

**“THE BEGINNING OF THE GOSPEL (Mark 1)”**

***Mark 1:1***

Those of you with children at school will recognise the scenario. Your child comes home with his or her homework. They're doing a project – history, art, science, English: it could be almost anything – and they have to find out as much as they can about a particular historical figure. Where do you go for your information? Probably to the Internet today - and the more unscrupulous pupils can simply download everything they need to know and hand it in as their own work. But let's assume that you want to do it properly: how are you going to research the life of this person?

You could try a biographical dictionary, but the entry may well be very short. You can try an encyclopaedia, but that might be an even shorter entry. As they're an historical figure, you might find what you want in a history book about the period in which they lived - but it will all depend on whether the person in question had any part to play in the events which the author is really concerned about. After all, historians can be very selective in what they include in their works.

So you have a look for a biography, the life story of the person in question - a whole book about them. The trouble is again that the writer will be dealing with a specific aspect of that person's life. Just take as an example the life of C S Lewis, one of the greatest figures of the scholarly literary world in the twentieth century and also someone who wrote a number of books for children, as well as a prominent spokesman of the Christian faith. The biography might therefore be a very literary one, with many references to the kinds of works on which Lewis wrote, and concentrating on his academic success. Or you might find a biography which is particularly concerned with his Christian faith - how he became a Christian, how he communicated that faith, how it helped him in his life. Or you may find out something about him in a “story” of his life, something like *Shadowlands*, for example.

The best information will probably be found in books that were written close to the time of his life, maybe by those who were very friendly with him and thus knew the intimate details of his life. Those things may need to be read along with books by people who have interpreted his life with the benefit of hindsight or through discovering documents and witnesses which were not available to the other biographers. They may have an interest in discrediting him or putting another view completely - the BBC2 series *Reputations* does that job with an alarming sense of vindictiveness.

So what about Jesus, then? He is a towering historical figure, known throughout the world - admired by millions and denounced by many as well. He is the central figure in our Christian faith and someone who has changed the lives of millions of people down through the centuries. He has always been a controversial figure, inspiring faith and fervour in some and doubt and mockery in others. What do we really know about him? And how can we find out about him?

Well, there is the Internet, of course - but that information came from somewhere else. There are millions of books about Jesus, most of them very serious works. Some are very much pro-Jesus, wanting to set out his life in way that is very sympathetic to him and which have as their goal the building up of the faith of the readers - or even of converting them to some kind of belief in their subject. There are many very serious books which are anti-Jesus: their writers have a desire to prove him wrong, to set out an argument which will turn people away from him. There's a lot of stuff written about him which is indifferent - Jesus is an incidental figure in the history which they are writing or he is not really considered to be worth any great mention. And, of course, there are the truly wacky books which really serve only to betray the author's wild fantasies or complete and utter foolishness – Jesus was an astronaut, or Jesus is all about some impenetrable code that only extremely gifted Australian theologians can decipher.

Probably the best picture we have of Jesus comes from what we call the gospels. These are the four books which come at the beginning of our New Testament - Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. They tell very similar stories of Jesus. Some of the details are different in each of them, and they choose to record different things about his life - but they are all four saying effectively the same things about Jesus. Over the next few weeks (and probably months) we are going to look at the life of Jesus through the eyes and the writing of one of these four authors - Mark.

Mark's gospel was almost certainly the first one of the four to be written. Scholars think it was completed at the latest by 65-70AD, quite soon after Jesus had left this earth. Some people think it was circulating in written form within ten years of Jesus' death and resurrection. That means that it was written while there were still a good number of eye-witnesses about and while there were still plenty of people about who could have disproved any of it if they'd wanted to. According to tradition based on the writings of someone called Papias, who lived in the second century, Mark based what he wrote on the recollections of Peter, one of Jesus' disciples. In other words, Mark spoke to Peter about what he remembered of Jesus and wrote it down in the form of a short book, in order to preserve the story and so that it could be used by Jesus' followers in their learning about him and their worship of him. There is quite a bit of Mark's story that could only have been told by Peter, which is one of the reasons why we think it may be his version of the story. It also portrays Peter in a rather unflattering light at times, so people have suggested that anyone else writing about this pillar of the early Church would have missed out the bits that spoke of his failures.

Mark's version of the life of Jesus is also the shortest of the gospels and is the plainest. It's succinct and easy to read, and the story flows well. (It's pretty well agreed by most people that Matthew and Luke used great chunks of Mark's gospel when they wrote their own - some passages are copied almost verbatim in both those other gospels.) You'll notice that there is no reference to Jesus' birth and childhood - Mark plunges straight in at the beginning of Jesus' ministry. It finishes with the resurrection - and, according to the most reliable manuscripts which do not have *16:9-20*, it finishes rather abruptly. Of course, Mark has selected and edited the material he has at his disposal. No doubt he would concur with what John says at the end of his gospel (*John 21:25*). He couldn't possibly have included every detail of Jesus' life and work or the book would have been far too long and repetitive. Just like any other writer, he has to decide what to include and what to leave out, and what he does include is there because it serves his particular purpose.

