

Sermon preached at Gisborne, 6 December 2020

Teach us your way, O Lord, and lead us on a level path. Teach us, O Lord, to follow your decrees; then we will keep them to the end. Give us understanding, and we will keep your law and obey it with all our hearts. Through Christ, our Lord. Amen.

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

The work of the voice crying out in the wilderness

Mark begins with this remarkable proclamation: 'The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.' The word 'good news' (εὐαγγέλιον – *evangelion*) first appears in Mark, which is believed the very earliest New Testament Scripture we have. In this short passage, we find a few important things. First, the ministry of John was anticipated in the Old Testament.¹ Second, John appeared in the wilderness according to that promise. Third, he announced the way to God. Fourth, John continued his work till he died. In many ways, the work of John resembles the work of Jesus Christ. But there are differences. John came as a voice sent by God to prepare the Way of God, and Jesus – the Son of God, came as the Way that will lead people to eternal life.

1. Preparing God's way

Preparing the way of God is one of the tasks of the voice sent by God. It begins from the least expected area – in the wilderness – a common location that John and Jesus share. Here the wilderness is considered as a location which is thematic or theological rather than geographical. God chose the wilderness because it is a symbol of the wilderness of mankind. The wilderness is a picture of us, of our dry, empty, barren, weary, bored, and distraught lives. In Isaiah, as well as in Mark, the word of God is the only means that can transform these barren lives into the living ones.

In Isaiah 40:3-5, the first voice issues an instruction to build a superhighway across the desert on which God will travel in triumph (vs. 3-5). It tells us that there will be an enormous engineering project of levelling the land for a smooth road. This road is for God who will move in triumphal procession. But the levelling the land for a smooth road doesn't happen overnight. It requires a vision for the future, life, hope, and courage great enough to change the firmly established status quo in all dimensions. Disruption and transformation are happening at the same time.

For Israelites back then who had been exiled in Babylon, their lives were barren as if they lived in the wilderness. When God's decree was proclaimed with the words of comfort, the only thing that they needed was to heed the voice of God. It enabled them to remove rocks, stones from their hearts, and made the crooked ways straight to be transformed into a smooth road for God. Likewise, in Mark, when John proclaimed the good news of Jesus the Messiah, the only thing that people needed was to take heed of the proclamation. It had made them leave their homes to come to John and to receive the baptism of forgiveness. They came out to be baptized not because of the person, John. But the word of God that they took heed of had them enabled to level the stony and crooked hearts to become a smooth and straight road for the coming of God.

2. Proclaiming the coming of God

Proclaiming the coming of God is another task of the voice in the wilderness. In Mark, John proclaims the coming of Jesus, and the first words attributed to Jesus are, again words of proclamation.² The content of their preaching differs, in that John proclaims Jesus and his

¹ Malachi 3:1 and Isaiah 40:3

² In Mark 1:14-15, it reads: 'After John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. "The time has come," he said. "The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!"'

baptism and Jesus proclaims the nearness of the kingdom. Here, suddenly, appeared a strange man, namely John, who announced the good news. Mark doesn't explain how it worked. John just announced it, and somehow the word got back to Jerusalem that it was working, that people were finding relief. The city began to stir, as word spread around from mouth to mouth until finally the people began to stream out into this desert place and find John the Baptist, listen to what he had to say, and be baptized by him. Proclamation of the word of God doesn't depend on human power or plans, but the divine will. God says that as if the rain and the snow from heaven do not return to it without watering the earth, "so is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it."³ The work of John as the voice crying out in the wilderness, indeed shows how God had achieved the purpose of the word that He sent. So what now?

3. Living the Way

In our story time, we heard a summary of the story *Watership Down*. The question was, 'What has Fiver - the seer's vision brought to the rabbits?' Those who didn't listen to Fiver's prophecy, they were all destroyed when human beings came to build houses there. For the rabbits who heeded the warning, they survived in the end despite all the hardship they had to undergo. Similar to the Israelites who were wandering in the wilderness led by Moses, whenever the rabbits encountered challenges and danger, they would be split into two. While one group wished to go back to the old warren that they left, the other, to continue to go. Yet in their gruelling journey of uncertainty, they managed to get back together. In the end, the prophecy was their only hope to reach the promised new warren on a hill. When they eventually arrived at Watership Down, they still had to overcome great challenges, including the war against Efrafra warren and the despotic chief General Woundwort. Watership Down was not a pre-made paradise at all. Even so their vision rooted in hope helped them realize it into reality. Having hope means an act of continuing proclamation of the new life in the new warren. Proclamation of the good news of Jesus Christ is not different.

We, as the bearers of the word of God, are the voice crying out in the wilderness. The wilderness where we are in is full of human sufferings. In many cases, people aren't even aware of their sufferings while lacking a firm reference to life. We believers are also experiencing sufferings inadvertently. When we are indifferent to others' sufferings and pains in lives, we are also suffering from our ignorance. When we are doing nothing despite the word of God that we receive, we are suffering by abusing our own body of Christ.

The similitude between John and Jesus explain that our faith lives will also have a share in them. John becomes the forerunner of Jesus in being handed over for death. The same word *paradidomi* - hand over describes John's arrest or betrayal⁴ and that of Jesus later in Mark's Gospel. Mark's story invites disciples (& us as well) to follow in the way of John and Jesus. Later in the Gospel story, the disciples accompany Jesus into the wilderness.⁵ Their main task is to engage in the proclamation of the gospel.⁶ Proclamation of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God continues no matter what circumstances. Even if we are unable to open our mouths, God continues to proclaim the word of salvation through our bodies and spirits, prayers, and silent devotion to the word of God. So, hang in there! - for the kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news! We say Amen! to that.

³ Isaiah 55:10-11

⁴ Mark 1:14

⁵ the 'deserted place' of 6:31

⁶ Mark 6:12; 13:10