

Good News of The King

Mark 1:1-13
BPC: 2/1/2022

I don't know if there is a more familiar and iconic beginning to a movie than the Star Wars... That familiar music with the scrolling text flying into the darkness... In fact when watching the release of a new Star Wars movie a few years ago the guy next to me just burst into tears with joy as he heard it.

Iconic beginnings have a way of impacting our emotions and filling us with excitement or anticipation. Whether it's simple like the dimming of the lights in the cinema as the movie begins, or the roar of the crowd after the national anthem in the AFL grand final as the players take their position.

It's the first ball of an anticipated Ashes series against England that barely hits the pitch or bowls the opener around his legs... Iconic beginnings capture and engage us.

But I wonder if that happened for you as we read Mark 1:1. I didn't hear any gasps or cheering, no one fainted or even seemed to be on the edge of their seat. *The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God*

These words might be familiar to some of us or even underwhelming to others, yet to Mark's first readers they were hope-filled and wonderful while also controversial and confronting.

And as we look at these opening verses of Mark it's helpful for us to get familiar with the book. Mark it's understood, is the first and earliest Gospel written down and was probably used and added to by Matthew and Luke.

Mark, or John Mark as he's often called, was a companion of Barnabas and Paul on missionary trips in the book of Acts. And tradition tells us, from the church Father Papias writing in the early second century, Mark worked closely with Peter as his interpreter or secretary.

So his Gospel is based on the eye-witness testimony of Peter – written for those in Rome, perhaps where he was when he wrote, where persecution of Christians was growing.

It is the shortest of the four Gospels, fast paced moving quickly from scene to scene to give us a big and clear picture of the greatness of Jesus. And what could be better for us as we begin a new year than to spend time being refreshed and again reminded with the greatness of Jesus.

And verse 1 which really is the banner and title of the whole book, tells us Jesus really is the focus because the identity and mission of Jesus really is good news. *The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.*

First, Mark tells us what he is writing is Gospel, or good news. The Greek word is *euangalion* from which we get our word evangelism, it means to herald or proclaim good news. It was a word familiar to Mark's first readers, used to describe an official proclamation of victory or triumph.

It was used for announcing the winning of a war or even the birth of a monarch. In fact, when the Emperor Augustus was born in 29BC, it was written "The birthday of the god marked for the world the beginning of the gospel through his coming." And so Mark uses this word intentionally.

He is writing and announcing, *THE* Gospel. Real, true, world-changing good news that needs to be heralded and heard in every place. Good news not of self-inflated and deluded political leaders or rulers who deified themselves, but good news of Jesus.

Verse 1 is highly provocative, even treason when he wrote it. But all that Mark writes will be to show us why this is the case – real good news, THE GOSPEL, of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

Having just come from Christmas hopefully you'll remember that the name Jesus, the Greek of the Hebrew name Joshua, means 'the Lord saves'. And Christ is not his surname but a title, or a role.

The Christ, or Messiah, means anointed one. A royal figure from the OT full of expectation and promise. The Christ would come and rule on God's behalf, bringing rescue for God's people and justice to God's enemies. The Christ is not just a King, but THE King, who would sit on David's throne forever as God's Son and bring final peace.

And Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God. And while others like Adam or David or Israel itself is called God's son in the OT, Jesus is the Son. It speaks of his unique relationship to God, his unique status. For Jesus to be the Son of God is an outright claim to divinity! That God is here, that's the good news, revealing himself, showing us what he's like, and especially calling us to himself.

And these two titles of Jesus as both Christ and Son of God really setup the entire structure of Mark which breaks neatly into two halves. The first in chapters 1-8 ask the question, who is Jesus which climaxes with Peter's own confession that Jesus is Christ.

And the second in chapters 9-16 ask why Jesus came, climaxing with none other than a Roman guard confessing Jesus to be the Son of God as Jesus hangs on the cross.

