

Trinity Baptist Church
Andy Banks, Sunday 11th October 2020
Mark 1:14-15; Jesus' Gospel Summarised

As ever, children, feel free to complete your activities, while I talk. And don't forget to share them on the Godzone Facebook page.

We're continuing our series in Mark's Gospel, asking ourselves the question that Jesus asked his disciples in Mark 8:29, "Who do *you* say I am?" And what difference does who he is make to your life today? Before I kick off, let me ask you another question: If you had to summarise the Christian gospel in 30 words or fewer, what would you say? Have a quick chat about that in your families, or if you're on your own, have a think and see if you can come up with something.

[Pause for discussion time]

Today's passage is just two verses, but they are really important, because this is Jesus' Gospel *in his own words* – no doubt summarised by Mark to draw out the core of his message, but Jesus' own words about his Gospel. And by the way this summary is only 17 words – 15 in Greek! So, let's read from Mark 1:14-15:

[Read Mark 1:14-15]

14After John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. 15'The time has come,' he said. 'The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!'

[Pray]

So how does your summary compare with Jesus' own message about his Gospel? I'd hazard a guess that for most of us it is quite different. In particular, I suspect that most of us will have focussed on what the Gospel does for us as individuals. And there's nothing wrong with that. The famous 25-word summary in John's Gospel does just that, "God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life." But Jesus himself started in a very different place: "The time has come!" Or more literally, "The time has been fulfilled."

1) The time has come

"The time," here, by no means merely locates the moment when something occurs. Rather, it marks something truly life-changing. To put it in terms we might understand, this is not, "the time has come for further restrictions to prevent this virus from spreading," but closer to, "the time has come: a viable vaccine is now available." Except, even that doesn't do full justice to what Jesus means here by, "The time has come." For this is *God-ordained* time, which God planned out in meticulous detail to be the right time for this world-changing event even before he created the world. For, what Jesus is announcing here is the arrival *the* time, when the whole history of the world and the whole destiny of humankind is transformed. It is at least as significant in history as the time when God created the world. And the only subsequent event that may come close to *this* time in significance is when Jesus comes back and re-creates the world. "The time has come ..."

2) The Kingdom of God has come near

And we only begin to understand why this is so significant, if we look at the next statement: "The kingdom of God has come near." We don't tend to talk much about the kingdom of God (or "the kingdom of heaven," as Matthew calls it), in our presentations of the Gospel. But Jesus talked about it all the time. Many of his parables begin, "The kingdom of God is like ..." This concept bookends what we call the Beatitudes: "Blessed

are the poor in Spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven ... Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (Matt 5:3,10). And Jesus taught his disciples to pray, "Your Kingdom come..." (Matt 6:10). So perhaps we should talk about the kingdom of God more than we do.

But what is the Kingdom of God? At its very basic level it is God's rule on earth – "on earth as it is in heaven." Jesus' *Jewish* hearers would have immediately related this statement to the Old Testament teachings about the coming of the Messiah King – the descendant of King David. So, the announcement, "The time has come; the kingdom of God has come near," would have been incredibly exciting to hear. Because of how those prophecies had been interpreted down the centuries, they would have expected the Messiah to rise up and overthrow the Romans and usher in a new era of national supremacy for Israel and glory for Israel's God. And it is true that, throughout history, when people collectively have turned to Jesus Christ, it has also created far more just and godly rules for society at large. But, though Jesus sometimes challenged ungodly use of political power, he was no political revolutionary, and his kingdom is not a geographical one.

Nevertheless, neither was he *only* concerned with transforming the inner being. He certainly does that, and it is central to the coming of the kingdom of God. But to reduce the kingdom of God to *only* transformation of the inner being is to completely ignore the issues of justice and mercy that were also so central to Jesus' teaching.

So, both these ideas add something to our understanding of the kingdom of God, but they do not give us anything like the full picture. Rather, we must start with a look, not at the kingdom, but at the *King*. The kingdom of God has come near, first and foremost because the King of God's kingdom came near – Jesus Christ. But isn't *God* the King of God's kingdom? Yes! That's the point! Jesus Christ is God in human flesh. God himself had entered his world. And with his coming came a brand-new relationship between God and his world. This was truly a new age, a new era.

