

Sunday 6th December 2020

1 Mark 1: 1-8 (The baptiser appears) Advent 2

Talk by Laura Polaine, Prayers by Kemi Ogundipe

Good morning and welcome to St Johns online reflection. Today, we will be focusing on Mark 1: 1-8. First, Kemi will lead us in prayer.

Let us pray:

Let us pray to our heavenly father,

Mighty God give us faith like John the Baptist, strong enough to believe even in a desert that, you and your kingdom are on farther from us than our hands. Make our heart strong like this, not swayed by trials or snared by false pleasures. Give us the courage to be faithful until your promises are fulfilled.

We live in a sinful world and we have fallen short in one way or the other, despite our sinfulness, you forgive and forget. Thank you for offering yourself to us as a tender and compassionate father. Though we cannot hold on to you physically, but we can receive your love in our hearts by the holy Spirit.

Merciful God keep us under the shadow of your mercy in this time of uncertainty and distress, sustain and support the anxious and fearful and lift up all who are brought low that we may rejoice in your comfort, knowing that nothing can separate us from your Love in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Lord in your mercy/Hear our prayer

Faithful God we pray for your blessings to be upon our congregation, upon the church throughout the world , may your presence be seen in what we do and say each day, we pray that your joy and love will flow freely in and through us and that we might never be perfect examples of your love in action.

Lord in your mercy/Hear our prayer

Creator God we pray for all in authority that they may never be tempted to abuse or misuse their power. Help and guide them to show wisdom and resolve in the search for reconciliation and peace and prosperity to every corner of the world

Lord in your mercy/Hear our prayer

Father God we pray for those we see and talk to everyday every week for those we often argue with or misunderstand for those who brighten our lives and make us smile for a greater thankfulness and appreciation of those we usually take for granted.

Lord in your mercy/**Hear our prayer**

Holy God as we pursue the many imaginative ways in which our churches approach Christmas during the advent help us to understand through them the different truths about God's amazing love and grace.

Lord in your mercy/**Hear our prayer**

Loving God we pray for those who are ill, sick, suffering, those who need healing and those recovering name quietly. We especially pray for any we know who are experiencing emotional pain or broken in Spirit through personal or family problems.

Lord in your mercy/**Hear our prayer**

Merciful God who sent John the Baptist to preach repentance and prepare the way for our salvation give us the grace to take heed of his warnings and to turn away from our sinfulness, so that we may greet with joy the coming of Jesus Christ our redeemer.

Merciful father Accept these prayers for the sake of your son our saviour Jesus Christ.

Let us say together the prayer our saviour Jesus Christ taught us.

**Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come,
Your will be done, on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us.
Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the power, and glory are yours
Now and forever.
Amen.**

Reading

Our reading today is taken from Mark, chapter 1 verses 1-8 - New International Version (NIV)

John the Baptist Prepares the Way

1 The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God, ²as it is written in Isaiah the prophet:

“I will send my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way”

³“a voice of one calling in the wilderness,
‘Prepare the way for the Lord,
make straight paths for him.’”

⁴And so John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁵The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River. ⁶John wore clothing made of camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. ⁷And this was his message: “After me comes the one more powerful than I, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. ⁸I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

Talk

The announcement of good news! When we have experienced a big event we want to tell someone about it. We get an idea at the start of Mark’s gospel his excitement as he announces the good news of Jesus Christ. Mark wrote his gospel for Christians in Rome, where many gods were worshipped, so he wanted his readers to know that Jesus is the *one true* Son of God. Mark does not give an introduction of Jesus background, the events leading up to Jesus’ public ministry in terms of his genealogy, as does Matthew and Luke, but he focuses on its actual beginning and gets straight to the point in verse 1: *Jesus the Messiah is the Son of God*. Mark communicates this both at the beginning and end of his gospel (Mark 1:1, 15:39).