So this opening verse hangs as a banner over the whole book – as Mark gives us the conclusion he wants us to draw straight up, what he will show and seek to persuade us of through his Gospel.

Because who Jesus is and why he's come is the good news we need to hear – and keep hearing. So while Mark might seem basic and straightforward, it's what we need to keep seeing Jesus' clearly.

The 1997 Mr Bean movie was a bit of a favourite of mine growing up. In it, Mr Bean travels to America and ends up responsible for a highly valued painting called Whistler's Mother. And while closely examining the picture, he sneezes on it! Right on the face! And of course, he goes to wipe it off only to smudge the paint and ultimately destroy it.

And in classic Mr Bean awkwardness, he panics and seeks to fix the painting by quickly redrawing it over the smudge – the whole thing is hilarious, especially because his recreation is so terrible and out of touch with everything about the original!

But what you'll find is that we actually do exactly the same with our understanding of Jesus. God's Word gives us the clear and glorious picture of the Son of God who came into the world. But over time that picture is distorted, tainted, or just replaced by our own thinking or imagination.

We repaint Jesus as one who is preoccupied with our comfort and pleasure. One who can be manipulated or easily forgotten, one who never offends or challenges us or a Jesus who can be reduced to only involved in certain aspects of our lives.

Sadly we have the natural ability to repaint Jesus as one who isn't worthy of more time or loyalty, one who is disappointing or even cruel or distant. So coming back to Mark is so good for us.

It's why God in his kindness has these Gospels written down and preserved for our benefit, to see and savour Christ as he actually he is. To keep the Gospel on repeat and have Mark refresh our minds and hearts with the greatness of Jesus who is as both Messiah and Son of God.

And in this opening section, vv.1-13 which really is the prologue to the Gospel, Mark gives us three scenes to help us grasp the greatness of King Jesus before he begins his ministry in v.14. Three lenses that we are to remember or keep in mind as we look at his life and ministry in the events that follow.

And as Mark announces the beginning of the good news of Jesus the Messiah the Son of God, in vv.2-8 he says we need to know that the coming of Jesus the King isn't random but what God planned promised all along. It might surprise us that after v.1 the focus turns to John the Baptist.

In v.2, Mark quotes two OT passages. The first from Malachi 3 and the second from Isaiah 40 – both which promise that there would be a forerunner, a messenger, a voice crying out in the wilderness, one that prepares the way, prepares people for God himself to come to them.

And Mark quotes them because they point to and are fulfilled in John the Baptist, who in v.4, *appears in the wilderness preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.*

Even John's clothes, random they may appear, further this fulfilment picture. V.6 *he wore clothing of camel's hair with a leather belt around his waist* – which should make us think of Elijah, the hairy prophet of Israel that was promised in Malachi 4:5 would come before the LORD himself appears.

In Matthew 11, Jesus tells us that John the Baptist fulfils this Elijah promise. And so Jesus is not just some first century revolutionary that captured the imagination of many. His coming, his work of salvation, is the goal and focus of all human history just as God had said.

When Paul reminds the Corinthians of the Gospel in 1Corinthians 15, he says Christ death, burial, and resurrection are *according to the Scriptures*. In 2Corinthians 1:20, that *all the promises of God find their Yes in him.*

In 2013, Cambridge University published a book called "Who's Bigger?" – it asked the question of who is most influential figure in world history. And having looked at Plato, Aristotle, Mohammad, and even Elvis, their conclusion was that it was Jesus of Nazareth, the carpenter from Galilee.

And why is the case? How did this happen? Right place right time? Just coincidence? Well 700 years before Jesus came, God promised in Isaiah 9 that a man from Galilee would come and reign on David's throne forever, and he would be called Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Prince of Peace.

Reflecting on this, historian John Dickson says, "How could this utterly implausible script ever be imagined? How could it ever be stage managed to be true? Only by God!"

