

Sermon for Advent 2 2020

1 *The beginning of the good news^[a] of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.^[b]*

2 *As it is written in the prophet Isaiah,^[c]*

*“See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,^[d]
who will prepare your way;*

3 *the voice of one crying out in the wilderness:*

*‘Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight,’” Mark 1.1-3.*

The gospel of St Mark is interesting for many reasons. Not the least of which is that it is believed to be the first Gospel written. Both Matthew and Luke appear to use the gospel of Mark as a basic reference point from which they begin to explore a new and more comprehensive understanding of the teaching of Jesus Christ.

When we sit down to read the gospel of Mark, we notice that it appears to be written in urgency. The writing is liberally sprinkled with AND together with IMMEDIATELY. It is as if it is a race from the baptism of Jesus through to the crucifixion. Only at that point does the story slow down.

He introduces his gospel with a parallel to the beginning of Genesis. It is as if he is suggesting that God is making a new beginning. Genesis begins with this phrase, *“In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth.”* The Gospel of John is introduced with the same phrasing. *“In the beginning was the Word”*. Mark introduces his gospel with this phrase, *“The beginning of the Good News of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.”* the intentional link to the first verse of the bible is a reminder that when Jesus was baptised, the world changed. This is a new beginning and nothing would ever be the same again.

Having declared this new and radical beginning Mark immediately introduces John the Baptist. He did not simply make him up to support his account of the life of Jesus, he identifies him as the messenger prophesied by the Isaiah. *“See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you.”* John the Baptist is the messenger. His is the voice crying out in the wilderness, he is the one preparing the way of the Lord.

John the Baptist calls all people to repentance. He teaches that all people must confess their sins and that they are to be reconciled to God and with each other. The first step in this new faith is to be repentance. The Faith is new because it grows out of the Old Faith, the Old Testament, and it points us in a new direction.

With the ministry of the Christ we make a deliberate shift away from the rigidity of the Law and into a faith which is focussed on love, compassion, community, grace, mercy, and forgiveness. The Law has not been discarded, but it has been fulfilled.

In the gospel of Mark there is only the image of the baptism of Christ and the promise that he will baptise with the Holy Spirit. It is in the gospel of Matthew and Luke that the extra phrase of judgement is inserted. They record that Jesus will baptise with the Spirit and with

fire. For them Jesus comes not only with love, grace mercy and forgiveness, he will also come with judgement. Not so with Mark.

We note that in the gospel of Mark the whole of the Judean countryside, and all of the people of Jerusalem, came to him to confess their sins and to be baptised with the baptism of repentance. It is in Matthew that we read of John calling the Jewish leaders "Vipers". He demands to know who warned them about the wrath that is to come.

Mark does not include any of this theme of judgement. He records that everyone - Jew and Gentile - came to John the Baptist for a baptism into a new beginning, a new understanding of God.

John the Baptist understood his role very clearly. He was a stepping stone, a sign, an indicator. He was to begin the teaching that would prepare the people for their personal meeting with Jesus. He did not set himself up as the one to be adored and worshiped. He pointed people towards the coming of the Messiah.

John describes the Messiah in very descriptive terms, and terms that the people would understand. The one who is to come after him is much more powerful than he is, and in terms of status John does not see himself as worthy enough to untie the thong of his sandals.

As you are aware it is the role of the slave to help guests remove their sandals and to wash their feet. John saw himself as being less than a slave. This makes the contrast between him and Jesus as wide as it could possibly be. There is no pretence about John representing Jesus and being his second in command. He does not claim any authority beyond the God-given task to point the people towards Jesus for salvation. It is Jesus who will baptise with the Holy Spirit.

The message for us is just as clear. We are to imitate John the Baptist as we too encourage other people to respond to our Lord. We are to teach that which we believe so that everyone will know that they are welcome in the kingdom of God. It is not for us to convince other people to worship us - we are not Jesus. We can, however, teach that which we know and believe to be true concerning Jesus.

The creed that we have just offered gives us the basics of our faith. We believe in God the creator. We believe in God the Son. And we believe in God the Holy Spirit. The Bible will fill in the gaps for us. In our daily prayers and meditations, we can include the bible readings of the day and our understanding of God will grow and flourish. Remember that no one was rejected at John's baptism. No one was rejected By Jesus as he fulfilled his ministry. All people are welcome to come and worship, pray and learn. It is with open arms that we welcome them. And we welcome them in the name of Christ.