

## **Year B**

### **Mark 1:1-8**

A calendar inscription on two stones, dating from 9BC, was discovered in Asia Minor. Part of the inscription read as follows: “Since Providence, which has ordered all things and is deeply interested in our life, has set in most perfect order by giving us Augustus, whom she filled with virtue that he might benefit humankind, sending him as a *saviour*, both for us and for our descendants, that he might end war and arrange all things, and since he, Caesar, by his

appearance excelled even our anticipations, surpassing all previous benefactors, and not even leaving to posterity any hope of surpassing what he has done, and since the birthday of the god Augustus was the beginning of the *good news* for the world that came by reason of him.”<sup>1</sup>

Good news brought in the person of a Saviour. Does that sound familiar to you? How does Mark’s Gospel begin? - “the beginning of the good news of Jesus, the Messiah”. Here was the riposte to the self-assured arrogance of Augustus Caesar. Here

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<sup>1</sup> <http://ntresources.com/blog/?p=428>

was the message of assurance to the beleaguered Christians clinging on desperately as the forces of Rome under the command of the newly proclaimed emperor, Vespasian, bore down upon Jerusalem and its temple in the year 70AD as Mark was writing his Gospel. Who was the bringer of good news? Was it the Roman Emperor or was it Jesus of Nazareth?

There is no birth story in Mark's Gospel; no Mary and Joseph, shepherds or wise men which we read about in either Matthew's or Luke's Gospel - not a trace of them. This is an adult account of the life of Jesus and it

begins with an adult account of John the Baptist - no stories of Zechariah, angels and dreams and being struck dumb here. Instead we are confronted with a frightening image of a new Elijah emerging from the desert in clothes hopelessly out of fashion with bits of insects and wild honey dripping from his beard. It's not a very pleasant thought although it is interesting to note that in Mark's Gospel there is no trace of John the Baptist's hell-fire and brimstone message. He comes simply as the one who points the way to Jesus Christ.

So who was the bringer of good news? Was it the Roman Emperor or was it Jesus of Nazareth? That's the question we continue to wrestle with today as we replace 'Roman Emperor' with whatever other character is claiming ultimate authority and there are plenty of them to choose from. I'm sure most of us would agree with Mark that Jesus is the answer to the question. But there are plenty about today who would vehemently disagree. So how does Mark go about convincing us by referring to a wild man who came from the desert? I've mentioned already that Elijah comes into view

immediately because in 2 Kings 1:8 he is referred to physically in ways similar to that of John the Baptist. Elijah is depicted as the one who signalled the end of all prophecy until the Messiah would appear and so it is very appropriate that an Elijah-like character emerges to make the Messianic pronouncement. Here is the genuine prophetic voice being heard after centuries of silence. Mark underlines the importance of the Old Testament background by quoting from Isaiah and Malachi in relation to the herald's activity. It states in verse two that he is quoting from Isaiah but that is only

partly the case. The beginning of the quote comes from Malachi 3:1 and possibly even Exodus 23:20. But regardless, here is a John the Baptist absolutely rooted in the history of God's revelation to Israel. Mark is telling us in no uncertain terms that in order to understand Jesus we must look back to the history of Israel. If we cut Jesus free from his Israelite roots we will fail to understand the good news message. Unfortunately the Church has not always paid attention to this. We have recently celebrated the 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation which changed the

course of history. The Reformation brought many good things to bear on the world and the church, but it also brought some bad things as well. One such negative was the development of an understanding of Jesus and his ministry which paid scant heed to Jesus the Jew. Sometimes tragically there has been a tendency to portray Judaism as evil and as a result to reject the significance of Jesus' Jewish roots. The terrible events in Nazi occupied Europe last century have some of their roots in a Lutheran anti-semitism. Jesus was born, lived and died a Jew and so it is only within the history of Judaism that



we can understand him. Mark is emphatic right from the beginning of his story that we must understand that fact. Since the rejection of Elijah's prophetic message and the subsequent rejection of all who would follow Israel was doomed to go into exile. If Israel refused to pay heed to God's word then its freedom would be taken away from it and it would be destined to effectively journey back into a new Egypt, a land of captivity, this time in the form of Assyria, Babylon and Persia. That is exactly what happened and so the voice of Isaiah and then Malachi was calling to a people ensnared by its

disobedience and desperate to be freed from it. These prophets were addressing the people in exile, and that continued to be the case even when the surviving generations returned to live in the land again. A return to the land in itself would not guarantee that the exile had ended. Only the return of God to dwell with his people would mark the end of exile and when John the Baptist appeared from the desert that still had not happened. So it was absolutely appropriate that Mark should apply the words of Isaiah and Malachi to John the Baptist. And for John the Baptist his role was quite simply to be

the herald of the good news of the Saviour. He was the mouthpiece of Elijah and the entirety of the Old Testament prophetic witness. He was anticipating the coming of the Messiah by pointing to him, by encouraging the people to get ready to receive him.

What are we about today if it is not about pointing to the Messiah and encouraging one another to get ready to receive him? The voice of one calling in the desert had fallen silent for centuries. John the Baptist had plenty of time to get ready for his appearance

and for that voice to be heard loud and clear again.

A young American engineer was sent to Ireland by his company to work in a new electronics plant. It was a two-year assignment that he had accepted because it would enable him to earn enough to marry his long-time girlfriend. She had a job near her home in Tennessee, and their plan was to pool their resources and put a down payment on a house when he returned. They corresponded often, but as the lonely weeks went by, she began expressing doubts that he was being true to her. The young

engineer wrote back, declaring with some passion that he was paying absolutely no attention to the local girls. "I admit," he wrote, "that sometimes I'm tempted. But I fight it. I'm keeping myself for you." In the next mail, the engineer received a package. It contained a note from his girl and a harmonica. "I'm sending this to you," she wrote, "so you can learn to play it and have something to take your mind off those girls." The engineer replied, "Thanks for the harmonica. I'm practising on it every night and thinking of you."

At the end of his two-year stint, the engineer was transferred back to company headquarters. He took the first plane to Tennessee to be reunited with his girl. Her whole family was with her, but as he rushed forward to embrace her, she held up a restraining hand and said sternly, "Just hold on there a minute, Billy Bob. Before any serious kissin' and huggin' gets started here, let me hear you play that harmonica!"<sup>2</sup>

John the Baptist was well practised and ready to the extent that his voice is still heard around the world on this second

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<sup>2</sup> Bits & Pieces, October 15, 1992, p. 17-18.

Sunday of Advent. May we listen to him and get ready to receive again the Saviour of the world.