

Date: December 6

Reading: Mark 1:1 – 8

Theme: The beginning of the good news



How many of you remember the Goon Show? One of Spike Milligan's favourite gags was a send up of a popular literary device in mystery stories – "and this is where the story really starts." I remember one episode where it was said at least 4 times! That came to mind when I read the opening sentence of Mark's story of Jesus – the beginning of the good news. But which beginning is he talking about; where does the story really start? With John baptising and preaching in the wilderness? Or with the prophets who spoke of someone preceding the Messiah - the Christ - who would be preaching in the wilderness? Or with Moses because part of the prophet's quote comes from Exodus? Where does the story really start? You could say it starts with God, because Jesus is called God's son, with Mark sounding a bit like John – "In the beginning was the Word". However, Mark doesn't write, "the beginning of Jesus", he writes, "the beginning of the good news." That might sound a bit pedantic because Jesus is the good news of God's grace, but I think this opening sentence is the title of the book. Mark is presenting an introduction to his telling of the story of Jesus.

"You have heard the good news being preached about salvation in and through Jesus the Christ, here is how that good news originated and came to be preached."

And the second sentence places that introduction in context.

"This good news is not a new religion that dropped out of nowhere, it has its origins in God's messages to the law makers and the prophets. And it calls for you to get serious about your relationship with God."

Where does the story really start? With a long line of people stretching back into history, all pointing forward towards Jesus.

Now I know that I have the quote a bit wrong; when Milligan and all those mystery writers were saying, "and this is where the story really starts", they weren't looking backwards to history, they were saying that what happened before was just history, here and now is where the story really starts. But that applies to Mark as well because the story – the good news – really starts at the resurrection. He is saying, "You have heard the good news, the story of life with God really started on that morning, a few days after the crucifixion, but now hear how that story began." We might think that we are reading history when we read the gospels, but we are really reading a prequel – the story starts at the end! And that is part of the problem with Advent; we are talking about waiting and expectation and hope but we're in the prequel. We know what is ahead. It's hard to hold on to anticipation when you're planning Christmas celebrations and trying to diarise catchups and family gatherings. And it's hard to hold on to the excitement of 'the good news' and the expectation of Christ's

return when you have been through this prequel time year after year after decade after year. We need freshness, we need newness; we need the good news to be new! And a way to do that is to look at Mark for what it originally was – discipleship training material for new Christians.

You don't have to go overseas as a missionary to discover people who have not heard the good news of God's welcoming grace in Jesus Christ. Our premier said just a month ago that we are a secular society. Just like first century Palestine, where people had a perception of religion as moral and cultural demands or behaviour manipulation by priests or governors. People in our culture are stressed, caught in the pressures of the economy, the environment, the constant cycle of news to be worried about and people to dislike, and there is a wish for things to be better. Just like first century Palestine, where the people were under foreign military rule, pressured for taxes, pressured for obedience either to the Emperor or to a God who seemed to have an endless set of rules to follow, and stressed by a rising group of militant zealots, attacking the Romans and threatening war, and they wished for things to be better, for peace, for a God who helped instead of demanded. The grace of God in Jesus *was* Good News, and it can be today for all those who are lost and struggling in this world. The many in our culture for whom Advent is not a prequel to a well-known story, it is the story of their lives; they are waiting for something better, expectant and hoping. For the many Christmas is not the answer to Advent, it's an annual celebration of gift giving and family celebration. But for those who have heard the Good News, who have learnt for the first time that God is loving and forgiving and welcoming, they can look to Mark and the other gospels as the beginning, the origin, of the good news story that they are now a part of. They have discovered, or been captured, by Jesus the Christ, the Risen Son of God, now they can read about Jesus the man, walking through Galilee and Judea, loved by crowds, healing and teaching and being disliked and betrayed and sent to the cross – the beginning of the story that really starts at the resurrection.

Reimagine our yearly cycle of Advent, Christmas, Easter and Pentecost as a story that we each go through. The expectation and hope, the birth of faith, the truth of the cross and resurrection, the filling through the Spirit. And in that reimagining is our connection to the world and the ministry that we are all called to. All those people walking around who are not our enemies or condemned, but each having a little touch of Advent and needing to hear a story of hope and love and faith. The great story of the resurrection has its beginnings in each of us with the call to take God seriously and see a long history of God dealing with the world in love and welcome. Imagine the joy in hearing about a God of love for the first time! A God who calls and understands and accepts. Not judgement and condemnation and a demand for morality because that is not the message that won us to God. Just consider; the people of Palestine heard their priests and Pharisees talk about sin and moral purity and law all day long and yet they flocked in droves to hear John talk about repentance. It must have landed in their ears as something different. An image of a God to be taken seriously and looked up to, rather than a God of anger and fear to be appeased. A God who answered their Advent longing, a God of presence and action here and now. And

that is the Good News. Not just 'good news' that happened millennia ago, but 'good news' that *is* news and comes alive every time someone hears and answers. Good news that has people saying, "and this is where the story of my life really starts!"

Mark records the words of Malachi and Moses, "See! I am sending a messenger." And while we might see that as a reference to John, sending a messenger in Greek is *apostolos*, apostle. We are all messengers sent into the world with the good news. The good news that God's great story of love started at the empty tomb and can start again and again in each and every heart to answer the yearning for something better, that anticipation of God acting in the world to put things right.

The good news that we can share with the world to answer the Advent expectations.

That is where the story really starts. Amen.

Rev Ross Pearce ©