

“The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God”. So begins the gospel of Mark, not with a birth narrative, not with the beginning of creation but with this bold announcement, underscored by the prophecy from Isaiah about the arrival of God’s messenger whom Mark links to John the Baptist. Talk about compression! We are catapulted right into the middle of things and the pace of Mark’s gospel does not let up from there. Just a few verses later Jesus will be baptized and sent into the wilderness. There is no time to waste.

“The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God”. Almost two thousand years later we must ask: how do we hear this opening verse? Yes, it is an appropriate introduction to the whole gospel that talks about what happened back then but it is also one of those phrases that has multiple meanings and redefines our understanding of time. That’s because “the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God” is a continuing story, a story of which we are now a part and we find that the need for this good news is not so very different than it was when it was told to Mark’s listeners so very long ago.

Scholars figure that Mark was writing his gospel around the time that the temple was sacked and destroyed by the Roman army. An attempted rebellion had failed and the suppression of this revolt was brutal. In the aftermath people were just trying to survive. Taxes were, high, the rich got richer, morality had gone to hell in a handbasket, the poor, the sick, the vulnerable were being pulverized. Then this little band of believers had the audacity to hear in the ministry of Jesus Christ, an obscure peasant from Nazareth, who had been crucified some 30 years earlier, good news; good news, a way of looking at God’s presence in the world that would enable them to survive and even thrive in those difficult conditions and what is even more incredible is that the message of this good news would eventually spread across the breadth of the Roman Empire, to move out of the cultural context of Judaism to be heard from the North of England, to the Rock of Gibraltar, across Turkey, and up the Nile to the Sudan.

Nevertheless it’s kind of hard to imagine what people saw as good news in the face of conditions in 1<sup>st</sup> century Palestine. But truthfully no times were no harder than they are today. Is there a week that doesn’t go by when we ask ourselves “how does God let this happen?” whether it is the impact of natural disasters like the forest fires in California, to appalling conduct by so many public figures, or yet another mass shooting, this week in Aztec new, Mexico. How, we ask ourselves, does “the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God” speak to us today?

The good news is that Jesus does not triumph and turn the world upside down by force of arms, or by imposing a new hierarchy. No, Jesus triumphs by joining himself to us, becoming incarnate, a human being, one subject to all the vulnerabilities of our mortal condition. And then he did not work his way up the ladder of power instead he sought out the lost, offered forgiveness to sinners, he healed the sick, he cast out demons, he showed compassion to the hungry. Jesus embraced suffering and in so doing he transformed it. He offers us a way to transform our own lives.

Does that mean that we don’t or won’t suffer any more?

You’re kidding, right?

Just look around: some of us are ill, some of us are alone, some of us are caring for someone who is ill, and some of us have secret sorrows and sins that weigh us down. But, and this is the good news, good news that is borne out by all of our readings, with Jesus the Kingdom of God is here. The Kingdom of God is where we recognize that God is in charge, that the way we conduct ourselves is in accordance with God's desires, that what God intended for creation, the mutual benefit of all creatures, is actually paradise regained. Granted it is not fully realized and our very humanness seems to make that impossible but it is here to see if we will. The Kingdom of God requires that we reject our human understanding of power and control – just like Jesus.

The first step is to repent. And if you've got any living in you, there's lots to repent, not downright evil in most cases but perhaps most often, indifference. And sometimes, yes, oftentimes, what we most need to repent is how we have treated ourselves. We don't believe that we deserve forgiveness, which we don't, but we also refuse to believe and to accept the forgiveness that is given through God's grace. This is perhaps the greatest difference between the repentance demanded by John which was the traditional repentance demanded by the prophets in order to bring about the restored kingdom of Israel, and the repentance called for by Jesus which was to invite us to live into the Kingdom of God, bigger and more inclusive by far than just the nation of Israel. This kingdom of God that is sometimes so elusive but nevertheless arrived with the birth of God's Son. Jesus offers us a chance to repent in the true meaning of the word, to turn back to look at who we are and to who we have been and to recognize God's love for us no matter what we have done, to look at ourselves through the eyes of God, the eyes of love and acceptance.

How does feeling loved and accepted change our understanding of how we are to live in this world? That knowledge, that understanding, can help us to ignore the practical realities of oppression and injustice, it can strengthen us when we feel powerless, and it can give us hope in the face of loss. This is what we have in the time that is already and not yet, the time in which Jesus has come but his promise for the world has not been fulfilled; it is yet to come. It is the time of Advent, a time to practice living in two worlds.

If that sounds to fantastic let's think back to that marvelous classic from 1939, *The Wizard of Oz*. Remember how the movie starts in black and white, and that when it first appeared on television people had to be warned that there was nothing wrong with their tv sets? That's the symbolic state of Dorothy's life. Black and white and gray. Dorothy is dissatisfied with the boring life in a farm in Kansas. It's kind of hard to blame her when that life is viewed through her eyes, isn't it? Then she gets transported to the wonderful land of OZ where everything is in living color. Once in OZ Dorothy has all kinds of adventures, but through them all she just wants to get back home. You might ask why, but let's face it, home is home. Much like Jesus helped us to understand that by becoming incarnate, our mortal lives have value, value enough that it is worth making sure that we will be restored when God has called us home.

Now think back to the penultimate scene when Glinda tells Dorothy that she has always had the power to get back home. All she has to do is click her heels together three times and say "there's no place like home." Repentance is like that, Jesus is calling us to turn back, to see

ourselves, to let our true and forgiven selves be what we were created to be. But this doesn't turn everything into the land of OZ. No. Dorothy's deepest desire was to get home, and when she does get there, everything is still in black and white and gray. She is still in Kansas. First century Palestine was still first century Palestine but believing that Jesus Christ was Lord made a difference in the lives of those who accepted him, as believing in him today can make a difference for us. When we are forgiven, we are still who we are but when we accept that, then we are able to live with that knowledge and to hold fast to the joy of what is to come in the technicolor kingdom of God.

And that is the continuing story of "the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God."

Amen.