The first section of Mark we read today, in chapter 1: 2-8 focuses on the citation of the Scripture and the introduction of John the Baptist. Mark starts with the story of John the Baptist, because he is the messenger of the coming of Jesus. Romans at the time knew when someone gave an announcement that someone prominent would arrive. The passage emphasises that John the Baptist’s ministry in bringing the good news was the fulfillment of God’s promise; the announcement was not random. John is the one who comes to bear witness to the more powerful one promised in Scripture. In verse 2: *‘as it is written in Isaiah the prophet: I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will*

prepare your way - a voice of one calling in the wilderness, Prepare the way for the Lord make straight paths for him. This story is the beginning of the good news, but every beginning is a consequence. Hundreds of years earlier the prophet Isaiah had predicted that John the Baptist and Jesus would come. Isaiah was a great prophet of the Old Testament who spoke about the promise of salvation. The fulfillment is a continuation of the story of God's saving activity. In Isaiah it is written 40:3. *'A voice of one calling: In the wilderness prepare the way for the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.'* Isaiah's words would have comforted many as they looked forward to the Messiah.

In Mark, verse 2 there are three individuals mentioned: i) the one who will send the messenger, ii) the messenger who will construct the way, and iii) the one whose way is prepared, and similarly in verse 3. It is "I [God] will send my messenger [John] ahead of you [Jesus], who will prepare the way. The messenger no longer is preparing the way for God as in the Old Testament, but for another powerful one, Jesus, who is now to be acknowledged as the Lord. This means that God's coming in salvation and judgement, promised in Scripture. 'takes place in Jesus'. God now acts through his beloved Son. God had promised his people, and his promise is now fulfilled. God keeps his promises. God has always had a plan. Jesus is the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end, and is why we can continue to trust him today for everything in between.

But what is actually meant by verse 3 *'Prepare the way for the Lord'*? How is the 'path' or 'way' to be readied for "the Lord"? John's call to 'clear the road for him' meant that people were to give up their self-focused way of living, to renounce their sins, seek God's forgiveness, and establish a relationship with God by believing and obeying him. In verse 4 it says: *'And so John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins'*. John's ministry baptism was a visible sign that a person had decided to change his or her life, giving up a sinful and selfish way of living and turning to God. Similarly this is recorded in Matthew's gospel (3:5-6), 'confessing their sins, they were baptised by him in the Jordan River.' Repentance had to precede baptism and thus baptism was not the means by which sins were forgiven, but was a sign indicating that one had truly repented; repentance meaning 'to return' or 'to turn back'. It is a total commitment to serving God, relying on his strength, doing his will and living as his people. Both soul and body matter; our devotional life and behaviour: church/ home/work is not separate. Repentance relates to every part of life, as does forgiveness.

In baptising people, John took a known custom and gave it a new meaning. Whilst ritual washings for sanitation in provision of the law was not new, being made pure, and the baptising of those joining the Jewish faith, the difference is John is calling the Jews themselves to be baptised. Later baptism would be taken a step further, associating it with Jesus death and resurrection (Romans 6:3-4). To baptise a Jew as a sign of repentance was a radical departure from Jewish custom, and yet so many came to John the Baptist. In verse 5: *The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem*

went out to him. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River.' There had been no God-sent prophets for 400 years, since Malachi the last recognised prophet. So anticipation was growing that a great prophet, or the Messiah prophesied in the Old Testament would soon come (Luke 3:15). People were ready for Jesus, and they flocked to hear this wilderness preacher. They believed John and were baptised in large numbers. Also, Jesus came at a time in history when the entire civilised world was relatively peaceful under Roman rule, so travel would have been easy and there was a common language.

Whilst crowds were responsive to John, some were not ready to follow Jesus along the path of self-giving love, expressed in death and resurrection. When God is doing a new thing, some resist, as it may bring not what they were hoping for, or it disturbs long established ways etc. Today, we can help prepare the way for others to receive Jesus. We can explain the need for forgiveness, and demonstrate Christ's teaching by the way we live. We can 'clear the road for him' by helping to correct any misconceptions that might be hindering people from approaching Christ. As we prepare for Alpha for people to attend, is there someone you know you can help in clearing the way for them?