Do you have that sort of confidence in the Gospel? Good news that is not just historically credible but openly promised beforehand. Yet to Mark's first readers this would seem almost unimaginable as Christianity was small, without any power or influence, and facing persecution. But we know more.

And so while John is centre stage in these verses, the focus is still on Jesus. Jesus' coming, prepared by John, is exactly what God promised.

John makes this clear by what he proclaims in v.7: *“One who is more powerful than I am is coming after me. I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the strap of his sandals.*

It was a slaves job to remove sandals and wash feet, a dirty and unthinkable job for a Jew. Yet John says he isn't even worthy to untie Jesus' sandals. The comparative greatness cannot be stressed enough. But none of this should surprise us since the OT promises that John fulfils in vv.2-3 say that he is preparing the way for none other than God himself – who has taken on flesh in Jesus.

For God alone can baptise with the Holy Spirit. In v.8 John says he can baptise with water, he can give people a symbol and splash them with water, but Jesus will bring inward change by the Spirit.

So John prepares the way by pointing to the greatness of Jesus and by baptising. In essence John is saying, God himself is coming after me, and in order to be ready, you need a bath – you need to be washed. In v.4 he preaches a *baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.*

They say that everywhere the Queen goes she smells fresh paint as they scramble to impress her. Yet as God himself comes to his own world, he finds people who reject, ignore, and replace him.

He's saying the way you get ready to meet God himself, is by acknowledging that you aren't good, that you don't give him the love, loyalty, and obedience he deserves. And notice the response in v.5 – they flood to him, all Judea and Jerusalem come and are baptised.

The 1st century Jewish historian Josephus speaks of how great John's influence was on the Jews. Although John's message is confronting it is actually good news. Because as they confess their sins they are baptised, a symbol of the promise that they will be washed and cleansed by God.

Which is exactly what we see in the next two scenes Mark gives us as Jesus is now on the scene and is baptised then goes into the wildness. And what happens in these scenes might seem strange, as if we have moved from history into fantasy (and if we are familiar with them we may not realise how strange they are: heaven splits open, a voice from heaven, the Spirit descends and Satan shows up!)

But we should ask: do these verses match the significance of the greatness John says is coming? Do they live up the expectation that after the messenger prepares the way, God himself is going to show up? And I think we have to say yes!

As the promised King arrives just as John said he would, these two scenes work together to show us both Jesus' identity and mission, that he really is the King we need.

Jesus comes in v.9, from Nazareth and is baptised by John. And as Jesus comes out of the water in v.10, we are told that heaven itself is torn or split open. And given that the same word is used of the temple curtain being torn in Mark 15, it shows that in the coming of Jesus heaven and earth, God and humanity being reunited and the barrier between God and us is being bridged.

And the Spirit descends on Jesus as a dove, anointing and empowering him as King. In the OT, Kings were anointed as they took the throne and would receive the Spirit, like Saul or David.

The Spirit's presence makes the whole event very Trinitarian. The One God who is Three: The Father speaks, the Son is baptised, and Spirit descends. God is making sure we know the identity of the Son.

And the sentence God speaks in v.11 is a loaded one as it combines three OT quotes. Firstly, *you are my Son* is from Psalm 2. It's a famous and important Psalm for God's people. It speaks of the nations raging against God, united in resisting and rejecting his rule.

And in response, God enthrones a King. ⁶ *"I have installed my king on Zion, my holy mountain."*
⁷ *I will declare the LORD's decree. He said to me, "You are my Son; today I have become your Father."*

God enthrones a King, his own Son, who will rule the nations, break and crush all opposition to God, a King who will in v.12, be angry and crush the rebellious, yet is a refuge for those who accept him.

But God declares Jesus as his *beloved Son* – a reference to Genesis 22 where God tells Abraham to take his only son Isaac up as a sacrifice. But the Greek translation of the OT which was widely used at this time, translated the word only as beloved, the same word used here by God the Father of Jesus.

