

Tidings (Advent 2 – Mark 1. 1-8)
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Our reading this evening, brief as it is, is dense with Scriptural references and theological significance. Mark opens his story of Jesus with an allusion to the creation of the world. You'll remember the first words of the story of creation in the book of Genesis, 'In the beginning, when God created the heavens and the earth ...'. In John's gospel, an allusion to this Genesis passage is powerfully emphasised: 'In the beginning was the Word, and the word was with God, and the word was God'. In Mark, it is subtler, briefer, but still unmistakable. We are at a fresh 'beginning' that has cosmic significance – 'the beginning of the good news'.

Then Mark introduces us to the messenger who is preparing the way for this in-breaking of God in creation. He draws on the words of the prophet Malachi who pronounced, 'See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple' (Mal. 3. 1), and on Isaiah who proclaimed, 'A voice cries out: "In the wilderness, prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God' (Isa. 40. 3). Mark brings together these two otherwise unrelated texts from the Hebrew bible, and so identifies John the Baptist as the link between Israel's past (symbolised by the prophets) and its future (announced as the one who is to come).¹

And the journey from this past into the promised future is imaged as a second exodus journey. John the baptizer appears (we are told) in the wilderness, where the wilderness symbolises 'the time when God was preparing the people for entry into the promised land'. Commentator Bonnie Thurston suggests: 'Probably for this

¹ Bonnie Bowman Thurston, *Preaching Mark* (Minneapolis, MI: Fortress Press, 2002), 14.

reason, [this passage] is appointed as the text for the second Sunday in Advent. In scripture, the wilderness is the place where people go to meet God or where God chooses to appear'.² So in just four verses, we are given a world of meaning, a densely communicated set of quite extraordinary claims about the import of this story.

There's another feature of it all that has struck me this year. And that is the emphasis on the notion of 'news', 'good news' or what used to be translated as 'glad tidings'. The gospel begins: 'The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God', and this whole introductory section concludes with a summary of Jesus' own words: 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news' (Mark 1. 15). The passage from Isaiah from which Mark draws has a similar emphasis: the prophet is told to 'Cry out', to 'Get you up to a high mountain, O herald of good tidings to Zion; lift up your voice with strength, O herald of good tidings to Jerusalem, lift it up, do not fear; say to the cities of Judah, "Here is your God!"' (Isa. 40. 9). And recall that in Luke's story of Jesus' birth, it is not a prophet but an angel who brings to some astonished shepherds the good news of God's coming, which is 'glad tidings of great joy to you and all people'.

At one level, this might seem a fairly banal and obvious point – of course God's coming among us is news and of course God wants us to know about it. Evangelism – noting that 'this word comes from the Greek 'eu', meaning good, and 'angelion' meaning news or message, is simply our becoming participants in God's own evangelical project to share the good news of God with us. Well, yes – but (especially when the notion of evangelism and the history of its Christian practice make some of us feel distinctly squeamish) I still think there might be some implications of this that are worth dwelling on a little.

For one thing, it reminds us that God's coming, God's presence with us is a public matter, publically proclaimed. It is to be told, spoken about, shared – in

² Thurston, *Preaching Mark*, 14-15.

principle – with anyone. This feels like a no-brainer to us and our egalitarian age, but not all understandings of the divine encourage such an open door policy. Ancient mystery religions were essentially secret societies, whose knowledge and rituals were available only to the initiated, and the early church had to struggle against certain tendencies in this direction in various forms of ‘gnosticism’. If you are powerful or trying to accumulate power, it’s always a temptation to hijack God, to make God available only to an elect few (of whom, of course, you happen to be one). But just as Jesus’ practice of hospitality undermined any attempt by the religious authorities to confine access to God to those *they* deemed pure and fit, so Scripture’s insistence on the *public* proclamation of God’s word works against knowledge of God becoming another possession of a powerful elite.

This doesn’t mean that there is no such thing as maturing in faith, with some able to be recognised as having grown more fully in wisdom, discernment, authority and love. But such growth is never about initiation into secret knowledge or practice, but the fruit of deeper and more generous participation in a reality to which all are given access and all are invited. The good news of God is proclaimed from the mountain tops, within earshot of the whole city of Jerusalem.

A further implication, then, is that this good news concerns, in its essence, the whole of our life in the world and with each other. In the Scriptures it is proclaimed and made known cosmically from the heavens – in the movements of the stars and the voices of angels, and throughout the whole earth – in the wilderness, by rivers and lakes and flocks of sheep, on mountains and up sycamore trees and in crowded places. The good news meets us all the places we are, and it invites us to be in *those* places differently, more freely, more responsively. It is not special esoteric, insider knowledge, but empowerment to live our daily, human lives in the light of a reality whose advent among us provokes gladness, rejoicing. Which brings us, finally, to the question of what this good news is news of. What content can we give this notion of God’s coming, God’s nearer presence, recognised in the human life of Jesus?

Traditionally on the second Sunday in Advent we light the peace candle. A biblical scholar I knew used to complain that, in English, 'peace' is a *flaccid* word – a pale notion which points towards an absence, the absence of war or conflict. Whereas, he insisted, the biblical concept of peace – shalom – is a rich and positive notion, with connotations of well-being, abundance, and justice. Isaiah speaks of the coming of God in these terms: 'he will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead those that are with young' (Isa. 40.11). So also the angels who gave glad tidings of Jesus' birth to Luke's shepherds: 'Glory be to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favours'.

The good news is news of peace, shalom, God's blessing and healing and abundant life – which we receive insofar as we allow ourselves to be drawn into and participate in the dynamic of God's own, shalom bestowing life. And this involves, as John the Baptist proclaims, repenting – turning away from what is not God, having our patterns of thought and heart renewed, and letting ourselves be led through the wilderness of our fears and lostness, into new life.

And notice what this must involve if it is truly to be 'good news', public, historical, incarnate news. God's peace is not about our hunkering down into some private state of non-disturbance, but becoming those who live peaceably and create peace in our world. And God's presence is not about having a personal, 'spiritual' experience that makes me feel special, but learning recognise the presence of God in the world and in others, so as to be someone who evokes that healing reality in them and in our common life.

The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God is the strange and wondering testimony that we are being given access in a new and deeper way to the reality that leads us from death to life, from alienation to shalom, as individuals and as peoples who dwell upon this earth. Now that's evangelism I can get excited about, glad tidings indeed!