

'baptise with the Holy Spirit' (1:8). This, of course, is exactly what happened on the first Pentecost Sunday, when thousands repented, were baptised and were saved (Acts 2:38-42).

The other important feature of John the Baptist is that he was a preacher and a prophet. The connection is straightforward. An Old Testament prophet is someone who was given a special word from the Lord and was required to convey that word. A preacher is someone who in New Testament times is given authority to declare God's word, and does so. The difference between the two is little, and it is hard to imagine what a preacher is doing today unless they think they are conveying God's word; that is, exercising the gift of prophecy. The physical description of John (1:6) connects him with the Old Testament prophets of the past, but the verses in this passage about his preaching link him with preachers of New Testament times and to us. In addition, just as John recognised that his own work was limited unless it was taken up in power by the Messiah and the Holy Spirit (1:8), so we who preach today must recognise that we preach in vain unless we expect the Lord to work by His Holy Spirit through what is said and done, to bring about the true repentance and changing of ways that makes for true salvation and deliverance of the repentant sinner.

Application

There is a great deal that can be explored within this passage of Scripture; further analysis of the Old Testament passages of Scripture to which it relates, and investigation into what is meant by John's clothes and eating, for example. I have nevertheless focussed on the one main feature of Mark's Gospel which has generally been accepted as one of its main characteristics, and that is 'preaching'. If you read other more theological books about Mark's Gospel, you will find that this is referred to by its Greek name 'kerygma'. John's preaching points to Jesus Christ and the work of the Holy Spirit, as ours should; it calls people to repentance and confession of sin, as ours should; it is delivered 'in the desert' where people of all kinds are able to come and hear it, as ours should; it makes stern demands on those who respond, as ours should. All of this is found in our passage today, simply as a prelude to Mark's great Gospel! There is much more to come.

From these points there are many challenges from which we can learn. For example, we often treat preaching today as an event in itself, without connecting it to its essential consequence, the work of God in the heart of the believer, through Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. By this, I mean that sermons are preached Sunday after Sunday as if God will do whatever He will with what is preached, and there is nothing we can or need to do about it. Surely that is not the case. People can be given ways and means to respond to the Gospel preached, prayer teams can offer ministry, and the church's own groups or 'cells' can offer a place to respond to the preached word. All of this and more can be done within an active church; it depends upon the value placed on what is preached, and too often it is very little. Again, there is more to explore within this theme of preaching; for example, suitable places to preach, and whether preaching points to the Holy Spirit as well as Christ. If this passage today is a part of a prologue to the whole Gospel, then we can expect that these themes will rise again.

Questions (for use in groups)

1. Discuss what you believe to be the 'Gospel of Jesus Christ'. How does this relate to the introduction to Mark's Gospel?
2. In what ways is John the Baptist an important role model for preachers today?
3. From what this passage says, what do you believe is the difference between baptism with water and baptism with the Holy Spirit?

Discipleship

Reading Scripture is something which people can find easy or difficult. Sometimes we can read a passage which stops us in our tracks and forces us to spend time with it, because it says something which we had not expected and we need to check it out. At other times we read Scripture too quickly and do not take on board the important details which it contains. What we have read today invites us to consider that there might be more for us to discover in passages which we might otherwise read through very quickly. Read this passage through again, several times, and see what comes out of the exercise!

Final Prayer

Call each of us, Lord Jesus, according to Your plans for the world and for the future. May we be prepared to play our part in whatever way you require of us, so that Your Gospel may be proclaimed throughout the world, and to Your glory! Thanks be to God; AMEN

Prayer

As we face all that lies ahead, Lord Jesus, establish our faith firmly so that we live the Gospel in which we believe. May we not be guilty of religious hypocrisy, and may we be kept secure in our faith through all the circumstances of our personal lives. Maintain in us the truths we have been given through revelation and the Word, so we may praise You throughout our lives, and forever; AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: Looking Ahead

Praise God for the New Year. Many people use this as an occasion to consider 'new year resolutions' and attempt to improve themselves by their own efforts. Pray that Christian people will find that it is by God's help alone that they can really be renewed and strengthened for the days ahead. Pray for the Lord to break through into people's lives through their resolutions.

Meditation

Almighty Lord and God who speaks to us all
through the wonder, majesty and greatness of creation;
speak to me through the quiet whisper of a breeze,
the wonder of colour, or the flight of a simple butterfly.

Almighty Lord and God who speaks to us all
through history, and through the lives of great people;
speak to me in the everyday events of my own small life,
both that which seems important, and also what seems insignificant.

Almighty Lord and God who speaks to us all
through the grandeur and power of music which touches the soul;
speak to me in the psalms and hymns and songs of praise
that linger in my mind and teach me truth from day to day.

Almighty Lord and God who speaks to us all
through the epic events unfolding all around us within the world;
speak to me in the trials and joys of life which happen every day
and show me Your care for everything, which includes even me.