It shows the intimacy, the closeness between God the Father and Jesus. But also the unthinkable cost for God to send his beloved Son, who unlike Isaac, won't be spared. God's Son Jesus, though he is the conquering King of Psalm 2, is the beloved Son who will be a sacrifice.

Which is what we see in the last quote from God's statement of Jesus' identity: *with you I am well pleased*. That's taken from Isaiah 42:1, one of the 4 'servant songs' in Isaiah, and this servant is a bit of an enigma.

In Isaiah 42:1, the servant is empowered by the Spirit and will bring justice to the nations, like the King of Psalm 2. But this servant is humble and lowly. ² *He will not cry out or shout or make his voice heard in the streets.* ³ *He will not break a bruised reed, and he will not put out a smoldering wick.*

And more than that, as we move forward to Isaiah 52-53, this servant of God is one who will be rejected and die for others. A servant in 53:4 who bears the burdens of God's people, who will be crushed by God on their behalf, who is pierced for our rebellion and to bring us peace.

And while God's OT people knew this promise and were waiting for this servant, they never thought that the Suffering servant was the same as the King of Psalm 2. Now we get this because of the cross but for God's people this was unimaginable.

Yet the King of Psalm 2 who will conquer all nations and end opposition to God, is also the beloved son of God who won't be spared, but will give us life as the suffering servant for the forgiveness of sins and to bring peace with God. Son, Beloved, Servant, that's King Jesus.

All powerful, yet gentle and approachable. Conquering King – but who saves by his own death. And so God himself speaks from heaven for our benefit: to declare to us the identity of King Jesus.

Which means we don't have to make it up. We don't need to invent or create an identity of Jesus but respond to the one God himself gives us. So while we are prone to bend, twist, and repaint Jesus' identity for our own benefit, the reality of who he is so much better than the idol we make.

You'll hear all the time from Christians, "Jesus wouldn't expect me to do that" or "Jesus won't allow that" and so on. We are often confident in our view or version of Jesus, we think we get him or know it all but we must make sure it's the real Jesus, not the redrawing like Mr Bean.

And so if you know this experience in your own life or especially if you're sceptical about the claims of Jesus or his claim on your life, then this is an invitation to test it. To ask if his life and ministry that Mark will unpack for us is he consistent with what God says about him here.

Is your view of him actually consistent with God's declaration and what his life shows? There is nothing better you could do with this new year than answer that question, especially if you are Christian already.

Because in the final scene, in vv.12-13, Mark shows us that Jesus really is unique. We go from the heights of his baptism and God's declaration, to his testing in the wilderness. And this is the key moment. Here is God's King, God's Son, but will he be any different from all who've come before?

¹² *Immediately the Spirit drove him into the wilderness.* ¹³ *He was in the wilderness forty days, being tempted by Satan. He was with the wild animals, and the angels were serving him.*

Now if you know your OT, you'll know there is lots familiar here. The number 40 and the wilderness make us think of Israel. In Deuteronomy 8, Moses reminds them of their experience: ² *Remember that the LORD your God led you on the entire journey these forty years in the wilderness, so that he might humble you and test you to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commands.*

Forty and wilderness is all about testing. Israel worship the golden calf while Moses us up the mountain 40 days. Nineveh are given 40 days to repent at the preaching of Jonah, Israel are in the wilderness 40 years and fail miserably, grumbling and accuse God of evil in rescuing them.

But tempting by Satan and presence of animals makes us think of Genesis 3, of Adam and Eve in the Garden being tempted by the lies of the serpent. It takes us back to where it all went wrong, where God was rejected as humanity preferred the lie rather than the truth and sin entered the world.

But in amazing brevity Mark shows us that Jesus is different. Where Adam and Israel failed, Jesus is faithful. Driven into the wilderness by the Spirit to be tempted by Satan, surrounded by wild animals, Jesus emerges faithful and victorious as the angels serving him.