But what is Mark's purpose? Why did he write this gospel? Well, he does place a good deal of emphasis on the suffering and death of Jesus, what we call the "passion". That is clearly the climax of his work and it takes up a disproportionately large chunk of it. A scholar called Martin Kähler wrote that Mark's gospel is really "*a passion narrative with extended introduction.*" But it's not just that, or Mark could simply have written about that last few days of Jesus' time on earth. Mark has much more besides that he wants to say. Another commentator, Hugh Anderson, writes, "*Mark wants to locate God's activity with its challenge to faith decisively not only in the 'moment' of Jesus' death, but in the 'moments' of his earthly mission, in his word and deeds leading up to his passion.*" What is it all about, then?

Well, let's just look at the very first sentence this morning. (Don't worry, we're not going to work our way through the book at the rate of one sentence per week!) Mark begins his account of the life and death of Jesus with "*The beginning of the gospel about Jesus Christ, the Son of God.*" Now you might think that that's a pretty safe beginning for a gospel - you start by saying that this is beginning of the book. But we need to remember that, at the time Mark was writing, there were no books called "gospels". It wasn't until much later that these books - which didn't really fit into any other existing category (history, memoir, biography, etc.) - were given the name "gospel". Mark is wanting to say something quite different from "This is the beginning of the book"; that would have been fairly obvious anyway.

The *New Living Translation* of the Bible translates this sentence as “*Here begins the good news*”. And Eugene Peterson’s paraphrase, *The Message*, has, “*The good news of Jesus Christ – the Message! – begins here.*” Of course, we are very familiar with the idea that “gospel” means “good news”, and so were Mark’s first readers: but they had a very different way of looking at it. The Greek word that is translated “gospel” or “good news” is εὐαγγέλιον, a word that was used to translate the Hebrew phrase that appears in the Old Testament and is often translated “good tidings”.

These “good tidings” are to be found most frequently mentioned in the prophecy of Isaiah. Look, for example, at *Isaiah 40:9; 41:27; 52:7; 61:1*. If you look at the context in which those words occur, you’ll see that the prophet is telling his listeners that God is going to put the world to rights. There is a vision of a world restored to its former glory, to the way God wants it to be. There will be peace and wholeness – the Hebrew concept of *shalom*. God’s kingdom would break in and there was the promise of a wonderful future for his people. The Jewish people had been looking forward to this for centuries. There was a great sense of anticipation amongst many of them. God was going to do something wonderful – that was indeed “good news”.

And as you read through the prophecy of Isaiah – and the other prophecies of the Old Testament – you will see that there is to be a figure who will herald this new age. The Hebrew word for that figure is the Messiah, the one chosen, appointed and anointed by God. When he arrived on earth there would be a start to this new kingdom. So the Jewish people were not only looking for a renewal and restoration of the earth, but also looking for the figure whose arrival would mean that the change had begun. Of course, as is the case whenever there are such prophecies, there was no shortage of people who claimed to be the Messiah – a whole parade of ancient David Ickes and Benjamin Cremes. But they had all been proved to be false Messiahs. With the arrival of Jesus on the scene, it looked as if the true Messiah had finally come. And as people looked at his life and pondered over his teachings and his miraculous acts, any lingering doubts disappeared. This was, indeed, the one who had been foretold by the prophets.

So Mark undertook to write down what he knew about Jesus that would help people to see that this was actually the thing that Isaiah had prophesied. God’s kingdom was indeed being heralded by Jesus. There was to be a new beginning. This was “*the beginning of the good tidings*” – the wonderful things that they had been looking forward to were about to happen. The “*good tidings*” were going to be fulfilled. A new thing was happening, a new beginning had been made. It wasn’t all complete yet, by any means, but the kingdom was on its way.

And the one who was to make it happen, the subject of the “*good tidings*”, was Jesus. So the gospel was actually all about him. The good news was that Jesus had arrived. He was the one who was the inaugurator of this kingdom. He had come to start setting it all up. And Mark tells us, in this short opening sentence, something very important about this Jesus. In fact, he tells us three things which will form the basis for his story and will prove to be the foundation of the Christian faith down through the centuries.

Firstly, he calls him **Jesus**. Well, we’re all very used to that. But this is his earthly name, the name that, as Matthew tells us, he was given by his earthly father, Joseph. It wasn’t an unusual name – it still isn’t in many parts of the world. It’s a human name. And this person who is the subject of Mark’s telling of the good news is quite simply, **Jesus of Nazareth**, the carpenter’s son. That’s how most people encountered him during his time on earth. They assumed his statements about the relationship he had with God the Father were blasphemous because he was only a man. The group of disciples struggled with this as they watched him exert his authority over the forces of nature and had to ask themselves, “*Who is this? Even the wind and the waves obey him*” (4:41). In 6:3 his listeners actually say that he is only the carpenter’s son.

