



Advent Sunday 2

THE NEW SHOFAR

Advent 2 - We are invited to a new beginning

Isaiah 40:1-11 - Mark 1:1-8

December 10th, 2017

in the beginning...

It should not come as a surprise to see the language used here by Mark. What he has done is open his Gospel with an echo of the creation story – *the beginning*. In both cases it is a celebration of the authority of God in creation. Here begins a whole new story, a story about a new world, a new creation in which everything and everyone has an invitation to take part in this gift of newness. Mark's invitation is simple: In Christ we have the offer of new life, not just once but throughout the whole of our lives. Mark's Gospel is a celebration of this action of God to bring all men and women into the family of God. It begins now – if we respond.

This is why Mark describes this invitation as being *the good news*. It is the Good News of the rule of God, of salvation for all. The Greeks used the word when speaking of a great military victory, the birth of a member of the royal family or a significant political victory. But here Mark is saying something very different – this Good News is clear – it is *Jesus of Nazareth the Christ, the Son of God*. Those words may not sound all that significant from a perspective here in the west some two thousand years after the event, but they shook the world of those who read it and heard it proclaimed. Mark's Gospel is no simple biography telling of a journey of this man from his birth to his death on the cross. What makes it Good News = *evangelion* = *gospel*- is that Jesus is *the Christ, the Son of God*.

Jesus IS God's Son

For Mark, the point of his opening his Gospel in this way is so that he can highlight all of this as being a divine initiative, an act of God. Once he has established that, the Jewish world would come alight with joy and hope. God was (at last!) bringing to an end something that had begun back with Abraham. It is not that God has been doing nothing. The divine saving works have been unfolding for us in the history of this one people Israel. But this has not been a smooth and untroubled journey, with more twists and turns than a spy novel. Sin abounded! But while sin abounded, grace was always the more powerful and so despite the limitations of the people chosen by God to fulfil the divine saving mission in creation, the moment is upon us. God's Anointed One – *the Christ* – has come. Not only has *he* arrived among us but *he* is nothing less than God's only Son.

Why is this so exciting? It is because God's actions in creation are now revealed to us and opened up for us in this man Jesus. The closer to Jesus to clearer we can see the face of God in the world around us. Question: where/how do we see God's face?

This reading comes at the end of one year, as we approach the beginning of a new one. In prayer, what were our failures, our sins, things we know were not in accord with the Gospel (done or not done)? If we want to be transformed, forgiven, what will we do next?

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It all begins in the wilderness

How appropriate is it that Mark reveals to us the way this Good News of God makes itself known to us *in the wilderness* in the person of a *prophet* (John) proclaiming an invitation to *repent* and *believe*. The combination of *wilderness* and *salvation* is one that has been woven into the story of Israel, into our own human history. A *wilderness* is not simply a geographical reference, it is what there was *in the beginning* when God began the work of creation and it is the spiritual condition of men and women throughout the whole of our lives. We all know those moments of living in the *wilderness*, those times of loneliness, of uncertainty of our direction, hungering and thirsting for something but not knowing quite what that “something” was. And like all *wilderness* moments, we have all experienced uncertainty about the directions we need to be taking and the decisions we need to be making. This is where Mark’s Gospel encounters us and here in the wilderness the Good News is proclaimed – *Jesus is God’s Son*.

a voice of one calling out in the wilderness

It is so easy to pass over this little note, missing its key place in the evangelist’s message to his Church. How is this *Christ*, this *Messiah* to be made known by the world, by those people yearning for hope and the chance to move on from their *wilderness* experiences? God does not appear in the world amidst thunderstorms, lightning strikes and mighty armies of angels. God’s presence in creation is revealed by a hairy prophet, an odd man who lived in the desert, ate locusts and honey and through his very passion for God, spiritually challenged everyone he met. Key to this is how he was *in the wilderness*. His message was lived where the *wilderness* was experienced.

For Mark’s Christ to touch our lives, we first of all need to acknowledge our “wilderness” moments, our need for a Messiah. What can Christ do for us? What difference can the Messiah make in our lives? How can we offer this Good News to those living in the wilderness of today’s world? What do we need to be doing to experience transformation?

This is going to be a key element of the rest of Mark’s Gospel. This *Messiah* is not going to lock himself away in the sanctuary of the Temple and spend his time offering prayers and incense after stepping over the beggars, the sinners and the outcasts gathered as beggars on the Temple steps. He has been sent by God to people living in the *wilderness* because these are the very people who *need* light, who *seek* love, forgiveness, healing, belonging and hope. Those who feel they are comfortable in the presence of their God in the sanctity of the Temple are going to find themselves a long way from the coal face of salvation. Only those who acknowledge a passionate need for God can find the Christ.

“John” the ever-present prophet “in the wilderness”

The evangelist is not into writing history, at least not history as we are used to it. John is a “type” of disciple, he is offered to us by Mark as a *model for discipleship*. The vocation given to us at our baptism, stressed at our confirmation and renewed each time we celebrate the Eucharist is to proclaim the *Messiah* by word and deed *in the wilderness* in which we live with others. It is by the way we use this gift of God in our daily living that we make clear to others just what is open to them if they only *repent* and *believe*. *Here is the challenge then: how do we live this Good News in the wilderness around us? What would be the signs of our proclamation of the Good News? What will the world observe/experience through us? How can we imitate John?*

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