For, with the coming of Jesus, the forces of darkness begin to be pushed back, as he heals and forgives and restores and frees people from demonic strongholds. It's like in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* when Aslan first turns up, and the Winter thaws and turns to Spring. But more than that, Jesus was soon to win the decisive victory over all the forces of evil that had kept the world imprisoned for centuries, through his death and resurrection. That would in turn clear the way for the Holy Spirit to come into believer's hearts and begin to transform them into the likeness of Jesus. And, as that happened, they would start to make positive changes to the societies in which they lived, and so the rule of God would increase. And it will continue to increase until the day when Jesus returns as King of kings and Lord of lords, when the fullness of God's kingdom on earth will finally be realised.

For there remains a sense in which this kingdom of God is still not yet – not yet *fully* realised. And we only need to turn on the news on any given day to see that. But – and it is a big but – nevertheless, the kingdom of God began to come near in a radically new and powerful way, when God himself came near in the person of Jesus Christ. With his coming has begun the inevitable transformation of the whole world back into the world that God created it to be in the first place. The time came. The King Jesus came. The kingdom of God began to come, and invade the Earth. Is this not good news?

3) Repent ...

Yet, this good news is also challenging news. For it demands of humanity a response. And the first response it demands is the same one John the Baptist called for: "Repent." Repent. This word has sadly gone out of fashion in much of the Western Church today. We have so many sophisticated ways of excusing or justifying our sin – most of which, of course, carry a *degree* of plausibility to make them appear credible. So, we

reinterpret biblical commands or dismiss them as culturally-shaped, not universal. We lay all the blame for our actions on our upbringing, or our genetic makeup, or our ill-health, rather than recognise that sometimes in the mix of those things can also be wilful disobedience. Or we re-frame our understanding of God under a simple catch-all banner of “God is love” and we interpret that statement through the Western framework that equates love with total acceptance of everything that someone does.

Brothers and sisters, this is not the Gospel of Jesus Christ. It is a construct of our own making. For the first response that Jesus Christ commands to the Gospel is, “Repent.” Literally, change your mind. William Barclay, in commenting on this command, perceptively writes: “We are very apt to confuse two things – sorrow for the consequences of sin and sorrow for sin ... Real repentance means that a man has come, not only to be sorry for the consequences of his sin, but to hate sin itself.”

And this repentance is no one-off event at conversion. Repentance – re-framing our mind – is the ongoing, life-long responsibility of the Christian, as God reveals our sins to us. For instance, I can have a short temper – as my children know too well. Now I could make all sorts of excuses for that, like “I’m just under a lot of stress at the moment.” There’s also a complication in that one of the things that makes me most cross is injustice, which I do believe we are meant to get angry about – as Jesus did. But, if I’m honest with myself, by no means all my anger is righteous anger. Jas 1:19 says, “everyone should be quick to *listen*, *slow* to speak and *slow* to become angry.” But, too often, I can get angry before I have properly taken the time to *listen*.

So what does it mean for me to repent? It means, alongside saying “sorry,” I must actively work on two fronts simultaneously: I must find legitimate ways to reduce my stress, and I must work on consciously choosing to *listen* well before I speak. But I won’t do either of those things unless I hate my anger itself, not just the consequences of it. If I only hate the consequences, I will always excuse my anger by pointing to mitigating circumstances. So, what do *you* need to repent of? Sexual immorality? Greed? Judgementalism? Unforgiveness? Gossip? Divisiveness? Pride? The effective worship of other things alongside God? Jesus’ call is clear, and if we want to follow him we must heed it: repent. Repent.

4) ... and believe the good news

But that is only half of the command. “Repent and *believe* the good news!” To believe in the New Testament is far more than a mental agreement that it is true. To believe is to entrust your life to this truth. And what is that truth? The Kingdom of God has come near, for God has chosen to come near. It is inconceivable, therefore, that God wants you to keep yourself far from him because you feel unworthy to approach him. He came near, not when we had made ourselves perfect, but precisely because we *couldn’t* make ourselves perfect. He came near to forgive sin once we have repented, and to remove it as far from us as the East is from the West. He achieved that through the cross, and it is a finished work.

He came near to restore us to himself, to ourselves, to one another, and to the world. This is the good news we are to actively choose to believe. But, some of us are so crippled by feelings of guilt for our sin that we prevent ourselves from receiving the benefits of God’s forgiveness – his peace and well-being, even his words that we may not believe he would say to us, yet he still does, “You are my child, whom I love, with whom, despite your sin, I am well pleased, simply because you have put your trust in my Son and so become my child, too.” “The time has come ... The kingdom of God *has* come near. Repent and believe the *good* news!” Will you?

[Pray]