

“JOHN THE BAPTISER (Mark - 2)”
Mark 1:1-8

A couple of weeks ago we started looking at this short book by Mark which narrates the life and mission of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. Mark refers to it as “*the beginning of the gospel about Jesus Christ*” and we saw that he considered the narration of the story of Jesus to be about the inauguration of the Kingdom of God referred to by the Hebrew prophets as the “*good tidings*” which were for all people. Jesus had burst into our world, fully human, anointed and chosen by God as the promised Messiah, and fully divine. All of that was bound up in the words chosen by Mark for his opening sentence. Something special was happening and at the heart of it was Jesus.

Now Mark moves into his prologue. He’s given us the title of his work, and in the next few verses we have a kind of introduction, a bit of scene-setting, if you like. It’s something like the beginning of the film of *The Lord of the Rings*, where there’s a bit of voice-over with some nice bits of scenery and a few battle scenes telling us something of the background, so that we can make sense of what follows (although, even with that, not everyone manages to make sense of it). There seem to be two main reasons for this introduction. Firstly, Mark is telling us a little bit more about the “*good tidings*” which he is about to narrate. Secondly, he seems keen to establish the link between the Old Testament – the spiritual heritage of his first, mainly Jewish, readers – and the new era which heralds the establishment of the Kingdom of God. “This is all part of God’s plan,” he is saying. “Look how it is all working out. There are threads here which we can follow, which show how God’s purposes are developing.”

He starts with the **Old Testament Prophets**. His first sentence is a quotation from *Isaiah* and *Malachi*, compressed together to demonstrate that something is going to happen. Isaiah, Malachi, Jeremiah, Hosea and all the others were the original harbingers of the good tidings. They are the ones who looked forward to the day when God would bring about his purposes in establishing his Kingdom. Mark is reminding us through this quotation that the coming of Jesus is to be seen as part of this long but seamless development of God’s plan. These people who proclaimed the coming of the Kingdom, even though they were unable to experience it for themselves, also called men and women to repentance. They invited people to return to God, to mend their ways and walk in the paths God had set out for them.

For those first Jewish readers, Mark was emphasising that Jesus was not the founder of some alien religion, but the fulfilment of their own religion. For those of us who do not have that Jewish heritage, Mark’s words are a reminder to us that any understanding of the life and ministry of Jesus must begin in the Old Testament. We cannot ignore the first part of our Bibles. Down through the centuries there have

been those who have tried to suggest that we do not need to bother with the Old Testament. All we need is the Gospel, and maybe a bit of Paul at a pinch. But if we take that view we lose out on so much of what God wants us to know, not least why it was that Jesus came in the first place. Reading the letters of St Paul is very difficult without at least a basic awareness of what happened in the time of the Old Testament. And what we read in those books also describes the progression of God's amazing plan down through the centuries, the plan that was necessary because of the sinfulness of human beings almost from the beginning of created time.

Having begun with that quotation, Mark moves on to describe the ministry of **John the Baptist**. Towards the end of the Old Testament period, some people began to introduce a rite of baptism for those who were wanting to convert to the Jewish faith. And there were some sects within that faith that insisted on baptism as a means of entry into their sect – the Essenes who formed a community at Qumran were among those. So the idea of someone like John baptising people was not, in itself, particularly novel. What was significant, though, was what John was doing with his baptism. John represented the next step in the development of this plan. He moved beyond what was in the Old Testament, and brought people a step closer to the new kingdom that was the subject of the good news.

John the Baptist was, if you like, a prophet plus. He stood firmly in the tradition of the Old Testament prophets. He wore the unofficial uniform of the prophets. He wandered about in the desert preaching a message of uncompromising clarity. And he drew large crowds (perhaps Mark's account in *1:5* has a little Jewish exaggeration in it!). But this prophet was actually someone who had been foretold by other prophets – that's clear from the quotation from *Isaiah*. Here is a man who has himself been the subject of the prophets' preaching, a messenger out in the desert, trying to prepare the way for God's chosen one and trying to prepare the hearts and minds of the people to accept him.

And John stood out from the other prophets in his favour with God. Jesus himself says of John, in *Matthew 11:11*, that there has never been anyone greater than him. That's partly because John was close enough in space and time to physically point to the coming Messiah, but it's also because of his message and methods. John wasn't simply calling people to join the Jewish faith. He wasn't out there trying to convert Gentiles to Judaism. His baptism was not a rite of initiation. He was calling for repentance, offering men and women the opportunity to know forgiveness of sins after repentance and a very visible act of commitment.

The message of God was becoming even clearer. John was calling people to repent of their sins, to put behind them their old way of life. The word translated here as "*repentance*" in most English versions of

the Bible is actually the Greek word μετανοια, which is often translated “conversion”. This is not some brief prayer of confession, some half-hearted acknowledgment that things haven’t gone quite right, a formal apology to God for messing things up. This is the decision to draw a line under the past life and start afresh on a completely new path. John was not messing about. To respond to his words you needed to be deadly serious. But if you were, then you could know forgiveness. God would honour the commitment and give you the opportunity for a new start, a clean slate. And to demonstrate the seriousness of that commitment, you could be baptised by John. The word for that in Greek is not βαπτω, which means sprinkle or splash, but βαπτιζω, which means plunge. That’s why John did it in the river and not just by a little pond. The dramatic action of being plunged under the waters was in itself an act of commitment. The baptism of John was not a ritual of initiation, some kind of entry requirement for a new sect: it was a ritual of repentance, the demonstration of a desire to break with the old way of doing things and set out on the path of God’s will.

John’s message, as we have said, was uncompromising. It was a message that pulled no punches and spared no-one’s blushes, least of all the pious but hypocritical religious establishment. It was a message of judgement, a reminder that time was running short and people needed to act, and act decisively. But it was also a message of hope. John had moved on beyond the message of the Old Testament prophets, but was still not the culmination of God’s plan. He was a kind of stop-gap, pointing forward to someone who was even more powerful than he was, to a man who was to represent the next and final stage in God’s plan, in this development from Old to New. John was calling people to “*prepare the way*” for this figure. And it wouldn’t be long before his figure would be seen striding across the very same landscape that John now seemed to dominate.

The “*one more powerful than [John]*” was, of course, Jesus Christ, the Son of God. Mark forces the reader now to move the focus of his gaze from John to **Jesus**. It’s a further development, as we have said, and John points to that in his proclamation of Jesus. John has baptised with water – itself a move beyond what people were used to – but someone is coming who will baptise with the Holy Spirit. In a sense, after all that has been said about John, repentance and forgiveness are taken for granted. Commitment is assumed – and as we said last time, Mark will make much of the subject of discipleship in this gospel – but there is another step, and that is what Jesus’ coming is all about. It’s an idea that also has its roots in the preaching of the Old Testament prophets, and most specifically in the words of Ezekiel, in *Ezekiel 36:25-27*. There the prophet is talking not only of cleansing with water and renewed attitudes, but also of a new heart – a complete transformation.

And that is what Jesus came to bring. The old rituals and regulations, symbolised by the baptism of initiation and embodied in the outwardly religious but inwardly self-seeking Pharisees, were to be swept away – or, at least, totally re-interpreted – by the anointed and appointed son of the Nazareth carpenter and Son of God. The prophets brought a message. John the baptiser brought a fuller message of judgement and hope. And Jesus Christ brought the possibility of total renewal through the power of the Holy Spirit.

You see, as we began to think about last week, this story of Mark's can be read simply as a rather unusual biography. Unusual, maybe, but still a source of information. We can learn about Jesus in Mark's words just as we can learn about Julius Caesar or Johann Sebastian Bach or Admiral Nelson or Ian Botham. There are facts here. There's some comment. There are glimpses of Jesus' character and capabilities. And as long as we read it on that level, that's what we'll get – facts and maybe a bit of inspiration from a great figure of world history.

But Mark didn't write this just to be a book of facts, an interesting story. This is a book that can change your life. This is a book about a man who can change your life. Through the pages of Mark's gospel we can see the unfolding of God's plan for the inauguration of his Kingdom. We can see in the life and death of Jesus Christ the culmination of God's plan for salvation. If you take this book seriously, you will never be the same again after reading it. The prophets may call people to return to God's ways. John the Baptist may have given people the opportunity to show that they were serious about wanting to follow God's ways. But only Jesus can actually make it possible for you to live God's way. You may have been reading the Bible for years. You may have been coming to church for years. You may have been through all the rites and rituals of the church. But unless you have allowed yourself to be filled with, baptised in, transformed by the Holy Spirit, you're not really making the most of it. Right at the beginning of Mark's gospel, part of his introductory remarks, is the promise of something very special that Jesus is bringing to the world. And he's offering it to you again this morning.