

God than almost anywhere else. We will soon discover in Mark's Gospel that Jesus' preaching soon attracted interest from a wide range of people.

There is one thing worth commenting upon at this point in our study however. Elsewhere in the Gospel, Mark often reports that Jesus told people to keep His identity secret; for example, He sometimes told people not to reveal who He was (see 1:44, 3:12, 5:43 etc). But this theme of 'secrecy' does not mean that Mark doubted who Jesus was, or that Mark thought Jesus doubted who He was, for from the beginning, Mark has told us with certainty that Jesus was God's Messiah. The truth about Jesus in Mark's Gospel is that although He preached and acted boldly to declare and demonstrate the Kingdom of God, he also came as a servant (see above), not attempting to force people to believe His message, but appealing to them; and not arguing with people but accepting their choices and the responses they made to what He preached. Bold preaching should not mean human aggression or brain-washing; it simply reflects conviction of the truth.

Application

We will briefly take up three issues for consideration; firstly, the work of the Holy Spirit in anointing Jesus for His work. It seems obvious to say this, but wherever the baptism of Jesus is mentioned in the Gospel, the Holy Spirit is also described as powerfully and immediately at work. In today's church, too many are still afraid of talk of the Holy Spirit, concerned that what some Christians mean by the work of the Holy Spirit is somehow at odds with the traditions of the church. In addition, I have attended services of adult baptism in some churches, at which the Holy Spirit has not been mentioned, or, it seems, invited! Surely the time has come for all Christians to stop being afraid of the Holy Spirit and accept that the Holy Spirit is God at work in this world. It was the Holy Spirit who empowered our Lord to do what He did. We are commissioned to do the same, and as a matter of urgency, we cannot do this without the same Holy Spirit.

Secondly, the picture of Jesus being cared for and ministered to by angels is powerful (1:13). It reminds us that as we fight the spiritual battles in which we are engaged as God's people, there is ample help at hand. Too often, we forget that we are all involved in spiritual matters which are far bigger than we can see with our eyes or experience with our normal senses. The Holy Spirit works in the hearts of believers to give them spiritual awareness, and one such awareness is that we are on the winning side of a war against Satan and all evil, just as Jesus was throughout His ministry. In addition, there are angelic hosts supporting us in what we do for the Lord. It may not be easy to talk in such a way, but many of God's people are coming to realise that we have dismissed the spiritual all too easily in our modern world.

Thirdly, Jesus' brief and succinct sermon is a challenge to all who preach today to be clear about the message they preach. Jesus had one message, and a thousand different ways to live it and demonstrate it; and this one message was about the presence of God's Kingdom in our midst and the need to respond to it. Given that all Christians are called to follow Jesus' example, is it not worth asking whether we should make this the one message to the world which unites all God's people, all Christians, today?

Questions (for use in groups)

1. How is baptism practised in your church, and how does it reflect the work of the Holy Spirit?
2. In what ways are you aware of the spiritual battle in which we are involved as God's people, or does this whole idea fill you with concern? If so, what concern?
3. Is the Kingdom of God any nearer now that it was in Jesus' day? How can we preach the presence of God's Kingdom today?

Discipleship

In his Gospel, Mark has an admirable way of reducing things down to the bare minimum, in order to say what he has to say. Given that our brains can only hold a small number of things active in our minds at one time, his approach has much to commend it. For example, when attending worship or spending time in your devotions, concentrate not so much on being sensitive to everything – especially things you don't like, but focus on the one or two things which God is saying to you at the time. You will then find you are blessed, in all circumstances!

Final Prayer

Lord, I turn my eyes towards You, I look for Your help, I seek Your advice, and I long for Your presence in every moment of my life. Remove the unseen barriers, O Lord, and break into my consciousness with Your liberating power, I pray, and encourage me. Thank You, Lord: AMEN

Prayer

Save us, O Lord, from becoming consumed by our own concerns and interests. Direct our hearts towards offering genuine concern for all those who need our love, our help, our care, our fellowship and our friendship. In this, may we find fulfilment through You who are the greatest friend we can ever have; AMEN.

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: Looking Ahead

Pray for all people for whom the days ahead look dark and difficult; those who have experienced great trouble within their families or those who have recently been bereaved, for example. Pray to ask the Lord's protection during their trials, and pray for them to receive supernatural strength to sustain them in the days ahead. Bless them through your prayers.

Meditation

This is the way of the Lord, this is His will:

He cuts the giants down to size, and raises up those who feel powerless;
He loves without distinction or favour, and values those who are rejected;
He washes away the filth of human sin, and exposes the beauty of holiness;
He laughs in the face of human fashions, and promotes the power of truth;
He loves and cares for the world's forgotten, and lays bare the equality of all;
He opposes the evils of greed outright, and fights for fairness and justice;
He offers salvation to all who will hear it, and cuts across all false religiosity;
He brings an end to the power of sin and death, and recreates the world;
He shows His glory in this new creation, by the resurrection from the dead!

This is the way of the Lord

This is what happens in His Kingdom.

