

“REPENT AND BELIEVE (Mark 3)”
Mark 1:15

After the title and prologue of Mark’s gospel the central character finally makes an appearance. The “*good tidings*” that were first heralded by the Old Testament prophets, the arrival of the Kingdom of God, is about to become a reality. John the Baptist has been exercising his ministry of preaching and preparing the way for the Messiah. And while John has still been preaching, Jesus himself – Jesus the son of the carpenter, the chosen and anointed Messiah, the Son of God – comes from Nazareth to begin his unique and historic ministry. He is baptised by John and affirmed by his Father. He undergoes six weeks of severe testing in the desert (which Mark deals with in a couple of lines), then he moves into the Galilee region with his distinctive message.

To understand something of the background to that, we need a little bit of historical filling in. Just bear with me for a few moments: it will all make sense in the end. It's AD66 - thirty-odd years after the death of Jesus - and the Jewish people are really struggling under the rule of the Romans in Palestine. In only four years time the city of Jerusalem will be destroyed, but all around the country are groups of fiercely nationalistic Jews who want to get on and do something, to rise up in revolt against their oppressors. They are filled with a burning passion to restore their land to home rule and - as are all freedom fighters whose roots are amongst the common people - they're wildly optimistic that they can drive the Romans out of their land. Unfortunately, they are rather limited in their knowledge of just how powerful is the might of the Roman Empire.

There are also some of the ruling classes of the Jews who are interested in more gradual change: a "period of transitional rule" is how it might be put today. They aren't doing too badly out of the Romans and are able to collaborate with them in various ways, and they don't really want to put the Romans' backs up because they might end up losing the privileges they've been carefully cultivating over the years. Amongst this "aristocracy" is a man called Josephus, later to be acknowledged as one of the greatest historians of the Jews, and at present a governor of part of the province of Palestine. Hearing of the plans of one particular freedom fighter and his band (known as John), he travels to meet him and try to persuade him to change his mind about the strategy he's adopted against the Romans. As he tries to reason with him and explain to him that he is doomed to failure if he continues with his policy of guerrilla terrorism rather than getting on board with the movement for transitional power sharing, he says to John in Greek, *μετανοείτε και πιστεύετε*.

Now, if (unlike me, I'm afraid) you are readily conversant with New Testament Greek, those words may seem almost blasphemous, because they are the very words Jesus uses in this passage at the beginning of

Mark's Gospel which we have just read. In the New Testament they are translated "*Repent and believe.*" These are part of the first utterance with which Jesus opens his ministry in Palestine. He only uses them a very few times in the gospels (although the ideas are often present), but here they are the clarion call of a new era. We tend to think, don't we, of these words having very specific religious connotations – "*Repent and believe*" are not words that we use in many other situations. They're a bit "language of Zion", aren't they? Now that religious overlay means that we can miss out on their true meaning. What both Josephus and Jesus were saying - and the way it would have been heard by their contemporary listeners - was "*change your thinking and put your confidence in me.*" Or "*Give up your own agenda and trust me for mine.*" Josephus, as we know, ultimately failed to convince John and the many others like him, and the result was the military and political catastrophe Josephus feared - but Jesus' words still have the power to make a difference.

"*Give up your own agenda and trust me for mine,*" says Jesus. That's the foundational concept of his ministry. OK, what's your agenda, then? "Oh, I don't have one of those," you may reply. Of course you do. What do you want to get out of life? Where do you think you're going? What are your priorities? Probably most of us don't actually think in those kinds of terms, we don't articulate our hopes and aspirations, our dreams and our desires in quite those terms. But they're there all the same. If you stop people in the street and ask them what they want out of life, they usually have to pause and think for a while, but then they'll say things like *To be happy, To be successful, To give my kids a good start, To make enough to retire comfortably.*

What do you want? Even if you can express it in a couple of sentences, though, it doesn't often tally up with your priorities. How do you spend your time, your money, your energies? Where is your focus? Now, a bit more to the point - how is your agenda being fulfilled? Are you getting near achieving your goals and building the life that you want? Are you satisfied with what's going on in your life? Do you feel that you are getting the most out of life, that when Jesus said later in his preaching, "*I've come to bring people life, life that's lived to the full*" you can identify with that? I suspect that if we're honest, few of us are really content and at peace about the way things are going.