This shows us that Jesus' work as King is not primarily political or social, but spiritual and cosmic. For the first time, we have someone who is truly faithful, truly righteous before God and unblemished by sin. And so Jesus brings a world changing difference.

Because why does it matter that Jesus is tested and found faithful? Why couldn't Jesus just show up on the Thursday, be crucified on the Friday then raised on Sunday? Why does it matter that he emerges from the wilderness faithful and spends the next three years preaching and ministering?

It's because he includes us in success. As Paul says in 1Corinthians 15, just as the first Adam brought death to all, so Jesus, the last Adam, brings life for all. So just as Jesus takes the death our sin deserves as the suffering servant of Isaiah, so he also lives the righteous life we couldn't which is then credited to us by faith. He lives a faithful life on our behalf, in order to die for unfaithfulness.

And so here is the beginning of the beginning of the Gospel, the good news, life giving news of Jesus. That one has come that our world has been waiting for. One who is faithful to God and is able to set things right, who brings healing, refreshment, and freedom as we'll see in the next chapters.

As J.I Packer says in *Knowing God*, “There is hope for ruined humanity – hope of pardon, hope of peace with God, hope of glory – because at the Father’s will Jesus Christ became poor, and was born in a stable so that thirty years later he might hang on a cross. It is the most wonderful message the world has ever heard, or will hear.”

This is the good news our world is searching for, longing for. It struck me at church recently as someone prayed that we would be a congregation that is eager to proclaim the good news of Jesus, because even if this pandemic was to pass, there will always something else. Something that will confront our fragility & mortality and have people crying out for relief. Relief that Jesus alone brings.

And so as we begin a new year, do you want to know this Gospel more and more. To have a clearer and bigger picture of who Jesus really is. Are you eager to know and enjoy every day that there is a King who rules this world, who deeply loves you, and is in control of every aspect of your life?

Because we actually live in a world that is always putting up a rival Gospel – offering or proclaiming good news of what will satisfy us, make us happy, the life we truly need. As Steve McAlpine says in his book *Being the Bad Guys*, “The ambition is to replicate the kingdom vision of the good life – a future world of human rights, dignity, freedom, love, and equality – but all without Jesus at the centre.”

And even Christians can fall into this. It will take effort and resolve to have THE Gospel, real good news at the forefront of everyday and shaping all of your thinking. And there is a temptation on this first Sunday of a new year to talk about resolutions... Those 48-hour promises we tend to make with ourselves while optimism is at an all time high and we aren’t back at work yet!

But then as we start a new year, why wouldn’t we resolve to have the Gospel shape all of who we are? To say with the apostle Paul who knew plenty, *I want to know Christ, yes, to know the power of his resurrection!*

And although I myself am sceptical of making any sort of New Year resolutions, John Piper may have persuaded me. He says in his little devotional book, *The Godward Life*, “Christian resolutions are different from the world’s resolutions. We believe that by grace alone we have been called – that is, captured by the truth and beauty of Christ. We resolve things not to make God be for us, but because he already is for us – that’s what his call makes plain. He opens our eyes to see and trust Christ. He shows us, in the cross, that he is totally for us. All our resolves are to walk more worthy of this calling, in ways more fitting for the beneficiaries of such free grace.”

If Jesus is the King we need, the King whose life and mission really are good news, life bringing, life changing good news, shouldn’t we resolve to not just be familiar with him, but to have all life revolve around him? To be captured afresh by the wonder of his life, death, and resurrection.

As Tim Keller says, “Religious people find God useful. Christians find God beautiful.” So let’s start this new year resolved to make much of Jesus. To have at the centre of every day, to see the world through the lens of who our King is, what has done, is doing and will do.

And let’s do it not as a burden or duty or even obligation, but in the joyful pursuit to see and savour the Lord Jesus as he actually he is: not useful, but wonderful. Let’s pray.