

Trinity Baptist Church
Sunday 13th September 2020. Andy Banks.
Mark 1:1-8 (1-3)
Jesus' Identity: Scripture's testimony

Children, I'm going to talk for a little while now, so feel free to complete the activities we sent out to you.

I'm beginning a new series today working through Mark's Gospel. In a sense we're going back to basics with this series. Mark's Gospel was probably the first Gospel written, and it's very action-packed and immediate. So, it presents us with arguably the simplest and easiest to understand portrayal of Jesus in the Bible. It's written essentially to answer Jesus' question to his disciples in the middle of the Gospel, in Mark 8:29: "Who do you say I am?" Who is this Jesus and what did he come to do? We may think we know the answer to those questions already, and so miss much of the richness contained in the Gospel. So I encourage you to approach each passage with an eagerness to discover more.

Also, Jesus' question is not intellectual; it's personal: "who do *you* say I am?" Our answer to that question must govern not just what we say we *believe*, but how we *live*. So let's read from Mark 1:1-8. This is the first of two messages I intend to give on these particular verses, so I'll deal with John's message next week.

[Read Mark 1:1-8]

1The beginning of the Gospel of Jesus the Messiah, 2as it is written in Isaiah the prophet:

*"I will send my messenger ahead of you,
 who will prepare your way" –
 3"a voice of one calling in the wilderness,
 'Prepare the way for the Lord,
 make straight paths for him.'"*

4And so John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. 5The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him. Confessing their sins, they were baptised by him in the River Jordan. 6John wore clothing made of camel's hair, with a leather belt round his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. 7And this was his message: 'After me comes the one more powerful than I, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. 8I baptise you with water, but he will baptise you with the Holy Spirit.'

[Pray]

Think of a time when you received some brilliant news. Maybe being chosen to represent your school in a competition, or opening your GCSE results and finding them good, or getting your first real job, or the birth of your children or grandchildren, or getting the all-clear from cancer. Try to remember where you were, and how you felt. And how desperate you were to share that good news with other people!

Good news is infectious, isn't it? We *want* to share it. And that's what the word Gospel means: "good news." The sort of amazingly brilliant news that should, if we've really understood it, make us desperate to share it. And that's what Mark is doing. He's bursting to share the great news that he has come to realise is true. "The beginning of the *Gospel* – the *good news* – of Jesus the Messiah."

In typical fashion, he doesn't include a birth narrative, like Matthew and Luke do; he's straight in with the action. Or *almost* straight in. For, before we encounter Jesus himself, we *hear* about him from John the Baptist. And before we even meet John, Mark *himself* nails *his* colours firmly to the mast with some bold, even dangerous, statements of his own about Jesus.

1a) Mark's declaration: The Gospel

You see, even the word "gospel" could be contentious. It appears sparingly in pre-Christian literature, but, when it does, it refers to *good* news, such as great military victories. But, perhaps, *most* notably, it was used in 9BC to describe as "gospel" the benevolent provision of "Providence" in sending the "god" Augustus Caesar to be the "saviour of the world." This is the first known description of a Caesar as a "god," and it sparked a very powerful, state-enforced cult of Caesar worship among the Romans.

Then along comes Mark, announcing into this Roman world, to Christians persecuted by those same Romans, the *Gospel*, not of Caesar, but of the *true* Saviour of the world, Jesus Christ – perhaps even explicitly adding the tag, "the Son of God" to his name, though that doesn't feature in every manuscript. This could be political dynamite: to refuse to acknowledge Caesar as saviour and a god, but instead to declare another, Jesus Christ, to be Saviour and the *only* God! For Mark to make such a dangerous statement he must have been very sure of his claims!

1b) Mark's declaration: The Messiah

And then Mark adds a title that would be equally provocative to Jesus' own people – the Jews. You see, the overriding hope of the Jewish people, for centuries, had been that a *Messiah* King would come to save them – or a *Christ* as it was translated into Greek. The Messiah, the Christ, was God's special anointed ruler, and was extensively prophesied in their Scriptures (our Old Testament). He was expected to finally free them from oppressive foreign rule (like that of the Romans), and usher in a new era of godly adherence to the Jewish Law, which in turn would bring spiritual and material blessing and national pre-eminence to God's people. To apply the term Messiah (or Christ) to Jesus was to claim that *he* was the fulfilment of everything for which the Jews had actively longed for at least the past 1,000 years!

But here was a major problem. For the Jewish *leaders* had crucified Jesus' rather than believe he was the Messiah. And, even after his resurrection, they tried to cover up the facts and to prevent people from putting their faith in Jesus as the Messiah. Why? Because he didn't match *their* expectations for the Messiah. And even worse, he challenged the legitimacy of *their* own rules and traditions. To admit that Jesus *was* the long-awaited Messiah, they would have to admit that they were wrong – and culpable – and we know how much people in power like to do that!