We all have our agendas, we're all trying to head somewhere. But it's jolly tough isn't it? It's not easy to keep ploughing on towards the goals we've set ourselves. Things never go quite as smoothly as we'd like them to. Every now and then something major comes along and blows out of the water all that we have been carefully constructing. Suddenly the agenda's re-arranged and we have to start again. Suddenly the dream fades and the hope dies. It's part of being human, I suppose. And in our western society at the dawn of the third millennium, we find it difficult to escape the feeling that, however well we think we've made our plans, set our agenda, it's all a bit shaky, a bit insecure.

Relationships are breaking down with alarming speed - families split up and the vows that were made in the soft-focus romance of the wedding day suddenly crumble into dust as we find that our agenda is not quite the same as our partner's any more. The dream we've been sold of perfect pleasure in a perfect house with perfect kids evaporates into thin air as the selfishness inherent in each of us takes over.

Community life - where once there was some kind of mutual support and stability - is a distant memory for those who live in places where fear and suspicion are the watchwords. Social mobility means that you don't really get to know your neighbours before they've moved off with their job or to a bigger house or to a more affordable flat. And the perceived threat of crime and violence keeps many of us - particularly older folk - locked indoors, away from friends and company.

People who thought they were in a job for life now find that the chief executive of the company in Frankfurt or Chicago or Tokyo which has taken over their factory or business has decided that there isn't really any profit in doing things in a way that takes the employees into consideration. The contract shrinks to a year at a time: those who are over a certain age are pushed out: the premises are too expensive so you have to work at home at the end of an e-mail connection. The brave new world of business becomes the dark old world of exploitation - but with more technology.

Children and young people - in whom we place our hopes for the future - find that there isn't really a great deal to look forward to any more. The real world is a world of readily available drugs and casual sexual encounters and dead-end jobs - the "*MacJobs*" of Douglas Coupland's *Generation X*. The only alternative seems to be a world of virtual reality: Lara Croft and electronic violence, the manufactured and manicured lives of unattainable sporting and musical heroes, the always-just-out-of-reach ideals of magazines and day-time TV.

Gosh, that's depressing. But I don't think I'm just being sucked into nostalgia for a world that has now passed, a golden age when everything was wonderful and everyone knew the neighbours and left the doors unlocked when they went on holiday, when workers trooped off to the factory or down the mine or into the office with cheery hearts and a burning desire to fill the bosses' pockets with cash. Because it's always been like it is now. Oh yes, the details are different, the nuts and bolts of society have changed - but it's always been the case that men and women like you and me have set their agendas and then found that it all falls apart. Even in the times of the Old Testament prophets, people found that they were earning money only to put it in a bag with holes (*Haggai* tells of that in the 6th century BC), that the grapes they harvested set their teeth on edge as they started to eat them, that the future for their children was bleak and full of the unknown.

The things we put our trust in - especially our own ideas and ideals - prove to be remarkably fickle and transitory. You just cannot depend on them. The insurers and financiers know well enough how to play on those fears. I'm always getting junk mail inviting me to take out a policy against accidental death, serious injury, calamitous accidents and so on (and there are all those daytime TV ads). They're almost as numerous as the invitations I get to take out a loan so that I can do the things I've always wanted to do. But the small print nearly always goes to prove the certainty of what they want to guard against - that investments can go up as well as down and that the insurance is only valid if a pig happens to be flying by at the moment of injury. To sum it up - you cannot put your trust in your own agenda. There is no security in it.

