

Text: Mark 1: 1-13

Theme: Series-The Coming King Mark 1-8: Preparation for the King

Sermon delivered by Reverend Canon Dele Agbelusi during Morning Service on 01/10/2017 at 10.30am

Introduction

Mark starts the story of Jesus a long way back. It did not begin with Jesus' birth; it did not even begin with John the Baptizer in the wilderness; it began long ago in the mind of God and was revealed to Old Testament writers. Mark 1 :1 gives away the theme of the book. He refers to Jesus as the Messiah and Son of God. The Book conveniently divides into two parts: The first half, chapters 1-8 shows us that Jesus is the long expected Messiah, God's promised King. It comes to a climax at the declaration of Peter that Jesus is the Messiah in Mark 8:29. The second half which we shall consider from January shows Jesus as the Son of God who dies in our place for our sins. Matthew and Luke based their longer Gospels on Mark, and quoted from it, at times almost word for word. That is how revered Mark's Gospel was. Mark is also special precisely because it is shorter than the others. It was written to a group of suffering Christians, probably in Rome, who were facing execution, and had no time for theological intricacies. They needed to know the most essential parts of the Gospel, without getting lost in theological jargon.

The emphasis in Mark's Gospel is on the deeds of Jesus more than on his words. Before we go too far, let us engage with the acclaimed writer of the Gospel, Mark (who is also called John-Mark in passages like Acts 12:25). You can recall that he was perceived as a failure in ministry as pictured in the book of Acts with Paul (Acts 15:36-41). However, his relationship with Paul was restored in the end (2 Timothy 4:11). Mark is generally thought to be a close acquaintance of Peter and theologians have identified Peter's influence, especially in some details given in the gospel. Many of the eyewitness accounts probably come from Peter, who got closer to Jesus than anyone. There are clear pointers to eyewitness testimony - the greenness of the grass at the feeding of the 5,000, the vividness of the transfiguration, Peter's denial, and the fact that the actual words of Jesus in Aramaic are preserved at key points in the text. We know that Mark was with Peter towards the end of Peter's life. Like Mark, Peter also knew what it was like to be a failure in following Jesus after having denied Him three times, and apart from Peter, no one else would have been able to tell it as Mark reported. He too was restored in the end. Another indication of Peter's influence is that "Peter usually spoke in Aramaic and Mark has more Aramaic phrases than the other, like Boanerges (3:17), Talitha cumi (5:41), Korban (7:11), Ephphatha (7:34), Abba (14:36)." (Roberston).

So much of this Gospel carries Peter's stamp -. You can easily cut out a picture of who Jesus is, and who stumble as they try to follow Him. It's a gospel for ordinary men and women.

So here is the original gospel of Jesus, written from the vivid perspective of His closest friend. It is the unadorned, 'no frills', pure Gospel of Jesus, raw and ready to change your life.

There are three introductory words in the first verse that Mark used to introduce the book and the person the book is all about.

1. Gospel - the word means 'good news'. This gospel is God's authoritative announcement to the world that an end has come to their exile and it can only be 'good news' if people are clear about the bad news that precedes it. God is angry at our sin (Rom. 1:18-20), but has chosen, out of sheer love, to give us Jesus as a 'propitiation' or 'anger-bearing sacrifice' (see Rom. 3:25).

2. Christ - Jesus did not come into our world in a vacuum. He was the fulfilment of centuries of prophecy that the 'Christ' (in Hebrew 'the Messiah'), would come to save God's people from

their sin. The word 'Messiah' means 'anointed one' and refers to the anointing of kings in Israel who were set apart for the task of kingship by God. Jesus is God's anointed king, set apart for His kingly task which is, dying on a cross to bring salvation to a lost world.

3. Son of God - Mark is actually more interested in the title 'Son of God' than he is in the title 'Christ' (Matthew's favourite theme). In the first half of the gospel, Mark presents Jesus as the supernatural healer who casts out demons, heals the sick, calms storms, and opposes the Pharisees all at breakneck speed, to prove that He is the Son of God - full of power and authority.

Mark introduces the gospel as a person we need to believe on (John 3:16) - 'Jesus Christ, the Son of God', whom we need to love, honour and obey. Ultimately, the gospel is very personal. It is not just a message to the world; it is a personal relationship with a loving, powerful Saviour. Paul summed it up by calling Jesus 'the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me' (Gal. 2:20).

Mark refers to Old Testament Scriptures, Isaiah 40:3 in verse 2 in relation to the preparation for the coming of the Messiah. We cannot afford to ignore the Old Testament Scripture because its main purpose is to point us to our need for Jesus and points forward to what He is like. Without the Old Testament, we will not understand who Jesus is, or why He came; We will know nothing about God's character, human sin, God's heart for His people, the inability of law, kings, temples, prophets etc. to solve the human predicament of exile from God, and God's promise of salvation.

So who is Jesus, and why is He worth dying for? Mark does away with any reference to Jesus' birth, so he can focus on the most essential stories that convey the meaning and power of Jesus' life, death and resurrection. He presents Jesus as a gripping hero figure who heals, confronts, exorcizes and resurrects, all at breakneck speed (Mark's favourite linking word between stories is 'immediately').

John came announcing a baptism of repentance which the Jew was familiar to, but the amazing thing about John's baptism was that he, a Jew, was asking Jews to submit to that which only a Gentile was supposed to need. John had made the tremendous discovery that to be a Jew in the racial sense only, was not to be a member of God's chosen people. It is only those with the gift of the cleansed life that belong to God's new kingdom.

