him for just this reason. The whole world.

Coming to God. To his messenger.

Where.

This is the Jordan. The middle of the region. Where east meets west. Where Roman fades out to the trade of the east. It' is the middle of the world. Politically – socially – religiously, culturally.

At last , faith had been turned in to action.

This is about body and soul and everything.

What Next

The biggest spectacle people have ever seen. The camel hair, the belt, the locust diet, all say that this man, John, is no ordinary prophet but Elijah. And the first prophet for 400 years.

John says – I am just the warm-up act! “After me will come one more powerful. He will baptise with the Holy Spirit.”

John’s message. Good News. The Good News is coming to preach the Good News.

A picture within a picture within a picture.

Jesus

And in verse 9 Jesus has arrived.

And by verse 10 you are half expecting the whole world to have been saved.

And in a sense, it has.

If John’s gospel covers all time – Marks is almost without time.

Impact

This is so different from John’s “in the beginning was the Word”. This is not about theology.

Nor is Luke’s nativity story.

John has the start of everything with the Word. Luke has the appearance of a star in the sky.

Mark has the smoking crater of a meteorite. What on earth was that! Something has made an enormous impact and the world will never be the same again.

One commentator called it the “breaking in of God’s kingly rule”.

Pulling together

Over the next few weeks, we will encounter countless references to the nativity scene. A star. A stable. Shepherds. Some rather premature Kings.

The imagery of the Holy Night fits in well with the shortest day of the year.

*Longing for light, we wait in darkness
Longing for truth, we turn to You.
Make us Your own, Your holy people
Light for the world to see.*

The choir sang these words last week. They reflect a great tradition of advent as a time of waiting in hope for the coming of the light

But Mark’s imagery is just as important. A brilliant sunlit day and a man baptizing. The whole world responding to God’s great act of grace. God’s Kingdom bursting in on the world.

No looking forward to a birth but an event which has already happened. An impact which has changed the world.

Accessible

It reminds of pictures of January sales. Crowds people who had been up all night, waiting for the door to open. And then the rush.

Or November 1989: many of us will remember the Berlin wall coming down – crowds greeting each other after years of separation.

People flocking to John the Baptist – the first prophet for 400 years.

COVID

If this Christmas sees the easing of COVID restrictions, another barrier come down. Let us hope the celebrations are slightly more restrained.

It is the perfect re-enactment of Mark's Good News message.

Ironically – it is exactly what Christmas is about. Access to God – the first prophet in 400 years. The man in the desert. The whole world flocking to him to repent and renew their relationships with God.

It is the picture in a picture. Good news. The good news is arriving with the good news.

At a time when the future seems uncertain, Mark reminds us that the greatest event the world has known is in the past. God's amazing act of grace in sending his son.

COVID restrictions may be frustrating and disappointing. But
if that is all we have to worry about – thank God!

God's kingly rule has already broken in.

Amen.