

Good News

‘Do you want the good news or the bad news?’ Your house burned down while you were on holiday is the bad news – but the good news is that no one was hurt. You are losing your job – but the good news is you keep your pension. Covid19 has stopped us travelling – but nature has had respite from pollution. This tension between good and bad news is something that runs through the Christian gospel. And there is no part of the Bible where the tension is more intense than the Gospel of S. Mark, the opening words of which we have just heard.

Mark’s gospel will be the source of most of our gospel readings on Sundays throughout the coming year. It is the shortest gospel, the first to be written and the fastest paced. The athlete Linford Christie used to say that if you wanted to win the 100 metres you should be sure to start on the ‘B’ of the bang of the starting pistol, there’s no time to lose. Mark’s gospel begins in the same way – on the ‘G’ of gospel. The very first sentence is, ‘the good news of Jesus Christ the Son of God’. This is the story that is more than a story, it’s Good News..

We’re living in hard times, but so was Mark as he wrote his Gospel. Judea was in violent turmoil, the Jewish Revolt against Rome. But by the time Mark began writing the Romans had come back with a vengeance, destroying Jerusalem in 70AD. In the middle of all that suffering, the followers of Jesus had formed themselves into little groups, telling the story of Jesus, who, just forty years before had changed the way they saw life. They realised that he was still good news in bad times. And so Mark set it down in the very small book he called ‘The Good News (Gospel) of Jesus Christ.’

If you sit down and read Mark it will take you less than a couple of hours, something we could all do easily. 16 chapters that lead you from one dramatic event to another, better than any page-turner.

And where does this dynamic story begin? Not in a stable in Bethlehem (Luke), not with an ancient ancestry (Matthew), not with a poetic meditation (John), but in the wilderness with the prophets. Mark quotes, not Isaiah’s ‘Comfort ye, my people,’ but Micah’s, ‘I will put my messenger right in front of your face. He will look you in the eye.’ And then he turns to Isaiah’s urgent call, ‘now is the time of preparation, now is the time to get ready’ for that messenger. By verse 4, John the Baptist has appeared with the same urgent call, and plunging people in the river (‘baptise’ means ‘plunge, soak’), as they confess their sins and change their lives, and prepare for ‘the one who is to come.’

This is religion in the fast lane. Nothing is explained. It’s all happening. And that’s the way it continues through the Gospel, the story of an all-action Jesus. There is not much teaching: it’s movement and healing and conflict and prayer.

It’s the conflict that comes across most strongly. Mark’s Jesus is in trouble with the authorities by the end of the Chapter One. In Luke’s version Mary and Joseph have not even heard of each other by this stage. And in Matthew the magi are just beginning to wonder about a star in the sky.

Mark’s gospel is breathless. Stories are linked together with the repeated phrase ‘and immediately’. You only have to read ten chapters before you get to the last week, trial and crucifixion. The pace slows down then, showing that for Mark this is more than a passive handing over of a meek Jesus, more of a great struggle with sin and death. And the gospel ends, not with happy lakeside scenes, or Jesus talking to Mary in the garden or disciples walking to Emmaus, but with three women running from the empty tomb, not wanting to say anything to anyone ‘because they were afraid’.

Sixteen short dynamic chapters, written in the chaos of a ruined city with the rubble of a defeated people. It’s strong medicine for difficult days. It’s not ‘chicken soup for the soul,’ but more like ‘chemotherapy for the spirit.’ As cancer patients know, such treatment can feel worse than the disease. And that, perhaps, is why Mark says that, against all the evidence, this *really is good news*. It is only something of this strength that can help us really see that Jesus is the Son of God, and that his life and death has opened the door into something utterly new and good and better – but nonetheless terrifying and strange.

The first reading opened with lovely words from Isaiah the prophet, speaking Comfort to the people. But Mark’s Gospel provides very little evidence that the way of Christ is comfortable. In Mark, Good News and conflict go hand in hand.

What then of comfort? We need here not the modern meaning which suggests well upholstered chairs and central heating, but the more ancient and literal meaning, where comfort isn’t about protecting weakness, but giving strength. The “-fort” in “comfort” comes from the Latin for “strong.” The “com-” in “comfort” is Latin for “with.” To give comfort to someone is to lend them your strength. ‘Take comfort’ is more like ‘Be strong,’ ‘Keep going,’ ‘Take courage.’ We don’t say these things to people to help them relax. We say it because their troubles are worth overcoming and because through them and beyond them is the reality of love.

So, the Gospel of Mark - good news or bad news? It is bad news if by any chance you think that baptism and being a Christian is like a warm bath in a luxury spa, like a weekend at Gleneagles. It is good news if you know that although there is chaos and Covid and trauma and tragedy raging around out there and in here, the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is the strength we need in all our weakness.