So, for Mark to apply the title Messiah to Jesus was religious dynamite, as it was political dynamite to apply the title "Gospel" to his book about Jesus. Again, he must have been incredibly sure to take such a risk! And at least part of his purpose for writing his Gospel was to give other believers sufficient evidence so that they might be equally bold in their faith in the face of persecution.

2) Scripture's declaration

"The beginning of the *Gospel* of Jesus the *Messiah!*" And how *does* Mark begin? With the fulfilment of Old Testament prophecy. The Gospel of Jesus Christ did not begin with his birth; it actually began, as Paul tells us, before God even created the world. And God foretold it through his prophets for many centuries before it came to pass, so that everyone could know this was indeed the work of God.

There are, in fact, *three* allusions to fulfilled prophecies in this passage. Two are easy to find if you look at the bottom of the page in your Bibles; what appears to be one prophecy from Isaiah, actually draws together two complimentary prophecies, from Malachi 3:1, leading into the main prophecy from Isaiah 40:3. The third prophecy is not quoted, but is alluded to in the seemingly redundant description of John's clothing, v.6: "John wore clothing made of camel's hair, with a leather belt round his waist." Now, any Jew hearing that would immediately have seen a parallel to the description in 2 Kings 1:8 of the prophet *Elijah's* clothing. Why was that significant? Because God had promised in what many believe to be his last words before this time – some 450 years earlier – "See, I will send the prophet Elijah to you before that great and dreadful day of the Lord comes" (Mal 4:5). Indeed, Jesus would later confirm that John the Baptist was the fulfilment of this prophecy of an "Elijah" figure to come.

Why is this so significant? Primarily because of who those Old Testament prophecies predicted this Elijah-messenger would prepare the way for. We often find a slight variation between how a prophecy is translated in the Old Testament and how its fulfilment is recorded in the New Testament. The reason is that the New Testament writers tended to quote from the Septuagint – the *Greek* translation of the Old Testament – rather than from the original *Hebrew* Scriptures, from which our English Bibles are mostly translated. And, as with all translations, there was a degree to which the Septuagint *interpreted* within the translation.

2a) Scripture's declaration: God himself

But if we go back to the original Hebrew of these three prophecies, we find that the Elijah-messenger was to prepare the way for *God himself* to come. Malachi 3:1: God says, "I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before *me*." Malachi 4:5: "See, I will send the prophet Elijah to you before that great and dreadful day of the *Lord* comes." And Isaiah 40:3: "A voice of one calling: 'In the wilderness prepare the way for the *Lord*; make straight in the desert a highway for our *God*.'" By drawing together these prophecies, Mark is demonstrating that Jesus was not a mere man, but God himself in human flesh – whether or not he originally included the title "Son of God" in v.1! That is a bold statement, and one that the rest of the Gospel will seek to prove.

2b) Scripture's declaration: Judge and Comforter

But there is another interesting feature that we find if we look back at the context of these original Old Testament prophecies. For they reveal something of the nature of the ministry of the prophesied Messiah. And what Malachi reveals might surprise us. He talks of the day of God's coming as a "great and *dreadful*" day, a day of terrible *judgement* if the Elijah-messenger's call to repentance was not heeded (Mal 4:5-6). Even for the repentant, he had spoken of God coming to *purify* and *refine* (Mal 3:2-3) – which is still a ministry of judgement, though with a purpose of transformation, in place of destruction. Now, this is not a popular portrayal of Jesus today, but we cannot do justice to the Jesus presented in the Gospels unless we talk of his judgement against sin and wickedness.

However, that is not the full story. For Isaiah 40 begins, unequivocally, with God's words, "*Comfort, comfort* my people, says your God. Speak *tenderly* to Jerusalem, and proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed, that her sin has been *paid for*." This is also the God for whom the messenger would prepare the way.

So how do we reconcile two seemingly contradictory messages about the purpose of Jesus' ministry? Quite simply through the cross with which he completed his ministry. On the cross, Jesus took God's righteous judgement against sin upon himself and, for all who put their trust in him, he paid for that sin for them, thus paving the way for our comfort in a new relationship with our Father God. This is the Gospel – the good news

of Jesus the Messiah, the Christ. He is God in human flesh, the true Saviour of the world, who took on himself the just punishment for our sin, so that we can be set free, made holy, and receive God's promised comfort. So, I finish with two questions: 1) Who do *you* say Jesus is? Have *you* received God's comfort by personally putting your trust in his Son, Jesus Christ? And ...

2) If you have, are you still excited by this *good* news, or do you need to re-examine it to rediscover your excitement afresh?