Bible Study - Mark 1:1-8

¹ The beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. ² As it is written by the prophet Isaiah: 'Look, I am sending my messenger ahead of You, who will prepare Your way; ³ a voice of one crying out in the desert, "Prepare the way of the Lord, make His paths straight,"

⁴ So it was that John the Baptist appeared in the desert, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁵ People from all the Judean countryside and from all Jerusalem went out to him; they were baptised by him in the river Jordan when they confessed their sins. ⁶ John wore clothes of camel hair and a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. ⁷ This is what he preached: 'One who is far more powerful than me is coming after me. I am not worthy to stoop and untie the straps of his sandals. ⁸ I have baptised you with water, but He will baptise you with the Holy Spirit.'

Review

The beginning of Marks' Gospel is quick and sudden. The Gospel of Jesus Christ is announced (1:1), the Old Testament is quoted indicating that a messenger is coming to prepare the way for Jesus as the Son of God (1:2,3), and John the Baptist is announced as the one delivering this message (1:4-8). For those of us who like the 'Christmas' stories of Matthew or Luke or the rich theology of John chapter 1, this brief introduction to a Gospel seems rather weak. The beginning of Mark's Gospel nevertheless holds much, and we miss it far too easily.

So, why did Mark begin like this and not with a story about Jesus' birth? In the early days of the church, the Kingdom of God grew as preachers spoke about Jesus Christ, and the 'good news' of His death and resurrection brought people into a new relationship with God (see various stories in the Acts of the Apostles e.g. chapter 17). Through this message, people were 'saved' by faith, and other information about Jesus' life, such as how he was born, was passed on later. It seems that Mark's Gospel came into existence at this early phase of the life of the church as something more like a sermon preached to a congregation rather than an integrated story designed to tell us all the details about Jesus' life. Throughout the Gospel, Mark's concern appears to have been to offer people the Gospel of Jesus Christ so that they could hear it and be saved, rather than methodical story telling! So, just like a good sermon, Mark's Gospel starts with a powerful series of quotations from the Old Testament telling people to prepare for the Lord's coming with a messenger ahead of Him, crying out 'prepare the way of the Lord ...' (1:3)

Mark's quote from the prophet Isaiah (Mark 1:2,3) is very important, but it is more complicated than it looks. It has obvious similarities to Isaiah 40:3, but the quote is made up of three passages; Exodus 23:20, Isaiah 40:3 and Malachi 3:1! This is no casual connection, and Mark placed these prophecies together like this in order to give us plenty of information about how both John and Jesus fulfilled Old Testament prophecy.

After the introduction (1:1-3), most of the opening verses of the Gospel are about John the Baptist (1:4-8). It was clearly Mark's intention to tell his readers that John the Baptist was the connection between Jesus and the Scriptures of the Old Testament. This was important, because before Mark began to write, the only Scriptures possessed by the early church were the Old Testament, and it was essential that he prove to his readers that the God they knew from Scriptures and their own traditions was indeed the God to be found in Jesus. So Mark connects John with not just one, but all the famous prophecies of the forerunner of the Messiah (as in the quotes above); but most importantly, that he was like Elijah (see 2 Kings 1:8) the prophet people believed would 'come again' before the Messiah (see Malachi 4:5).

In addition, Mark's style as a preacher is also shown in what he said about John, and this connected strongly with his message about Jesus. He highlighted John's appeal for 'repentance', 'baptism' and the 'forgiveness of sins' (1:4), and then quoted his significant comment that Christ would 'baptise ... with the Holy Spirit' (1:8). All of this is remarkably similar to Peter's powerful preaching on the day of Pentecost when the church came into being (see Acts 2:38); this famous sermon and the call for response given by Peter at the end was the first 'model' sermon for those preaching the Gospel in the Church.

All this is a tantalising glimpse into how and why Mark began to write his Gospel. Some say that Mark was a servant of Peter and wrote down his story. Certainly, the opening of the Gospel gives us good reason to suspect that this may have been the case; and it certainly seems to have copied Peter's style of preaching.

Going Deeper

Already, we have a glimpse of the intrigue of Mark's Gospel, written with an emphasis on preaching and with an eye to the fulfilment of prophecy. There are three sections for our deeper study, the powerful first verse, the meaning of Mark's strange triple quote from 'Isaiah', and the description of the preaching of John the Baptist, the first 'mini-sermon' in the Gospel. Each of them has further secrets to reveal which help us with our understanding of Mark's Gospel.

'In the beginning ...?'

