

Sermon for SJB Advent 2, Dec 7th 2020. Mk1v1-8 Good news/prepare

Good news this week! Great news! The news we've all been longing for! The wonderful news that there really is light at the end of our dark covid tunnel. YES! The UK has become the very first country in the world to approve the very first vaccine against covid! Furthermore, nobody can buy a ticket to jump the queue. It's a free gift for everyone and those most in need will get it first! Very good news indeed. Wouldn't everybody think so?

Er no, not everyone will agree. Not everyone will accept the crying need for it. Some truly believe stories circulating on social media that the government intends to inject micro chips into us to control us, or even poison to get rid of some us. Someone I was at school with even believes, with many others, that the whole story of the virus is a complete fabrication, designed to deprive us of our liberty.

We know there are many who think the good news of Jesus Christ is a complete fabrication too. Are even we, who believe in this good news, as excited about it as we are about the vaccination success? Have we got so used to it, so familiar, that we're in danger of taking it for granted?

Our gospel reading, the first eight verses of Mark's account of Jesus, starts like this: "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the son of God". The very word gospel itself means, good news. Stupendous news. Jesus, the human face of God himself, comes into the world to heal forever the fractured relationship between God and humanity. He comes to show us how to love and forgive, to give us a fresh start every time we fail, to assure us that each one is unique and precious and infinitely loved and finally to assure us that death is not the end. That must surely be the best news ever.

In two weeks time in spite of the pandemic we'll already have held our popular service of lessons and carols. People are applying for their free tickets for covid safe entrance right now. They will come to hear the beautiful story of the baby in the manger, the shepherds, the angels and the mysterious Eastern astrologers following a star. They will come to be moved by the candlelight and the lovely music. There's nothing wrong with all of that, it's a vital way into the heart, but today Mark challenges us to think further.

Mark gives us no stories of the birth or childhood of Jesus. He simply plunges straight in to introducing us to Jesus as the son of God,

the fulfilment of the old testament prophecies of long ago of God's promise to send a messiah, a saviour.

As Mark's gospel rushes along at breakneck speed with healings, teachings and happenings, often prefaced by the word. "Immediately," we see that Jesus is not at all how the longed for messiah is expected to be. Some reject him outright, especially the powerful religious authorities who finally have him brutally executed for blasphemy. But the ordinary folk, the poor, the outsiders, some of the thinkers, and even some of the gentiles begin to realise that he truly is from God. Amazingly it's the Roman centurion actually in charge of the crucifixion who confesses, as he sees the way Jesus dies, "Truly this was the son of God".

Before we actually meet Jesus, Mark brings John the Baptist onto the stage. Before important people arrived, the victorious general, the emperor or whatever big cheese was on his way, there would always be preparations to be made. There would also be a herald sent ahead, announcing the one who was coming. It's still the same today. The story goes that whenever the queen arrives anywhere she always gets a whiff of new paint! And of course much fanfare. This metaphorically is John the Baptist's role. Look back to our reading from Isaiah, written four hundred years previously: "every valley shall be lifted up and every mountain and hill made low, the uneven ground shall become level and the rough places a plain. Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken"—and further on: "he shall feed his flock like a shepherd". All that is fulfilled here in the ministry of John the Baptist in preparation for the arrival of the good shepherd himself.

Of course John is not smoothing out the lumps and filling in the potholes on a literal highway. His role is to prepare the highway into the hearts of the people. His is the voice crying in the wilderness, "Prepare the way of the Lord". And how are the people to make preparation? They are to repent and as a sign of repentance be baptised with water as a symbolic cleansing.

There's another OT prophecy that the great prophet Elijah will return when the messiah is on his way. John is a quintessential Elijah figure, dressed in the same way, eating the same weird food in the wilderness and crying out in the same way. All the people flock to hear his powerful preaching. Many respond to his call to receive baptism as a sign of their repentance.

You may well have heard preachers say in previous sermons that the real meaning of to repent is to turn and face in a new direction. I make no apology for saying it again. We all need to hear it frequently.

Many people want to follow John and be his disciples but he makes it crystal clear that he is only the herald. The one whose arrival he is announcing is someone much more important than him. It 's the job of the lowliest servant to unfasten his master's sandals prior to washing his feet. In saying he is unworthy to do even that task for Jesus, John is ranking himself as lower than the lowliest servant. Three years later at the last supper, Jesus will take that lowly role upon himself.

Everything is topsy turvy in the kingdom of God, most especially the human life on earth of the king himself:..

You may know the piece entitled One Solitary Life that sums it up so well:

: He was born in an obscure village

The child of a peasant woman.

He grew up in another obscure village

Where he worked in a carpenter's shop

Until he was thirty .

He never wrote a book.

He never held an office .

He never went to college .

He never visited a big city.

He never travelled more than two hundred miles From the place where he was born

He did none of the things

Usually associated with greatness.

He had no credentials but himself .

He was only thirty three .

His friends ran away. One of them denied him .
He was turned over to his enemies
And went through the mockery of a trial .
He was nailed to a cross between two thieves .
While dying, his executioners gambled for his clothing
The only property he had on earth.
When he was dead he was laid in a borrowed grave
Through the pity of a friend.
Twenty centuries have come and gone
And today Jesus is the central figure of the human race
And the leader of humankind's progress .
All the armies that have ever marched
All the navies that have ever sailed
All the parliaments that have ever sat
All the kings that ever reigned put together
Have not affected the life of humankind on earth
So much as that one solitary life.

2000 years later here we all are in a global pandemic getting ready once again to celebrate his birth . Two more weeks to prepare. Might we find some time, however brief, amidst our preparations, to turn and give God our full attention? To ask his help to prepare our hearts? His help to set aside our regrets that this Christmas can't be quite the way we should like it to be?

Because, yes, Christmas will inevitably be different this year, but we will still be celebrating news even better than the news of the vaccine. The very best news ever! Amen

Carole Lewis