Bible Study - Mark 1:9-15

⁹ At that time, Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptised in the river Jordan by John. ¹⁰ As soon as He came up from the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit coming down on Him like a dove. ¹¹ A voice came from the heavens; 'You are my Son, the One whom I love; with You I am very pleased.'

¹² The Spirit immediately took him out into the wilderness, ¹³ and He remained in the desert for forty days being put to the test by Satan. He was with wild animals, and angels took care of His needs.

¹⁴ Now, when John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee preaching the good news of God.

¹⁵ He said, 'The time has now come and the Kingdom of God is close at hand. Repent, and believe in the good news!'

Review

These remarkable verses complete the introduction of Mark's Gospel, which, as we say yesterday, began with a brief reference to the story of John the Baptist. Our passage today describes three incidents; Jesus' Baptism (1:9-11), His testing in the wilderness (1:12-13), and the beginning of His preaching (1:14,15). Each of these gives us essential information about Jesus, but we are immediately struck by the speed with which Mark sweeps into his story; the 'heavens are torn apart' (1:10), the Spirit 'immediately' takes Him into the wilderness (1:12). Each of these events is described more fully in the Gospel of Matthew or Luke, but here in Mark, they are brief summaries that serve to prepare us for the dramatic first events of Jesus' actual ministry.

Mark does not give us an extensive description of John's meeting with Jesus, such as we find in Matthew's Gospel (Matt 3:13-17) for example. He merely tells us some of the story of Jesus' baptism, but focuses on describing the power and authority of God in appearing from the heavens and coming in the form of the Holy Spirit on Jesus 'like a dove' (1:10). The words spoken by God (1:11) are typical of many great passages of Scripture in which God gives His approval to His servants (for example, see Psalm 2:7 or Isaiah 42:1f.). Nevertheless, Mark reports more of what God says about Jesus than either

Matthew or Luke; 'You are my Son, the One whom I love; with whom I am very pleased.' There are some subtleties to these words (as we find out in the main study), but the whole sentence tells us very clearly that Jesus was God's own dearly loved Son, the Messiah.

Next, we are surprised to read that the temptations of Jesus in the wilderness have been reduced to two brief verses (1:12,13)! The other Gospels tell us the details of Jesus' temptations, and explain that they were a significant part of the beginning of His ministry because of Jesus' ability to defeat Satan and all forms of temptation. However, Mark does not describe any victory; all he says is that Jesus was 'put to the test by Satan' and adds some comments about animals and angels (1:12,13)! It is possible that Mark was simply telling us that Jesus' ministry would always be a battle with Satan and the forces of evil. The battle had begun, but it would only be won conclusively when Jesus faced death on the Cross and rose again in victory. Jesus' temptations are indeed an important part of each of the three Gospels in which they are recorded (Matthew, Mark and Luke), but each Gospel writer uses the story in a different way to say something important about Jesus.

The last part of our passage describes Jesus' preaching. It also tells us that Jesus only began preaching after 'John was arrested' (1:14). The pace of Mark's Gospel is very quick, but Mark felt it is important to tell us that Jesus waited for John's ministry to be completed before His began. In some Gospels there is a hint of competition between the disciples of John and Jesus (see Matthew 11, for example), but as far as Mark was concerned, this was unimportant. John had prepared the way for the Gospel and the news of God's Kingdom, so when his job was finished Jesus continued by preaching repentance, just as John had done. However, Jesus went further and preached what could only be announced by the Messiah Himself, that God's Kingdom was 'at hand' (or, more literally, 'touchable'). God's work of salvation had begun!

It is all too easy to prefer reading about Jesus' baptism, temptations and His initial preaching from the Gospels of Matthew or Luke, because what is said is more appealing to us than the brief reports of Mark's Gospel. However, Mark uses these incidents to deliver three sharply focussed points which form an essential introduction to his whole Gospel. Jesus was God's loved Son and anointed Messiah, His life was a battle against evil, and He preached repentance, belief in God, and the coming of God's Kingdom. We will not understand Mark's Gospel without grasping these essential starting points.

Going Deeper

It is so tempting to wander away from Mark's highly focussed description of these three events, but we must understand more fully why they are important to Mark's Gospel. In each story, Mark gives clues about why they are important for His understanding of Jesus and His ministry, and we must look closely at the text to discover them.

The anointing of Jesus

It is not clear to us in English translations, but this passage contains two examples of a word used many times in Mark's Gospel; and it is one with great significance; it is the Greek word 'euthus' which means 'as soon as' (1:10) or 'immediately' (1:12). The more we read Mark's Gospel, the more we will find this little word inserted between each story, giving us the feeling that the whole of Jesus' ministry was a continual succession of events, almost without ceasing! We will find out more about the meaning of this as we read the Gospel, but it is important for us to note that this urgency begins as soon as the Holy Spirit comes upon Jesus (1:10).

The picture of the heavens being 'torn apart' is a classic Biblical description of a great divine revelation (see Isaiah 64:1, Ezekiel 1:1). The coming of the Messiah and the beginning of His ministry was the greatest event in the history of the world, for at that moment and in the person of Jesus, heaven and earth were joined together. This is not simply a description of God calling out from heaven, but the coming of the Holy Spirit to earth in power, anointing the Messiah for His unique work of bringing salvation to the world.