Who can tell whether or not Mark thought he was the first person to write a 'Gospel', a complete account of the life of Christ to aid the preacher in his task of conveying the truth about Christ and God? For centuries, the Old Testament had been the written account of the works of God amongst His people. It spoke of the beginnings of the world and the character of God, the fall of humanity, the nature of sin and the Covenant relationship God formed with His servant Abraham through which He intended to overcome the evil inherent in humanity. The great Scriptural history of the Jewish people culminated in the testimony of the great prophets. They had heard God's voice both around and after the Babylonian exile, when God's people had to re-think their faith after the collapse of David's earthly dynasty and the sacking of the sacred Temple in Jerusalem; and out of this tragedy, the people found a renewed faith in their God. However, as the centuries passed, it felt as if the prophetic voice had waned and the Lord no longer spoke with clarity and vigour. Rabbis of Jesus' day were thought of as privileged

because through their learning and study of the ancient Scriptural texts, they heard a faint echo of the prophetic voice called in Hebrew the 'bath-qol', or 'daughter of the voice' of God.

Against this backdrop, the opening words of Mark's Gospel are extraordinarily bold! He announced that God was about to do a new work, starting his work with the same word which began the Old Testament book of Genesis; 'The beginning ...' (Mark 1:1, cf. Genesis 1:1). He was not as bold as John, who in later years copied the words exactly; 'In the beginning ...' (John 1:1), but there is no doubt why Mark used this word. After centuries of apparent silence from God, the Old Testament prophecies were being fulfilled. God had not given up on His plan to make His people a 'light to the Gentiles' (Isaiah 49:6) and bring blessings to all people (Genesis 12:3). The 'good news', or 'Gospel', was that the prophecies were fulfilled in 'Jesus Christ, the Son of God' (Mark 1:1). In Mark's first verse he made the boldest claim imaginable and one which shocked the Jewish and Gentile world wherever it was first preached. The man Jesus Christ was the 'Son of God', the Messiah, through whom God fulfilled all His promises about making peace between himself and all people. A new age had begun; a new 'beginning'.

Prophecies from Isaiah?

We have noted above that Mark 1:2,3 is made up of three passages of scripture. In detail, 'look. I am sending my messenger ahead of you' comes from Exodus 23:20, where God promises His people that if they listen to Him, He will lead them directly to the 'Promised Land'. In Hebrew, the word for 'messenger' and 'angel' are the same, so if you look up this text from Exodus in your Bibles, then you may well find the word 'angel' instead of 'messenger'; but it means the same and makes no difference to the text.

Secondly, the part of Mark's opening which says 'I am sending my messenger ... who will prepare your way' (1:2) overlaps partly with Exodus 23:20, but adds the idea of 'preparing the way' which is found in this form exclusively in Malachi 3:1. This is not surprising because at the time Malachi wrote (he was the last Old Testament prophet) Isaiah had previously spoken about someone who would go before the Lord's 'servant' and announce God's intentions. It was Malachi's unique addition to our understanding of the coming of God's servant, the Messiah, that this 'forerunner' would be Elijah (Malachi 4:5). This made sense to the Jewish people because Elijah was arguably the first great prophet, and he had never died. He had been transported to glory in a chariot of fire and in a whirlwind (2 Kings 2:11).

Lastly, Mark 1:3 is close to a direct quote from Isaiah 40:3, which reads 'a voice cries out, "in the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God."' So why would Mark put these three Old Testament prophecies together and describe them as all 'written by the prophet Isaiah' (1:2). There are a number of places in the New Testament where writers use different but similar quotes from the Old Testament (See, for example, Hebrews 1:5-13 and 3:7-11), so this is not the only place where this occurs. It is therefore likely that Mark saw these three quotes as being joined together primarily through Isaiah, and considered that they made the one essential point, together. Mark, true to the preaching style of his Gospel, emphasised that God would send His messenger ahead of the Messiah before He lead God's people into the true 'Promised Land' (see quote from Exodus) of salvation from sin and a new relationship with God!

John the Baptist

The characteristic of John the Baptist in Mark's Gospel is that he is the first preacher. He 'proclaims' repentance and forgiveness (1:4), is powerful and popular in his preaching (1:5), he behaves like a prophet of God (1:6), and preached the coming of the Messiah (1:7) and the baptism with the Holy Spirit (1:8). There is hardly a better job description of a preacher in the New Testament, providing we do not take the lifestyle issues (1:6) too literally! It is too easy for us to read this part of Mark's Gospel as if we have not yet come to the 'meat' of the Gospel, but this passage is like a summary of the proclamation of the Gospel. By itself, it acts like a preview of everything to come in the rest of the Gospel.

Every part of the passage is symbolic. The people of Israel as well as the people of the world live in a spiritual desert, and John the Baptist asks people to meet him there to confess the reality of their condition; to confess sin and repent. Both are important for the Gospel and John doubtless preached them both. If we look at the other Gospels, however, we find that John lambasted those who came to him and confessed their sin but did not change their ways, in other words, they did not repent (e.g. Matt 3:7-10). A careful look at our passage shows that this is exactly what is reported by Mark, but in a more subtle way. Those who came out to John confessed their sins (1:5), but there is no mention of repenting. Instead, John's preaching appears to suggest that true repentance will only come with the work of the Messiah who will