

Trinity Baptist Church
Sunday 20th September 2020
Andy Banks. Mark 1:1-8 (1-3)
Jesus' Identity: John's testimony

Children, feel free to complete the activities we sent out to you, while I talk. And remember, we'd love to see what you create on the GodZone Facebook page.

We're continuing our series in Mark's Gospel, with a second look at the opening verses. This time I'm going to focus on John the Baptist's ministry and testimony about Jesus. But, the really important question is not "Who does *John* say Jesus is?" or "Who does *Mark* say Jesus is?", but, "Who do *you* say he is?" As you look at the evidence in this Gospel, how do *you* answer that question? And what can you discover afresh about the nature of Jesus' ministry and mission? Let's read again from Mark 1:1-8.

[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]

What makes a good start to a book or play or film? One technique is for minor characters to talk about the main character before he or she actually comes on the scene. That can increase the anticipation of meeting the main character. Shakespeare uses this technique in *Macbeth*, for example. By the time we've heard about *Macbeth* from the shady witches in scene 1, contrasted with the glowing report of his battle heroics in scene 2, we're intrigued to meet the man who can command such contradictory assessments of his character.

And Mark employs the same technique in his Gospel – without the contradictions, of course. Before we meet Jesus in person, we hear some astounding things about him from Mark's own quill, from the Old Testament Scriptures, and then from John the Baptist!

1) The preparation for the One coming

Indeed, arguably *God*, even more than Mark, employs this story-telling technique, first by announcing the coming of the Messiah centuries beforehand, through many different prophets, and then by sending John the Baptist to directly prepare the way for Jesus. And how did John prepare the way? Through calling people to a baptism of *repentance*.

There isn't a clear precedent that shaped John's ministry. There were ritual washings prescribed for the Jews in their Law, often to signify cleansing from sin or restoration to the community of God's people. But these were regular events, not the one-off ritual that John administered, and which became the practice of the Church. The closest parallel was the baptism given to *Gentiles* who wished to become Jews, as one of three rituals by which they were welcomed into God's people. But John's baptism differed from this too, because he mostly called *Jews* to be baptised – people who were *already* members of God's people.

So why baptise them? Sure, it was a demonstration of repentance, but there were other ways of doing that! The answer lies in the prophecies with which Mark begins his gospel. John's baptism was unique, because it *prepared the way* for *Jesus* and for the new community of God's people that *he* would build, not founded on human ancestry, but on faith in Jesus Christ – the *New Covenant* people, fulfilling the vision of the Old Covenant. John's ministry was to gather and prepare a community who were hungry for God to do a new thing, who would acknowledge their failure to live up to God's Law, repent of that sinfulness, and live out their repentance in changed lifestyles. This was the Church that God was seeking – and still seeks today.

And what is fascinating is that, despite John's uncompromising straight-talking and his focus on impending judgement, the ordinary people flocked to hear him from miles around and responded by being baptised as a sign of their repentance. Because God convicted them of their sin and their need to change in order to prepare for his coming among them in the Person of Jesus Christ. In fact, the people who struggled most to accept John's message and to repent of their sin were the most religious people in society – the Pharisees and teachers of the Law, who spent hours studying God's Law, yet failed to apply its most important teachings of justice, mercy and faithfulness to their own lives (Matt 23:23)! They misunderstood not only John's ministry, but also Jesus' ministry, and so missed the blessings of God.

There is an important warning here for us, who call ourselves God's followers. It is easy for God's followers to become proud of their faith, then to think of themselves as better than others, and then to fail to see the planks in their own eyes at all, in their quest to remove the speck of dust in other people's eyes. If we read God's word and immediately think of other people who need to hear it, then we need to check ourselves and ask first, "What do **I** need to hear from this word? What might **I** need to repent of?"

2) The prestige of the One coming.

