

## The beginning of the gospel according to Mark - Mark 1 v1-8

The beginning of a good book gives us the idea of what the book is about. (I was taught that a good sermon does much the same thing, so let's move right along.) Some books manage to summarise what we are in for in the first sentence, and some have become so memorable that they have become the stuff of pub quizzes. For example:

"It was the best of times, it was the worst of times" – so begins *A Tale of Two Cities* by Charles Dickens – and we then read of good deeds and appalling brutality during the French Revolution.

Or try this one:

"It is a truth universally acknowledged that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife" – and then follows the story of Mrs Bennett's machinations as she tries to find husbands for her daughters in Jane Austen's book, *Pride and Prejudice*.

And here is another one: "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God."

This morning we have just heard these words - another beginning to another book, written in the first century, but you would not have found it in any first century bookshop. As a scroll, this would have been handwritten and carefully copied as more and more Christians needed to hear the story, and it was passed from one Christian community to another, valued and carefully guarded because in this book is written such a story as has the power to change lives. It contains the essentials of what people need to know about Jesus Christ, the One the readers have decided to follow because, for Christians in the first century, persecution was coming (and, indeed, may even have become a reality at the time this gospel was written down as it was about that time Nero was sending Christians to the lions in the arena). Christians, the followers of Jesus, needed to know the facts. We will rediscover over the coming year, as the Christians of the first century heard, that the whole gospel has an urgency about it: 'you need to know this, and you need to know it now.'

Imagine hearing these words for the first time. Here is what we have been waiting for – an account of some essential elements of Jesus' teaching, his miracles, the way he dealt with people, his credentials and about his death. And so, after a murmur of excited anticipation ripples through the room, everyone settles to listen and concentrate on what is being said, and the reader begins to read aloud the gospel according to Mark:

"The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God."

Each Sunday in our morning service, as we stand (as we did just now) and prepare ourselves to listen to the gospel as it is read to us from the middle of the church, what are *our* expectations of the book as we hear *these* words?

Those of us who have been brought up with stories from the Bible, or have been reading it for years, sometimes lose the *wonder* of how meaningful, significant, even earth-shattering this good news really is. Isn't something which is *this* special to be looked forward to, with anticipation of learning something new about Jesus – every time we hear it?

But then Mark, after his first sentence summarising what lies ahead in his book, immediately reminds us that we need to prepare ourselves to receive this good news. First he tells us of John the Baptist, the last of the prophets who told people about Christ-to-come, and how he proclaimed that we need to prepare ourselves to meet him. It is as though Mark says 'Hang on a minute. Are you ready for this? Are you *really* ready for this? Because if you are, it is going to be momentous. It's going to be life-changing.'

In quoting from Malachi and Isaiah, Mark reminded people that when the ancient kings travelled about the country, they did so with such grandeur that armies of workers would go ahead of them literally flattening the ground, levelling off hillsides if necessary and making a highway so that the king would not be bumped about by potholes or have to make detours round inconveniently-placed rocks.

Mark reminds us that what was about to happen, what you were about to hear as someone reads this gospel to you, is like just such a momentous event – Christ the King, the Son of God, is coming to us and we need to prepare ourselves as he makes his way into our lives.

John the Baptist, we hear, proclaimed a baptism of repentance for forgiveness of sins – that is, John's mission had something to do with confronting the reality of sin, recognising our own unworthiness to approach the Son of God...

... and yet, and yet, he would come to us, and he does still come to us in his word and in the reality of his Holy Spirit, and enter the lives of all those who are prepared to welcome him.

As, this month, we prepare our homes and our churches to celebrate that Jesus, God with us, came into our world and lived among us, and as, each Sunday, we stand and prepare ourselves to hear the gospel message, so may we also, this advent and in the coming year, prepare ourselves to welcome him and look forward with renewed anticipation as we hear afresh the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

Amen.

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