

**Advent 2**  
**7/12/2008**

**Mark the Evangelist**

**Isaiah 40:1-11**  
**Psalm 85**  
**2 Peter 3:8-15a**  
**Mark 1:1-8**

**The beginning of the Gospel: childhood seldom interests me**

---

Author Ian Bennett said 'I read biographies backwards, beginning with the death. If that takes my fancy I go through the rest. Childhood seldom interests me at all' (*Writing Home' Diaries 1980-1990*). When it came to writing down his account of the Gospel, Mark dwelt on the death, but he was not interested in childhood stories. If we only had what he wrote there would be no basis for Christmas with its angels, shepherds and stable. But if we understand Mark's cryptic Gospel, it is not hard to see why Matthew and Luke gave us stories of the birth.

Mark wrote: *The beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, Son of God...* Every word is significant. The word for "beginning" is symbolically and literally associated with the creation of the world in Genesis. What a boring thought, you may be thinking! But this identifies this text as being about God, and the beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ is the story of a person whose life and death is a watershed in history. It is nothing less than a fundamental act of new creation within human life. And this action of God offers us a breathtaking opportunity, the chance to engage in an adventure of discipleship with the holy one of God: Jesus the Messiah: God with us.

And this is *Gospel*: good news, glad tidings as in news of the birth of the king or of a victory that has been won. The propaganda of the Roman world focussed on eulogizing the Emperor as the "divine man" at whose birth messages of good news were sent throughout the world. Mark uses the language and apparatus of the state to announce the coming of one who will challenge every aspect of the status quo. His dramatic prologue heralds the emergence of a leader, who at his Baptism at the hands of John is identified and anointed by God to proclaim a Kingdom that is not of this world. And yet this Kingdom affects everything the world says or does or thinks.

*As is written in the prophet Isaiah: see, I am sending my messenger ahead of you to prepare your way...* Before we get too far into the story Mark introduces a prophetic voice, as if from offstage, that introduces John and clears the way for the coming one. From about the first century the rabbis held that true prophecy had ended four or five centuries before Christ with Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi. They were in despair that the voice of prophecy had fallen silent forever. Imagine the emptiness, the sense of "where has God gone?" But Mark does not hesitate: the breath of God is moving and the Word is being spoken again. Something of epoch making importance is on its way towards the people. Malachi had expected the Lord to come to the Temple, the centre of life, but Mark's prophet appears in the wilderness, the marginal place to which the prophets fled, where Israel was tested, and where Jesus sought solitude.

The wilderness was a fertile place. It spawned prophetic and revolutionary movements, it was a place where people became clear about God, and it was the place where Jesus fed the multitudes, as the Lord God had fed Israel, long ago.

*Now John was clothed in camel skin...* His garb evokes the prophet Elijah, who challenged the rulers of Israel to turn from their ways. John's appearance evokes the fear of God because it awakens the thought of the coming of the great and terrible day of judgement. This stark figure seems more like a sign of the end times than a new beginning, but when he comes on stage the Kingdom mission is being introduced. John preaches repentance: the great turning around that would lead to the restoration of the relationship with God. Forgiveness of sins, says one writer, exists in the relationship of faith: where faith is, there is the forgiveness of sins. What God gives is yours, if you allow God to be God, and do not choose to be god yourself. Baptism by John signalled just such a change of heart, the sifting of human intentions that preceded the coming of the greater one.

*All the people from the whole Judean countryside and Jerusalem went out to John...* Despite the long silence on the part of the Word of God, people found John engaging. They may not have remembered what the prophets said, but they recognised the urgency of his message: something significant was happening here, and the flocked to him.

*One who is more powerful than I is coming after me...* John pointed beyond himself to one who is greater, whose sandals John cannot even loosen. We naturally associate footwear with this scene. This familiar image is based on a semiotic phrase that suggests the one who undoes the thong at the end of the journey is obedient or subordinate to the other. It also has connotations of discipleship because later in Mark Jesus instructs the disciples to wear sandals as they go out on the Kingdom mission. Everything John says shows he is not out for himself. He acquiesces to the coming one's way of discipleship. And all who follow John's lead will need shoes for their feet. They are people of the way, people who travel with a message. If the story does not get out through them, it does not get out. This is something to think about as we ponder the context in which we live and our worry about such things as the lack of young people in our church.

Nelson Mandela spent 26 years in gaol but his release happened in stages. After a long period on the infamous Robben Island he was moved to another prison on the mainland. The circumstances were marginally better but he was separated from his long time friends and associates. One day he was moved again - to a cottage set in pleasant but well secured grounds. While still under arrest he had the freedom to move about, was given a warder who was also a good cook, and was allowed to receive visitors. Compared with more than two decades of serious incarceration, this was paradise - but he was still as prisoner. Nelson Mandela read a deep and encouraging message in this turn of events. A change of heart had come upon the white minority government. Freedom was coming. The black majority were to be given their democratic rights and the treatment being given to Nelson Mandela was a sign they saw him as a key leader in building a new South Africa.

Nelson Mandela was able to recognize the signs. His removal to detention with freedom was the first inkling that an old age was passing and a new era was dawning.

The days and months Mandela spent at the cottage were like the time in between the times. In those days he did not slacken in vigilance or commitment to the cause but concentrated even more fully on the task of smoothing the path for the day when a new way of life would arise for all South Africans.

John's appearance at the beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ is Mark's coded message to us. The heart of God has turned towards the world. God is at work amongst us as one of us. God has fully embraced the human condition. We can no longer deny God without in some way denying ourselves. (James Harvey *Tablet* 29 Nov 2008) John is the unmistakable herald of this Good News, and all that means for our life. What he heralded still stands, and there is no need to slacken our vigilance, or our hope that God is with us, and with us for our good.

\*\*\*