But the idea that Jesus was fully human is an important one – not only for Mark. The other gospel writers also describe his life in human terms. They write of his tiredness, his hunger, his anger, his temptations, his tears, his anguish, his compassion, his physical suffering. And on through the preaching we read in the book of *Acts* and the closely argued teaching of Paul in his letters, to the words of the writer of the *Letter to the Hebrews*, there is this emphasis on the full humanity of Jesus, for only a human being could be an effective sacrifice for our sins. And only a human being would be able to sympathise with the temptations and trials of fallen and flawed humanity.

Joined to the earthly name of Jesus, Mark adds a title that is found time and time again in the New Testament and in all of Christian literature and liturgy since this time – “*Christ*”. That’s the Greek word which translates the Hebrew word “*Messiah*”. Jesus is the chosen one, the one sent by God, the one who has been anointed to carry out the plan of God the Father. That’s what *Isaiah 61* is all about. This carpenter’s son is filled with the Spirit of God and equipped to fulfil the mission of God in this world, the mission of redemption and restoration. He’s the one who was expected by the Jewish people, who was looked for and awaited with such eager anticipation. Now he’s here, says Mark. This is beginning of the new age. And Jesus of Nazareth, who is actually the promised Messiah, is going to start to make it happen.

But there’s more yet. Jesus the Messiah is also **The Son of God**. Not only is Jesus fully human. Not only is he chosen and anointed and Spirit-filled by God. But he is also fully divine. He is also God. Now even in the few short years that had elapsed between the time Jesus was on earth and the time Mark wrote this book there had sprung up groups of people who denied either the humanity or the divinity of Jesus Christ. Those groups have never gone away, but one of Mark’s purposes in writing this book was to try and counter their teaching, to demonstrate that Jesus was both Son of man and Son of God. He includes, as we’ve already said, references to his human weaknesses and limitations, but there are also passages, such as *3:11*, where evil spirits hail him as Son of God. (Jesus always tells them to be quiet and seems to want to keep it a secret, which has led to one scholar building a whole system of interpretation around this apparent “Messianic Secret”.)

So this book is Mark’s attempt to show that the good news of the prophets, the gospel, is now being brought to fruition. This is beginning of it, and it is being inaugurated by Jesus – fully human and fully divine. And Mark is going to tell us all about it. He is going to narrate the good news, to show how it is being fulfilled. To do that he will tell the story of Jesus. As we look through this book week by week, we’ll see something of that. It might be an idea to read through the whole book all in one sitting some time this week, to help you get the flow of it, to follow the thread. Hugh Anderson, whom we’ve already quoted, writes, “*The outstanding phenomenon of Mark’s structure is of course quite simply that he narrates the ‘good news’. Wishing to proclaim the gospel, he yet tells a continuous story.*”

This isn’t just another story about a teacher or a prophet. It’s not some vaguely interesting account of a person who has been important at some stage in history. This is vital stuff, the basis of a whole faith system, the story behind the transformation of our world, the story of a life that has transformed lives. Dennis Nineham puts it like this: “*Mark and his fellow Christian saw in the earthly life of Jesus the beginnings of God’s final intervention in history, the first but decisive stage in the overthrow of the powers of evil and the establishment of God’s sovereign rule. That was clearly ground for the utmost rejoicing and the early Church calls it ‘the good news about Jesus Christ’.*”

With its roots in the revival preaching of John the Baptist (which we’ll look at next time), Jesus’ mission was to begin the work of God’s transformation of this world. It’s a terrific story – whatever the extent of your faith in Jesus Christ. There are some wonderful episodes and there’s some hard-hitting teaching. The story of the passion of Jesus Christ – his arrest, trial and execution – is powerful stuff. And I reckon that if you take it seriously, you too will find cause for the “*utmost rejoicing*”.

But just a warning, too, as we introduce this amazing story this morning. Not only does taking the gospel of Jesus seriously lead to great rejoicing. It also calls for a response of discipleship. Each of the scholars who comments on this gospel claims to have identified a reason for Mark's writing. Many see part of that reason as being a call to discipleship, a call to commit oneself to the way of life that Jesus sets out. I would challenge any of you to read this story carefully and with an open heart, and not come out of that experience with a real desire to follow where Jesus leads.

There are plenty of accounts in this gospel of the attitude of the first disciples. Mark describes their response pretty thoroughly – whether positive or negative. And one commentator (Anderson again!) writes that “*Mark campaigns against balcony-type Christians who are too high for the mission and discipleship that in Mark's terms necessarily involves cross-bearing and self-sacrifice.*” You need to be aware of that, because there may be challenges along the way that we all have to take up if we are to move forward in our understanding of and our relationship with Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

I have no doubt in my mind that Jesus is not only the most important figure in history – indeed, in eternity – but he's also the most important figure in my life. Mark gives us a portrait of someone very special, someone who can change your life, someone who has already given his life for you. May our prayer be that we will all meet him afresh through the words of Mark and may he inspire us in our daily lives here and now, and give us all a certain hope for eternity.