But even that self-examination, important as it is, is not what we need to gain most from our reading of Scripture. Too often we can look only at ourselves, and immediately jump straight to the question, "What does God want of me?" and so miss the primary witness of Scripture, which is not about what *we* are like, but about what *God* is like, what *Jesus Christ* is like. This is the Gospel, not of Mark or of John the Baptist, or of us. It is the Gospel of *Jesus* the Messiah.

John did far more than merely call people to repent of their sin. His *primary* purpose was to prepare the way for God's coming in the Person of Jesus. His primary message is, "He is coming! So get ready!" John pointed to Jesus and said, "Look to him!" We see that most clearly in John 1:29, where John the Baptist says of Jesus, "Look! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." Look! Look to him!

But Mark also records plenty that John the Baptist had to say about Jesus in preparation for his ministry, beginning with an astounding statement of his *prestige* or worth. John's focus was to give Jesus the glory he is due. "After me comes the one more powerful than I, the thongs of whose sandals I am *not worthy* to stoop down and untie." Here was a servant of God, a great prophet, of whom Jesus himself said "among those born of women there is no

one greater than John” (Luke 7:28). Yet John considered himself not even worthy to untie Jesus’ sandals! A Jewish Rabbinical teaching declared, “All manner of service that a slave must render to his master a student must render to his teacher, *except that of loosening his shoe.*” Indeed, there were periods of time when loosening a master’s shoe was considered too demeaning even for a Hebrew *slave* to perform. Only foreign slaves could do that!

Yet John says, I’m even less important compared to Jesus, the one coming, than the lowest of foreign slaves are to their masters. If John was a great prophet, how great does that make Jesus? Do you grasp the glory of his person, the prestige of this man? As you gaze into his glory, does it make you want to bow down and worship him? Because it should do. I confess that too often that is not the case for me! Too often, I am overfamiliar with Jesus, so I become blasé about him, instead of stopping to take in the enormity of his glory! “After me comes the one more powerful than I, the thongs of whose sandals I am *not worthy* to stoop down and untie.”

3) The promise of the One coming

And yet, despite all his glory and prestige, Jesus comes to us, not all high and mighty, but humbly as a human being. And with an incredible *promise*. John baptised in water. That baptism symbolised the believer’s repentance. But that was *all* it did. Baptism in the name of *Jesus* does far more. For with such baptism, every believer in Jesus is baptised in the Holy Spirit. It is not an additional blessing for the ultra-keen. Everyone who is baptised in Jesus’ name is baptised in the Holy Spirit, filled with the Holy Spirit of God. And we are called from that moment on to go on being filled with the Holy Spirit (Eph 5:18).

This, too, is a sign of the New Covenant between God and humanity, as God had announced through the prophet Joel (2:28-29): “And afterwards, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams, your young men will see visions. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days.” Peter recognised the fulfilment of this promise among the New Covenant people, the Church, on the day of Pentecost. And he also recognised that the gift was for all believers at all times, concluding his sermon (Acts 2:38-39): “Repent and be baptised, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you *will* receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The promise is for you and your children and *for all who are far off* – for *all* whom the Lord our God will call.”

Who is this Holy Spirit? He is the Spirit of God himself, who comes to dwell within every believer in Jesus Christ. And there are many benefits of receiving this gift from God. The Holy Spirit gives gifts to God’s people to enable them to better share the Gospel of Jesus; he grows in us a Christlike character, and speaks to our consciences when we stray; he reminds us and assures us again and again that we are God’s children. But most importantly, he opens our eyes more and more to see Jesus for who he truly is: God in human flesh, the promised Messiah, the Judge and Comforter and Saviour of the World, the One who is so glorious that we are not worthy to be called his lowest of slaves, and yet who is so humble that he is not ashamed to call us his brothers and sisters. This is our God. This is the One for whom John came to prepare the way, and to whom he pointed and said, “Look! Look to him!”

So, have you? And do you? Who do *you* say he is? And, if you believe he is the Son of God and the Messiah, have you publicly declared your faith in him by being baptised into his name? If you haven’t, I’d love to talk to you about that, even if Covid measure might mean we have to look at that in a very different way from normal.

[Pray]