And, if we're honest, deep down we know that. We know that there's an element of uncertainty. We may well have experienced that uncertainty in our own situation. And that leads to a deep-seated anxiety, a desire to cover all the bases and the stress and pressure of trying to keep it all going the way we want it to. We find our lives lack any real fulfilment because we're always hoping for something better - always looking ahead at what might be, so that we cannot enjoy what is. It leads to depression, to violence, to withdrawal, to bitterness and resentment - to being less than fully human. Oliver James, a popular psychologist, wrote a book a couple of years ago called *Britain on the Couch*. It's a fascinating read. In it he asks the question, "Why, when we are so much better off materially than we were only forty years ago, are we so much more unhappy?" His arguments are persuasive and we can see from our own experience of the world around that it's true. But he doesn't actually come to any real conclusions, unfortunately. It's clear that people are putting more and more trust in their own abilities to carve out the life they want in the face of more and more obstacles. People are relying too much on their own agenda.

Then Jesus comes bursting on to the scene and says, "*Give up your own agendas - and trust me for mine.*" Let me show you a better way to get the best out of life. After all, he created us. He knows how we should work. He knows what we need so that we can be fulfilled and satisfied as human beings made in the image of God. There's no point trying any other way than his.

A woman had been recently widowed and felt she needed company. A well-meaning friend suggested she get a pet, so she went off down the pet shop and had a word with the man behind the counter.

"What you need is a parrot," he said. "It'll be another living presence in the house - and this one here will talk to you as well."

So she bought the parrot and took it home. After a couple of days it showed no sign of talking so she went back to the shop.

"Maybe he's lonely," said the pet shop man. "Put a mirror in the cage so he can see himself and perhaps he'll start talking to his reflection." Alas! still no success, so the woman went back.

"He needs a bit of exercise, I expect. Take this little ladder and swing for his cage so he's got something to do." A few more days went by and the parrot seemed to be getting quite depressed himself, so the woman went back again.

"Talk to him as much as you can yourself," he said. "I know he can talk: I've heard him in the shop."

Two days later the woman was back at the shop. "He's died," she said. "Just keeled over and fell on to the bottom of the cage."

"Oh dear," said the pet shop owner. "Is that all that happened?"

"No," said the woman. "He actually said something at last. As he fell off the perch he said 'How about giving me some food, you daft old woman!'"

The parrot needed food to be a proper parrot. That was the agenda that would have sorted him out. That's what parrots are meant to do - to feed.

The woman tried another agenda and it didn't work. We try other agendas and they don't work, but Jesus knows exactly what we need to be fully human. "*Trust me for my agenda,*" he says. "*Trust my good news.*" And what is his good news? What has he told them that is so appealing? He hasn't actually started to preach it yet: these are the first words of his public ministry: why should anyone take him seriously? Well, he did actually say a few words before this sentence. He said, "*The time has come. The kingdom of God is near.*" That's the good news, the εὐαγγέλιον, the gospel – it's what the Old Testament prophets had been looking forward to. Jesus came bursting on to the scene declaring that the Kingdom of God was near. The time was ripe and things were about to happen. What that means is that the power of God is breaking into this world, overcoming other powers and pushing forward the boundaries of justice and righteousness as evil is gradually destroyed. That is demonstrated in the next few verses as the power of Jesus banishes the evil spirits from the possessed man.

The people who were listening to Jesus on this occasion would have understood immediately what he meant. The Kingdom of God was something they'd been looking forward to for centuries. They were waiting for this rule of God, this sovereignty of the awesome Creator and Lord of the Universe to be made real in their world. It meant that God's agenda, Jesus' agenda was going to be followed. There would be justice for everyone, there would be righteousness, healed relationships, security, a hope for the future in the short term and the long term. It would mean that men and women could begin to live as God intended them to - without constant and unnecessary anxiety, without that deep void within them that left them with an aching longing for something they couldn't quite describe. It would mean that God would be their God and they would be his people. There would be meaning in their lives again. (Of course, not

many of them actually believed that Jesus would deliver that - some of them actually thought it was so blasphemous of him to say that he could, that they did away with him, the irony being that it was Jesus' death that truly inaugurated the Kingdom.)