The words spoken by God are similar to Psalm 2:7; 'You are my son ... today I have become your father.' This Psalm originally spoke about God's adoption of a king of Israel at his anointing, and it is easy to see how Jewish people thought that it spoke prophetically about the coming of a Messiah who would be God's Son. But it would be wrong of us to take this idea from Psalm 2 and suggest that Jesus was not the Messiah before God spoke, and only became this after His anointing by the Holy Spirit. The Psalm points forward to the coming of the Messiah, but Jesus was always God's Son. Mark's telling of the story of Jesus' baptism simply highlights the fact that there was a moment in time when God anointed Jesus to begin the work for which He had been sent to earth. Clearly,

Jesus had come into the world, but Mark was only interested in what Jesus did as Messiah, which is why Jesus' ministry begins in his Gospel with this anointing of the Spirit.

The other fascinating Old Testament reference to God's favour comes in Isaiah 42:1,2; 'Here is my servant ... my chosen in whom my soul delights; I have put my Spirit within him ...' This fascinating prophecy is very similar to the words of God spoken to Jesus in our text, but it speaks about God's blessing on His 'servant', the figure in Isaiah who eventually becomes the 'suffering servant' of the famous prophecies in Isaiah 53; 'He was despised and rejected by others, a man of suffering and acquainted with infirmity ... He was despised, and we held Him of no account.' (Isaiah 53:3). It may be that we have to make specific note of such connections today when people of Mark's day knew Isaiah's prophecies so well, such connections between Jesus' anointing and His ultimate suffering and death for our salvation would have been immediately obvious to those who first read the Gospel.

Jesus in the wilderness

We have already noted that in Mark's Gospel, the details of Jesus' testing in the wilderness are not recorded, and the only conclusion we can draw is that whatever happened was of no interest to Mark because he saw this as the beginning of Jesus' battle with evil throughout his life. What Mark does do is tell us that the anointing of Jesus was followed 'immediately' by the battle with Satan. The Greek words of verse 12 almost suggest that Jesus was dragged into the desert by the Spirit, and in some translations of the Bible, you will find the words 'the Spirit drove Him into the wilderness ...'. The wilderness regions which the Israelites regarded as the place where evil spirits lived were not adjacent to the Jordan where Jesus was baptised, they were a few days journey to the east. If we read Mark literally, then Jesus was virtually transported to the desert, rather like Ezekiel was 'transported' between Jerusalem and the exiles in Babylon (Ezekiel 1:1, 3:15 etc).

Jesus stayed in the desert for forty days (1:13) being 'put to the test' by Satan. What we are told is so brief we must make of it only what it says, which is that the forty days represents a complete encounter. We could say that Jesus was 'tested in every way as we are' (see Hebrews 2:18). What is more interesting, however, is Mark's inclusion of one feature of the temptations which is not in Matthew's and Luke's versions of the story, and one which is.

The feature not included is; 'He was with wild animals'. It is possible that Mark could mean no more by this than that the wild animals represented the evil spirits living in the desert. However, it is more likely that the mention of Jesus with wild and mostly 'unclean' animals is a picture of the earthly and cosmic significance of the battle between good and evil which happened in the desert. Isaiah had prophesied, together with others, that when the Messiah came, 'the wolf and the lamb will feed together ...' (Isaiah 65:25; 11:6 – see also Isaiah 35). In other words, the result of the victory of the Messiah over evil would one day bring all creation back to its complete and original goodness in the sight of God. There is only a glimpse of this vision here, but it is there. The feature of this story which is found in the other Gospels is that of the angels 'ministering' to Jesus and taking care of His needs whilst in the desert (1:13). The reason Mark mentions this may be simply to explain how Jesus could survive in the midst not just of the physical desert, but of this cosmic battle with the forces of evil. The answer was that He was not alone, and the implication is that this was true throughout His ministry.

The preaching of Jesus

It is remarkable that Matthew, Mark and Luke all record Jesus as preaching the same simple message; 'the Kingdom of God is close at hand. Repent and believe ...' (1:15). But this is no simple message. Only the Messiah could preach this and demonstrate its truth, and only the Son of God anointed by the Father could be believed. In three Gospels of the New Testament this simple sermon or Gospel 'manifesto' is Jesus' first message, evidently preached with passion to those who first heard Him.

We should not think that Jesus delivered this crucial and important message merely to an unimportant backwater of Israel, the region of Galilee (1:14) where He had grown up as a boy and now began His public ministry. The picture often painted of the Sea of Galilee and the regions around it, is of a rural setting containing small villages and seaside boats and small cottage industries. In truth, the Galilee of Jesus' day was far more vibrant than this, and the whole region was at the centre of regional trade and was a cosmopolitan cultural cross-roads. There were far more large towns than exist now, and the whole area was teeming with life. For that part of the Roman Empire, Galilee was a better place to begin preaching the Good News of