

Mark 1:1-8 – 8.0 am.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit Amen.

The gospel of Mark is believed to be the first gospel to have been written, so it was appropriate for Mark to start by writing, "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God".

Mark was writing to both Jews and Gentiles and the word Christ wouldn't mean anything to Gentiles, but the Son of God would be clear enough to both.

The word 'beginning' in Mark verse 1, is reminiscent of the start to Genesis, "In the beginning", because while Genesis launched the knowledge of the existence of God and describes his creation, the beginning of Mark launched the beginning of a new understanding of the true nature of God and of the salvation work of his Son our Lord Jesus Christ.

Mark starts at the beginning of Jesus' ministry, with John the Baptist reminding the Israelites of what God told the prophet Isaiah, that he would be sending his messenger ahead to prepare the way of the Lord.

In verse 5 Mark wrote, "And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him." That's not a handful of people that's a huge crowd.

So, why did the Jews come out to John in such large numbers, and why did they listen to him? There are several reasons.

Many centuries before the prophet John the Baptist we can read about that great prophet Elijah. Now Elijah was described as, "A hairy man, with a leather belt around his waist." Somewhat reminiscent of the description of John.

We also know that Elijah crossed the Jordan into the desert, but legend has it that he didn't die but was carried up to heaven in a whirlwind 2 kings chapter 2 verse 1.

Turning now to verse 6 where Mark writes, "Now John was clothed with camel's hair and wore a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey."

This description was intended to identify John as Elijah, a hairy man with a leather belt around his waist. Indeed, Jesus says as much when he was transfigured Matthew chapter 17: 12 which reads, "But I tell you that Elijah has already come, and they did not recognise him.

The reference to eating locusts and wild honey also places John into the prophetic tradition; locusts is mentioned in Leviticus chapter 11:22 as acceptable kosher food and was classed as a vegetable rather than meat.

Indeed, John was the last of the Old Testament prophets being born before Jesus, albeit by only a few months.

So, we have John looking like Elijah and appearing from the desert, which if they were expecting Elijah then that would be where he would come from.

Additionally, many people will preach on Matthew chapter 6 verses 19 to 21, which reads, “Do not store up for yourself treasures on earth, where rust and moth destroy, but lay up for yourself treasure in heaven.” But I, like many other people, preach that sermon from a position of wealth and with many possessions.

But John preached his message of repentance and forgiveness from his poverty, he did more than preach the gospel, he was also living it, that’s another reason they came out in droves to hear him, because John was the message he preached, there was no hypocrisy, his message was genuine.

Yet another reason they came out to see him in such numbers was because he appeared from the wilderness, verse 4 reads, “John the baptiser appeared in the wilderness.”

The wilderness had tremendous meaning to the Jews, and indeed still has; the wilderness experience for the Jews is the backbone to their very existence.

It was in the wilderness that God moulded them into a nation and prepared them for the promised land; a huge amount of their history goes back to their desert experience.

And indeed, later in chapter 1 of Mark we can read about how Jesus was prepared for his ministry in the wilderness for 40 days.

John’s message was effective because the people recognised him as the messenger that the prophet Malachi spoke of in chapter 3:1 “See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me.”

But John's message also rang true, because he wasn't claiming to be the Messiah, nor was he claiming any advantage for himself, after all he came dressed in the roughest of clothes and ate the simplest of food.

John claimed only to be the messenger telling the people of the imminent arrival of the Messiah, and that they had to be prepared for his coming.

Now to be prepared is essential for all human activities, an Olympic runner must run hundreds of miles before he is prepared for the race of a lifetime.

Now John was telling them to be prepared by repentance, by turning away from a present or current pattern of life to a new way of living; because when we learn a new and better way of thinking, we naturally respond by changing our behaviour, true repentance causes us to change our mind and direction.

With repentance of course also comes confession of sins, and we are to confess them to God, and in confessing them to God we are also acknowledging them to ourselves, and acknowledging our sins to ourselves is the first step towards turning away from sin.

Now some of us may be saying to ourselves, yes, I've turned to Christ, but I still sin, I still do things that I know are wrong, why, as a Christian, do I still sin, why can't I turn away from sin.

St John the apostle, writing a general letter to fellow Christians, warned us when he wrote, "If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us".

Even if it is our intention and desire not to sin we will still fail, which is why we need to continually turn to Christ in repentance, because he will always forgive a penitent heart.

Christ not only understands our frailty, but he also sees into our hearts, and he knows our intentions our motives and he will always forgive a penitent heart.

St Paul in his first letter to the Corinthians wrote in verse seven of chapter five, "Clean out the old yeast so that you may be a new batch".

We are to throw out the old and bring in the new; we are to throw out the old prejudices, the old practises, the old desires, and embrace the new, which is the way of Christ.

It is the way of Christ that brings love instead of hate, which brings creation instead of destruction, which brings joy instead of sadness, which brings life instead of death.

John isn't telling us that we have to give up the good life; on the contrary he is inviting us to embrace a much better life, a life with Christ, a life that will make our previous life seem like so much dross in comparison.

Now John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness saying, "be baptised". Now baptism is about believing and belonging, and I've just been talking about believing, now I want to talk about belonging.

To belong to Christ, we need to be enrolled into his family, and that process of enrolment is what we call baptism.

Now people who have thought about it will rightly say that death is a part of life, which of course it is, but Christians will go further than that and say that life in Christ embraces not only death, but also resurrection.

That's the point of baptism; baptism is to be enrolled not only into Jesus' life, but also into his death and resurrection, which is why Mark starts his gospel by including in his first sentence the phrase "The good news",

The good news is that through baptism and repentance, and faith and trust in our Lord Jesus Christ, we can share in Christ's resurrection life.

Mark starts his gospel with the verse, "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God".

But Mark didn't put an ending to his gospel; Mark's gospel originally stopped at chapter 16 verse 8. Have a look at the end of Mark's gospel when you get home.

But others have added endings, one short ending and one a bit longer, but for me, St Mark was saying that there is no end to the Gospel of Christ.

We are baptised into Jesus' life death and resurrection, and when we die and are resurrected to eternal life with our Lord it will be the beginning of the good news of Christ not the end; so be prepared; repent and be baptised.

Amen.