The Herald of the King (Mark 1:5-8)

And the whole country of Judea went out to him, and so did all the people of Jerusalem, and they were baptized by him in the River Jordan, while they confessed their sins. John was clad in a garment of camel's hair, and he had a leather girdle round his waist, and it was his custom to eat locusts and wild honey. **The burden of his proclamation was, "The one who is stronger than I am is coming after me. I am not fit to stoop down and to loosen the strap of his sandals. I have baptized you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."** It is clear that the ministry of John was mightily effective, for they flocked out to listen to him and to submit to his baptism. Why was it that John made an impact such as this upon his nation?

John was a man who lived his message. Not only his words, but also his whole life was a protest. Three things about him marked the reality of his protest against contemporary life - He stayed in the wilderness; He wore a garment woven of camel's hair and a leather belt about his waist. So did Elijah (2 Kings 1:8). To look at the man was to be reminded, not of the fashionable orators of the day, but of the ancient prophets who lived close to the great simplicities and avoided the soft and effeminate luxuries which kill the soul. His food was also very simple--locusts and wild honey. **There are many preachers nowadays who extol the**

blessings of poverty from a lavishly comfortable lifestyle. But in the case of John, the man was the message, and because of that people listened.

John told people what in their heart of hearts they knew and brought them what in the depths of their souls they were waiting for. And **John was humble. At a time when he could have launched himself as a celebrity, his verdict on himself was that he was not fit for the duty of a slave in relation to Christ, because the task of removing sandals was the work and office of a slave. John asked nothing for himself but everything for the Christ whom he proclaimed.**

His message was effective because he pointed to something and someone beyond himself. He told the people that his baptism drenched them in water, but one was coming who would drench them in the Holy Spirit; and while water could cleanse a man's body, the Holy Spirit could cleanse his life and self and heart.

Why did John the Baptist conduct his entire ministry in the desert? Surely that wasn't the best place for God to send him. Why didn't he set up a podium in Jerusalem Main Street on a Saturday afternoon, or better still the Temple with all the crowds milling around? Why do we have this strange scenario where, 'The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him' (v. 5), in a 110-degree desert? Could it be that God wanted to encourage the people away from the hustle and bustle of their daily city lives, to the austere quiet of the desert, so they could really listen to Him? Emails and demanding jobs and screaming children and 24-hour cities make quiet spaces hard to find. But you need quiet to hear from God, as Elijah learned from the 'still small voice' (1 Kings 19:12, KJV).

God wanted to prepare Israel for the good news of Christ's coming, but in a context where they were ready to listen to Him. And perhaps the barrenness and austerity of a desert matched John's austere message. He was not calling people to a razzmatazz revival, but to a 'baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins' (v. 4). **If people were going to be truly ready for Jesus, they needed to strip their own lives bare of pride, apathy and greed, like a desert is stripped bare of any form of earth's comforts.**

The Day of Decision (Mark 1:9-13)

To any thinking person the baptism of Jesus presents a problem. John's baptism was a baptism of repentance, meant for those who were sorry for their sins and who wished to express their determination to have done with them. What had such a baptism to do with Jesus? Was he not the sinless one, and was not such a baptism unnecessary and quite irrelevant as far as he was concerned?

For Jesus the baptism was three things:

(i) **It was the moment of decision.** For thirty years he had stayed in Nazareth. Faithfully he had done his day's work and discharged his duties to his home. For long he must have been conscious that the time for him to go out had to come.

In every life there come moments of decision which may be accepted or rejected. To accept them is to succeed; to reject them, or to shirk them, is to fail.

(ii) **It was the moment of approval.** As Jesus stepped out of the water, the heavens opened and God affirmed, 'You are My Beloved Son' (NKJV). Jesus the man probably needed that affirmation, and He got it before He had ever done anything eye-catching in public ministry. God calls you and me His 'beloved sons'. If we trust in Jesus, we have that status regardless of whether or not we do anything that pleases the Father (see Rom. 8:17).

(iii) **It was the moment of enablement.** At that time the Holy Spirit descended upon him. There is a certain symbolism here. The Spirit descended as a dove might descend. The simile is not chosen by accident. The dove is the symbol of gentleness.

As Christ stepped into the River Jordan He was deliberately accepting God's mission as a representative of all humanity. He represents us. Jesus chose to be baptized to identify Himself with sinners. One day He would be clothed in our sins, becoming our substitute on the cross. Peter says, 'He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree' (1 Pet. 2:24).

Verses 12-13 And immediately the Spirit thrust him into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness forty days, and all the time he was being tested by Satan. The wild beasts were his companions, and the angels were helping him.

No sooner was the glory of the hour of the Baptism over than there came the battle of the temptations. One thing stands out here in such a vivid way that we cannot miss it. It was the Spirit who thrust Jesus out into the wilderness for the testing time. The very Spirit who came upon him at his baptism now drove him out for his test.

In this life it is impossible to escape the assault of trials, but one thing is sure—temptations and trials from the Lord are not sent to us to make us fall; they are sent to strengthen the nerve and the sinew of our minds and hearts and souls. They are not meant for our ruin, but for our good. They are meant to be tests from which we emerge better warriors and athletes of God.

I will close with the opening words of Hebrews 1: 1-3:

In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways, ² but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom also he made the universe. ³ The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven.