

St. Bride's Church of Scotland, Newtonmore

The Beginning

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Sunday 8th January 2012

Psalm 2:1-12

Mark 1:1-15

Throughout this year we are going to work our way through Mark's gospel, with breaks for other things too. And today we begin with the part of Mark that is most unlike the rest: we start with the beginning.

If you were to sit down and write an account of the good news of Jesus Christ, I wonder where you would start? Would you start with the Christmas story? Would you feel you had to start way back at the beginning of Genesis with the creation, to show where Jesus fitted into God's eternal plan? Would you start with the resurrection, as the most amazing thing of all about Jesus, and work backwards? Most likely, where you would start would depend on your audience. If you are writing for yourself alone you can start at the part of Jesus' person, life, ministry, achievement which means most to you. If you are telling the good news to children, or those with limited understanding of abstract concepts, then you will probably try a narrative approach, beginning at the beginning and going on to the end. If you are writing for people with some understanding of what has come before Jesus, you don't need to go into that in detail, but if not, then there is a lot of explaining of the human condition to be done before the wonder of the good news of Jesus Christ can be understood.

Mark is not a great explainer. John seems to feel the need to tell his readers why as well as what. Matthew and Luke give lots of detail and some explanation, but Mark wants the bones of Jesus' story which he is going to give, to speak for themselves, even when they can be taken in different ways. So Mark, as well as being the shortest Gospel, often can seem the simplest. But appearances can be deceptive. Mark is writing for grown ups. He is writing for people whom he expects to think, to ponder to draw their own conclusions. He expects us to take his words at their face value, but also to look behind what he says, and note what is not said as well. In some ways Mark is a theologian's theologian. When I was learning Hebrew, which is a difficult language, because letters keep disappearing or changing in the roots of words as they take different positions in a sentence, my tutor would say to us: "But you are all theologians: you can see what isn't there!" Mark expects his readers to know some of the story, if not all of it, already, and to see what is not there as well as what is. Rarely will Mark give a steer to what our conclusions should be. He won't need to, because he will have set out the basic and best premise at the very beginning.

The beginning of Mark's good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is recounted from a heavenly viewpoint. Oh yes, the action takes place on earth, but we are given, as it were, an angel's eye view of it. Mark does this on purpose. In much of what he is going to recount there will be ambiguity, confusion of understanding, and simple unbelief. But we, his readers are not to be in the position of those we are to meet in the pages of the gospel. We are to have firmly in our minds the truth about Jesus from the start. We are to know that what is being written is the good news about Jesus Christ the Son of God. That is who Jesus is: he is the Christ, or Messiah, the one promised as God's agent of salvation, the revealer of a new age. And he is Son of God. God on earth. In all he says and does - and in Mark we see him say and do without much comment from the author, he is revealing the new kingdom, and the will and ways of God. We are to remember that when the tale becomes entangled with human forces and personalities and preconceptions.

In some ways the beginning of Mark's Gospel is like the beginning of John's. Neither go into details about Jesus' birth, but both view him from the eternal perspective: both making clear that Jesus was already God's Son, before his ministry started, and letting us into the eternal perspective.

So with the viewpoint of the angels we look down at the earth to witness the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ the Son of God. We are on high, and below us are small figures moving about, but remote and almost unreal. But we focus, perhaps we train our angelic telescopes, more and more precisely, and there, what do we see? Again, just as in John's Gospel, we see John the Baptist. He is the very beginning of it all.

John would have no place in history were he not part of the Jesus story. He would be as forgotten as other would-be reformers of his nation and generation. But he is the herald of Jesus, and so he is important. He is baptising, doing something which no one else did for the Jews. His baptism is the way into a new age, a new kingdom. The prophetic quotations - from Exodus 23:20 and Malachi 3:1 as well as from Isaiah 40 - show that John is seen as the herald, the precursor of the new age, of God's coming among his people in a new way. He is the herald of Jesus, God's Son, and this gives him his only importance in history. It is not the good news about John that we are to read, but the good news about Jesus.

And at once, Jesus comes on the scene. Immediately our attention is taken from John, as it should be, to watch him and see what he does.

First of all, he is baptised. He isn't the only one, of course. This baptism, which was a new thing, was a step which some people were taking to show that their wish, their prayer for God's new age to dawn was more than just a dream or a hope. They were prepared to be identified with a movement, to undergo its initiation. No wonder that Herod later was to be worried by John's power and influence.

When Jesus is baptised he identifies with those who have shown by baptism their wish to be associated with a new age, with God's new age. He identifies with those who will work towards God's new age, who are prepared to do something. And in that act, God identifies him. We are not told if the voice which proclaimed him God's Son was heard by everyone (and if it was, I wonder why it was not more widely heeded) or just by Jesus himself. The point of Mark reporting it is so that we, the readers, may hear it now, at the beginning of the good news. Jesus is God's Son. Mark has stated it in the first sentence and now he backs up his assertion with God's own words. It is a point which will not be laboured after this and indeed will be much in dispute. Who Jesus is is a question often raised in the gospel. But we are to remember what we have been shown here, from our heavenly viewpoint.

We need to take note, because Mark has both told us and shown us that Jesus is the Son of God. Our Psalm tells us, reminds us just what that means. It reminds us just who God is, how much greater his power than any earthly authority. It reminds us that as God's Son, Jesus is given that authority, so that the nations and the ends of the earth are all his. It reminds us that reverence should be our response and that when it is, he becomes our security. Jesus is the Son of God: that is a truth that demands action.

From Baptism, into the wilderness. You know the story of the wilderness, don't you? You know that Jesus was there, fasting for forty days and nights, and that the devil brought him specific temptations, which he defeated by means of quoting Scripture. You know that. But that is not the story that Mark tells.

For Mark the wilderness is important. But he doesn't mention fasting. And temptation is important, but not the specifics of it. It is important that Jesus, God's Son still knows hardship and difficulty

and temptation, just as we all do. But it is also important that he knows God's provision and protection. He was with the wild beasts, which are thought of as evil, aligned with the powers of the tempter, and angels waited on him. They waited on him. Just as in the wilderness the ravens waited on Elijah, so God's angels waited on Jesus. That implies that they brought him what he needed to sustain him: body and mind and soul.

In the tussle of good and evil, in the battle between God and evil, there is no doubt as to whose side Jesus is on. And there is no doubt as to who is giving him his sustenance and power. Angels are mentioned. More significantly we should notice that the Holy Spirit has already had three appearances on the stage we are observing. The Holy Spirit is the one with whom Jesus is going to baptise. The Holy Spirit is the one who came on him, baptised him, if you like, when he came up out of the water. And the Holy Spirit drove him into the wilderness, which shows that the difficult things are important and not just something to get through in this man's, in this Son of God's life. And we can draw our personal conclusions from that as well.

This angel's eye view that we have had shows us the three persons of God, Father, Son and Spirit involved in the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ. But now we are coming down to earth. With the last two verses that we read this morning our perspective changes. We float back down to earth and from now on we will be watching from our own human perspective. But we should not forget the heavenly viewing that we have had nor the truth that has been shown us.

We have seen Jesus identify with God's new age in baptism. We have seen him resist evil in the desert. Now we see him wait for the right time - after John has been arrested: when he can be himself and not just one of John's disciples: when John's followers may be wondering if it is all over so soon - and he announces that in fact far from being over it has begun. "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent and believe in the good news."

What that kingdom is will be shown through the rest of the gospel in Jesus' words and works. We should take note, not just out of academic interest, but because if we too have been baptised into God's new age, into the kingdom of God, then we need to know what it is and how it acts. We need to know what the good news is that we say we believe.

Amen