But that's God's agenda for all of humanity. That's the kingdom of God. That's the alternative to your own agenda of trying hard and always seeing the results slip away. It is, as they say, "an agenda to die for", isn't it? That's exactly what it is, in fact. God believes so passionately in this agenda that he sent Jesus into this world not only to proclaim it, to give people the opportunity of following his alternative. He sent Jesus, his own precious Son, a part of himself, into this world not only to demonstrate in his own life that it was better to follow God's agenda than any selfishly conceived human agenda - and he showed that in his struggle with the Devil in the desert as he was tempted to relinquish his own agenda and adopt that of the Devil. God sent Jesus into this world to die, to die horribly and humiliatingly on a cross on a hill - naked and bloodstained, jeered at and spat upon - to show just how much he believed in the agenda of the Kingdom of God. And as he hung there he effectively carried with him all those false and hopeless agendas held on to by you and me and men and women down through the ages.

Now, you may well be thinking - with some justification - that it doesn't seem much of an alternative agenda if it means you end up nailed to a plank of wood until your organs burst and your life seeps away. But that wasn't the end of it all, was it? A couple of days later, God's power enabled Jesus to burst from the tomb and demonstrate that he'd gone through death and out the other side into a new eternity of hope and joy and eternal fulfilment. He blazed the trail for all humanity to follow, an agenda that turns on its head the world's priorities and aspirations. Why bust a gut now in achieving some limited and limiting aims which you cannot be sure will be fulfilled, when you could adopt the agenda of the Kingdom of God which is a sure-fire winner? Someone once said: *"He's no fool who gives up what he cannot keep in return for what he cannot lose."*

In Jesus, all the work has been done. All you need to do to benefit from it is to trust him, to say, "OK, I'll have a go; I'll put my agenda to one side and trust you for yours." Maybe this morning you've started to think - maybe you've been thinking for a long time, "I'm not going anywhere. My life's not a mess exactly, but it's not a roaring success either. I want to know some peace. I want to have a future to look forward to." Well, I believe Jesus' invitation is as valid today as it has ever been. He is saying to you, *"Give up your own agenda and trust me for mine."*

Give up those things that you've been hanging on to for so long, those essentially false dreams and aspirations. Give up those idols, those things that have been standing between you and God. Give up

those wrong relationships that have been spoiling your life and draining your energy. Give up that false facade that keeps people at arm's length because you just can't bear to be real and honest with them.

Maybe you used to be pretty committed to Jesus: you'd call yourself a Christian, but things have slipped a bit. Rather than having a Christian lifestyle, you've become a lifestyle Christian, where God is fitted in amongst all the other lifestyle options, domesticated and reduced, largely ignored except for an hour or two on Sunday. Jesus is saying, give up those other priorities that have crowded God out of your life and haven't actually given you any greater satisfaction - rather, they've caused you more hassles than you ever had before.

Give them up - "*Repent*" if you want to good old biblical word - and believe, trust Jesus for his agenda. Listen for his voice. Ask for his Holy Spirit to fill you and take the place of all those other things that have been in the way up until now but will leave quite a hole in your life if you get rid of them. Read the Bible to find out what this agenda really entails. Pray to God and ask for his help when you set your priorities. There's actually, no-one but Jesus who can really set the agenda in a way which will bring you the satisfaction, the fulfilment and the eternal security that comes with the Kingdom of God.

When Jesus had issued his invitation to people to give up their own agendas and follow him, he came across some fishermen and he gave the same invitation to them - "*Come and follow me,*" he said, "*and I'll make you fishers of men.*" Give up that old way of life, get rid of those old priorities, and take mine on board. No longer were they to be totally absorbed with their own personal aims in life, but they were to put Jesus and the values of the Kingdom of God first. Sure, they went back to fishing from time to time, but it was no longer their number one priority. But on that occasion they responded immediately. Jesus' invitation is there for you.