

1 Peter 3:18-22

Mark 1:9-15

I am very fond of art. I can't draw or paint at all but having been introduced to it at an early age I enjoy looking at paintings – though I know what I like! One of my very favourite paintings is Picasso's Blue Nude. I remember when I first saw it, I was quite young and puzzled by it because at first sight I thought it was just some rough scribbles, crudely drawn and not very polished. Then as I got to know it, and looked at it and drank it in I realized what an absolute masterpiece it is. The lines are few, but very sure, the use of light and shade are masterly and far from being a scribble by a child it is a masterpiece.

For many years scholars dismissed the Gospel of Mark as being rough and crude, without the finesse of the other Gospels and of not much significance. But as you study it you see that opinion is very wide of the truth. It is my favourite Gospel for several reasons. The Gospel is thought to be the work of John Mark a follower of St Peter and his faithful interpreter and scribe. It was written sometime between 60 and 70 AD and is the earliest of the Gospels. It is its own source and doesn't contain the additional material in Matthew and Luke but has clearly been used by them as a primary source.

Mark is not a creative literary artist and his unpretentious style which is close to the spoken Greek of the time doesn't sit well beside the literary Greek of the other three Gospels. His Gospel makes up for its lack of elegance by its simplicity and directness. Mark is not a literary artist but what he is, is an extremely honest compiler of history. He made no attempt to smooth away the difficulties he found in recording the accounts of Jesus life but reproduced his sources with remarkable frankness.

If Peter was his primary source then it is not surprising that he appears in the Gospel warts and all. Mark has made no attempt to cover up his humanity and weakness but in recording his words and actions faithfully has actually shown masterfully the redeeming power of Jesus' death and resurrection.

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Mark starts his account of Jesus' life by explaining his purpose in writing. It is to set forth the 'Good News', to bear witness to Jesus as the Messiah and the Son of God, of course that is a common purpose to all the Gospels. What is special to Mark, writing in Italy, most probably Rome, about 30 years after Jesus' death was that he also wrote to supply the liturgical and catechetical needs of the church in Rome. He wrote to support its faith in face of the threat of martyrdom and to provide material for missionary preachers.

Mark's writing is not as precise as that of the other evangelists but it is vivid and has the authenticity of an eye witness account. In the account of the feeding of the five thousand Mark records, ¹³⁹ *Then Jesus ordered them to get all the people to sit down in groups on the green grass.* The colour of the grass is a descriptive detail that comes straight out of the memory of someone who was there and is missing from the three other accounts. You can imagine Peter telling that story again and again and Mark absorbing all the details. On another occasion Mark describes Jesus as 'snorting like a horse!'; another descriptive detail missing from the other gospels and probably polished out as being too disrespectful to record.

The other thing that gives Mark's Gospel energy and realism is his continual use of the word εὐθύς 'immediately' which he uses more than forty times in the Gospel. This gives the gospel a dynamism and sense of moving forward that makes it very attractive and, I find, enables me to sit amongst the story and feel myself there.

The beginning of the Good News contains three very important sections that throw the reader into the story. It tells of John the Baptist, underlining his role as the fore runner of the messiah in accordance with Old testament Prophecy. John had a twofold message: the call to repentance and to point ahead to the one who would come after him.

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Our reading takes up the story at verse 9 when Mark introduces Jesus of Nazareth as the one that John had pointed to. Within the next six verses Mark describes Jesus' Baptism by John, the anointing by God's spirit and God's declaration that Jesus is his Son. It then sweeps us out into the desert where Jesus is tempted by the devil and then his return to Galilee proclaiming that God's kingdom is at hand.

These short verses contain enough meat for many sermons and the way that Mark speeds through them so succinctly leaves me breathless. So let's look a little more closely at the verses and what they have to teach us about the person and ministry of Jesus and what that means for us today.

We are told in verse 9 that Jesus came from Nazareth and was baptized by John in the Jordan. In the earlier verses Mark describes John as preaching a Baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Now this was a considerable embarrassment to the early church. How could Jesus, the Messiah, the Son of God possibly need to be Baptised for the forgiveness of his sins. In Matthew's account we see this problem being addressed by the addition of John's words, *'I need to be baptized by you and do you come to me?'*¹⁵ *But Jesus answered him, "Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness." Then he consented.*

Over the years scholars have made sense of this by saying that it shows Jesus' complete identification with sinners that would ultimately lead to his death for them on the cross, this understanding is very much echoed in our passage from Peter's first letter which says; ¹⁸ *For Christ also suffered^[a] for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you^[b] to God. He was put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit,* and is described by the German Theologian Karl Barth "In his baptism he became for men's sake and in their place 'the one great sinner who repents' "

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We are told that as Jesus rose from the water he saw a vision of the heavens being opened and the Holy Spirit descending on Jesus like a dove. The image of the Holy Spirit descending on Jesus has Messianic connotations because the Messiah was the 'anointed one' who was anointed by God's Spirit. Tied up in this experience is the accompanying voice that proclaims "You are my son, whom I love, with you I am well pleased" I confess I have written whole sermon's on this event alone but what seems to me to be important here, and why Mark begins his account of the Good News at this point is that it affirms Jesus' divinity and his high standing in God's eyes. The most important thing for any of us to know is who we are, and that we are loved and approved. For Jesus, at the beginning of his earthly ministry, these things must have been beyond price. What Mark is describing seems to be an intimate moment of affirmation from God to his much loved son rather than a public declaration of Jesus' identity.

In the same way the account of what happened next probably comes directly from Jesus himself to his disciples perhaps after they had recognized him as the Messiah. He would have told them of his anointing by the Spirit and then his subsequent journey into the desert.

Again we meet the word *euthus*; 'immediately' the Spirit sent him out into the desert. Jesus goes, not by chance or his own fancy but by the leadership of the Spirit who had come upon him in special fullness at his Baptism. The word used here *εκβαλλο* literally means 'thrown out' and speaks of being compelled. So Jesus went into the desert in obedience to God and in fulfilment of his mission, empowered and impelled by God's Spirit. The acceptance of Jesus' servant vocation meant that he would inevitably meet the devil and be tempted by him to abandon his mission. Whereas the rest of the human race are encouraged to avoid temptation it was part of Jesus' mission to voluntarily seek it out and to take the offensive against the enemy. Before he began his ministry Jesus needed to meet head on the temptations he would face along the way to turn

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his back on his father and his rescue mission of us. (another whole sermon)

Returning from the desert we are told that Jesus went into Galilee proclaiming the Good News of God. "The time has come. The Kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the Good News. This was 'the favourable time' The right and appropriate time determined by God when he would send the messiah into the world to bring the Good news to human beings that we are not condemned to a life of sin and failure but that God himself has stepped down to save us.

The Kingdom of God came in all its fullness in Jesus because he came really and fully. What we are looking forward to now is the return of Christ in glory. What we are waiting for is not something more complete than Jesus himself but rather Jesus Christ made manifest and in glory.

When we read Mark or any of the other Gospels we meet face to face with Jesus, with who he was and what he did for us. Can I encourage you this week to take up the Bible in a year project. Don't be discouraged if you aren't able to read the whole amount each day. Read what you are able and as you do ask God to send his Holy Spirit to bring the words alive to you and enable you to meet him in the pages