Mark pays attention not only to the Messenger's message in preparing the way, but as in verse 6 we receive a description of John the Baptist's clothing and his diet. *'John wore clothing made of camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey.'* We may ask why this detail? Firstly, his dress is similar to other prophets such as Elijah (2 Kings 1:8) and it distinguishes himself from the religious leaders. John's striking appearance reinforced his striking message. Secondly, John is not mainstream in the sense of going out to the desert, and which would not have been easy. John labours in the wilderness as a place of purification and fulfillment of prophecy. Being in the 'wilderness' would have had specific geographic meaning to the 1st century audience – a place of beginnings. It was this region where God led the people out and from which they crossed over Jordan and seized the land promised to them. The Jordan river represented the border between the desert and the promised land. Hence, this biblical imagery evokes the expectation that God is about to liberate Israel again. God's people wandered in the desert for forty years, but were sustained by God's goodness.

We can see here that the context matters then, as it does today – Christian truth and experience are not found independently of the history, social life and politics of the day. John's role, location, manner and message interlocked Jewish history, contemporary life, future hope and God's presence in them all. True faith and mission always do.

In this time of advent we are preparing the way for the coming of Jesus as a baby. The word Advent comes from the Latin word 'Adventus' meaning 'to come'. We are inviting Jesus to come – and in Aramaic 'Maranatha' meaning 'Come, Lord Jesus'. Whilst John the Baptist prepared the way for Jesus, in the big plan it is Jesus who leads the way for us, and we his disciples follow his lead. How ready are we to welcome him again?

When we first give our life to Christ, we acknowledge that we cannot journey on our own, we are not enough, we mess up. We submitted to him, to his ways, and not our own. As we continue walking with Jesus and serving him we are reminded again this Advent, of our dependence on him, to continue to put our trust in him. We do not need to fight our struggles, especially the challenges of this year of Covid, on our own. When we pass through the desert we know God has been there before us, and knows the way. All we have to do is follow. Jesus invites us to give *him* our anxieties, our burdens. In Matthew 11:29 *'Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. ²⁹ Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. ³⁰ For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.'* Jesus sending us his Holy Spirit, the Comforter, helps us in this.

Whilst John baptised with water, Jesus baptises with the Holy Spirit. In verse 7-8 *"After me comes the one more powerful than I, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."* The water baptism is preparatory; the Spirit baptism will be definitive. The Holy Spirit would be sent to live in each believer. When Jesus baptises with the Holy Spirit, the entire person is transformed by the Spirit's power, they are changed from the inside out. Jesus offers to us both forgiveness of sin and the power to live for him. Our sins were great, his love for us greater.

When John says 'the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie', he was pointing out how insignificant he was compared to the one who was coming, and yet one who would also serve, which cost him his life. John elevates the other person, Jesus, beyond all normal categories of work (water vs Holy Spirit). What John began, Jesus finished, what John prepared, Jesus fulfilled. Mark is relating John and Jesus to the kingdom of God. John is a messenger, John comes as a voice crying, a lowly servant in announcing the kingdom, where Jesus is the heart of the kingdom. John was part of God's bigger plan, and whilst John's role is time limited as was his baptising it was an important role. We are also a part of God's plan. We live in world where we are used to start things, complete and see the result/being 'in control of affairs'. It is a reminder for us that we are part of a bigger plan, and that our role though limited is vital. The author Donald English, puts it this way: *"We are most fulfilled not when we seek fulfillment, but when we seek to find our proper place in his never-ending purposes for this world."*

Let us close with the prayer for the second Sunday of Advent:

God our Father,
you spoke to the prophets of old
of a Saviour who would bring peace.
You helped them to spread the joyful message
of his coming kingdom.
Help us, as we prepare to celebrate his birth,

to share with those around us
the good news of your power and love.
We ask this through Jesus Christ,
the light who is coming into the world.
Amen.

Closing Prayer

As we await our coming Saviour
Go in peace to love and serve the Lord.
In the name of Christ, Amen