

**God's Servant**

Mark 1.9-15

It's worth reminding ourselves that Mark was writing for a later generation of Christians than those who first heard Jesus proclaim the good news. So Mark is not simply spreading the word like a news reporter describing current events, but repeating Jesus' proclamation to his readers in his own time, and to all subsequent readers, including, of course, you and me. So what follows is not simply what Jesus said to the fishermen then, but what Jesus is saying to us now.

The sheer brevity of Mark's story seems to offer little material for the preacher. Indeed, as we move through the year of Mark, John's gospel is called on consistently and often, to fill out the Sundays when Mark's story does not have enough texts to go around. This passage for Lent 1 is typical of Mark. In six verses the events of "those days" are laid out, beginning with Jesus' arrival from Nazareth and extending to Jesus' first preaching in Galilee.

There is, however, a certain drama in the brevity itself. In a few swift strokes of the pen, Mark sets the stage for all that is to come. Our attention is focused precisely on the man Jesus and the message he brings. This clearing away of extraneous detail, this forcing of our attention on Jesus, is perhaps exactly what believers who are too absorbed in their own projects need in Lent to make them focus.

Mark's opening verses invite us to re-focus with verses that echo Jesus' own message, "repent and believe in the gospel." We might translate these familiar words "re-focus and trust the good news." Mark leaves us in no doubt about the good news that Jesus calls upon his hearers to trust. First, it's "good news about God." Secondly, it's all about timing: "The time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God is at hand." Both verbs ("is fulfilled"/"is at hand") are in the perfect tense. Something has already happened, and the implications of that happening are emerging in "those days": the very same days referred to in verse 9. The time is ripe and the kingdom has come near. No wonder Mark's gospel is marked by brevity. His message is urgent and there is no time to waste on unnecessary words.

Besides, so many words had already been spoken. Mark is able to be terse because his words are all so rich and weighty. In these six verses he alludes constantly to his own Scripture (and that of Jesus!), our Old Testament. As he has already told us (Mark 1.2), the words of the prophet Isaiah resound through the centuries, leading us to the fullness of time.

Isaiah provides many references for Mark 1.9-15. The placing of God's Spirit on his chosen one to bring justice to the nations is part of God's description of the servant in Isaiah 42.1. The "beloved one" (Mark 1.11) does not convey a message of warm feelings on God's part toward Jesus. Instead, it conveys the message that Jesus is the servant sent by God, as promised in Isaiah. Isaiah's prophecy also yields a deeper sense of what God's kingdom may be. Isaiah 52.7 connects the one who brings good news with the proclamation, "Your God reigns". The coming of the servant who will be exalted is preceded by his being almost unrecognisable as human:

See, my servant shall prosper;

he shall be exalted and lifted up,

and shall be very high.

Just as there were many who were astonished at him

– so marred was his appearance, beyond human semblance,

and his form beyond that of mortals –

so he shall startle many nations;

kings shall shut their mouths because of him;

for that which had not been told them they shall see,

and that which they had not heard they shall contemplate.

(Isaiah 52.13-15).

With these verses ringing in our ears, we hear Mark's description of Jesus coming into Galilee wondering what will happen to him. We know, of course, that the story leads urgently to the fulfilment of those prophecies about the servant, as surely as Lent drives toward Good Friday. Yet the promise of exaltation of the servant, as the one who ushers in God's reign, is already there, right at the beginning.

All this prophetic preparation does not diminish the qualities of loneliness and violence that this passage embodies: a loneliness that will be exacerbated for Jesus as the gospel story unfolds. We are shocked at the unceremonious and "immediate" follow-up to Jesus' baptism, when the Spirit literally throws him out into the wilderness. We are put on notice when we hear that John has been "arrested". Mark uses the same word to describes John's arrest as he uses to describe Jesus' betrayal and arrest, right from the moment Judas is introduced in 3.19 (See also 9.31; 10.33; 14.10, 11, 18, 21, 41, 42, 15.1, 10, 15.) The word "arrest" is always violent and negative.

The loneliness of God's servant, a theme that persists throughout the gospel, is already suggested in these opening verses. It all begins in the wilderness, home both to the prophets of Israel and to Israel itself in the years of wandering. Jesus will be there too, his responses to Satan's temptations witnessed by no one. Again, at his baptism, the voice and vision belong to Jesus alone. The words, "You are my Beloved," are singular. It is Jesus who is beloved, as Isaac before him and Joseph: men whose lives belonged to God and who suffered much for God's people. Jesus' proclamation of the "gospel of God" follows immediately upon the arrest of John who had also been preaching repentance. That arrest will not bode well for John or Jesus. At the end of Lent and the end of Mark, both violence and loneliness come to their culmination in Jesus' cry of abandonment on the cross. We ponder the connection between the establishment of the reign of God, and the incarnation of peace where wild animals no longer exist in enmity with humans (a foretaste of that kingdom occurs during Jesus' temptations in verse 13). Something new has begun and Jesus is announcing it as good news. Remember the words of verse 10:

Just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart.

Here at the commencement of Mark's narrative, God tears apart the veil that has kept heaven's power and intention hidden, but Jesus alone is witness to it. But at the end of Mark's narrative, the suffering of Jesus the servant is on public view as he hangs on the cross,

And the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom.

Mark 15.38

This tearing of the veil between God and humankind and the opening of God's reign among all humans, both begin in this lonely, isolated way. Who will see it? Who will recognise the truth of what Jesus is saying, and how he embodies God's way of being among God's people? Mark's gospel sets before us God's own beloved Son, who announces clearly what is going on in the cosmos. We who hear him may misunderstand, or be misunderstood, or even give up completely. Yet, it is Good News announced here. It is good news that some seed "brings forth as much as a hundredfold" (Mark in 4.8). It is good news that "to you (plural) has been given the mystery of the kingdom of God..." (Mark 4.11). During Lent, perhaps we can focus our own attention on that kingdom that Jesus bears among us, as he challenges us: "Let anyone with ears to hear listen" (Mark 4.9).

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