

## Part 1

I suggested last week that with our journey through the life and ministry of Jesus, because we trying to follow that in just 21 Sundays, there would be things we would miss. And so I would interject a few little extras into our services to try and remedy that.

Teaching by story telling is nothing new, and was really nothing new in Jesus' day. Today, a lot of preachers like to start their sermons with a little amusing tale to help the congregation engage with them – indeed I sometimes do the same – and the purpose is to help the listener engage with the speaker so that they will be more likely to understand what the speaker is going on to say. And Jesus made an absolute art of it – the bible calls these stories parables. Even in Mark's gospel which is renowned for its succinctness Mark finds space to include a number of the stories that Jesus told. Our first reading, which we are now going to here, is just one of those, and goes on into a section where Jesus starts to explain why he teaches in parables.

I happen to think that the parable of the sower is simply a brilliant story. People were used to stories which had deeper meanings as the Old Testament is full of stories like that. They would have understood the notion of the farmer spreading his seed as representing God teaching the people. The problem, though, is that the people were expecting a great movement of renewal where, simply by the coming of the Messiah, their country would be changed and Israel would be rescued lock stock and barrel. But that was never God's intention and so Jesus in this story is having to tell people this – and so we have the seed that falls on the path, on rocky places, or among thorns, and all failed. Only the seed that fell on good soil grew and produced a crop. This is the parable that we are told was explained to Jesus' disciples – I rather suspect the explanation is given as an example because the disciples didn't always quite understand what Jesus was talking about – and in that explanation he refers to seed sown on good soil representing people who hear the word, accept it, and spread it themselves.

Jesus then goes on – in Mark's account – by telling other stories – don't put your lamp under a bowl but put it on the lamp stand; another one about seed growing all by itself; one about the tiny mustard seed growing into large plants. But what is so good about them is that they can mean different things to different people at different times. Because that is one of the beauties of reading our bibles – we can read a passage one day and get one meaning from it, and then we read it another day, and whilst I wouldn't expect us to get an opposite meaning, the same passage can teach us new things every time we read it. So look out for parable in particular when you read your bibles. The stories may seem very familiar, but be prepared to read it very closely, as God might just be showing you something different this time.

Our gospel reading which we will come to later is not a parable – it is the telling of something that actually happened. But, as we shall see, it is a story without a lot of detail, and so the same thing might happen each time we read this reading – we may learn something new this time which we hadn't realised before. And, actually, this is rather what we hope will happen.

## Part 2

The inclusion of the story of the baptism of Jesus as our lectionary gospel reading this week has again thrown a bit of a spanner in the works when it comes to our journey through the life and ministry of Jesus. It is almost as if the people who create the lectionary readings don't want us to get away from the beginning of Jesus' ministry – because that is where we are this week and this is week 8 of the 20 or so weeks we have until Pentecost. But the good news is that there are things we can learn from the baptism of Jesus which will guide us through our whole faith lives so let's start digging.

But first, just a minute on the preceding verses in Mark's gospel – in fact they are the first 8 verses of Mark's gospel. The other three gospel writers, in their own ways, start their gospel with the beginning of Jesus – the birth in the case of Matthew and Luke, and the fact that Jesus was there at the beginning of time in John, but Mark simply starts his gospel, "The beginning of the Gospel, or the Good News of Jesus Christ, the Son of God." Mark just wants to include what he sees as the important part of Jesus' life – the 3 years that form his ministry.

And then we have 7 verses on John the Baptist telling everyone that he is there to tell them about, and prepare them for, Jesus, the Messiah, coming. And what is more Mark tells us that the prophet Isaiah had already predicted that a messenger would come:

"I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way" – "a voice of one calling in the desert, 'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.'"

Of those 7 verses, the key part for us this morning is the last verse of that section. What John is saying is that his baptism was symbolic and provisional of a more powerful reality to come. "I have baptised you with water; but He will baptise you with the Holy Spirit." That is an extraordinary declaration, for in the Old Testament – what people would know to be the situation at that time – the bestowal of the Spirit belongs exclusively to God. What John is saying is the bestowal of the Holy Spirit will then be transferred to he who is coming - Jesus.

And then we are told that Jesus was baptised by John. This appears to us, initially at least as a real enigma. John's baptism was all about a sign that you had repented for your sins. So is that what Jesus was doing by being baptised by John? No, that can't be the case because Jesus was without sin – so what is going on?

Can you imagine the scene – I'm afraid we have to imagine it because Mark's style is so abrupt that we are given very little to go on, but with the help of the other gospel writers and a bit of our own imagination we can have a go. We are told that John was really attracting the crowds and large numbers of people (Matthew tells us it was the people of Jerusalem and all Judea) were being drawn to John, and were being baptised. I wonder how that worked? If there were, say, hundreds of people wanting to be baptised, would John baptise them all – or would he get his disciples to do at least most of the baptising whilst he did the talking? I rather think this would have been the case so we have John talking, I think he would have had to be talking to the people from the River Jordan or they wouldn't be encouraged to come into the River for Baptism, and huge numbers of people in the River Jordan being baptised by John's disciples, and then Jesus joins them. Matthew tells us there is a conversation between Jesus and John – is that in the water? Do people back off leaving this spectacle? It doesn't appear to be the case, and in fact I don't think it is. I think Jesus wanted to be just one more person to be baptised by John and joined the queue.

But why does Jesus join them when he is not a sinner? Because Jesus always wanted to be identified as being with sinners, almost to say, "I am among you; I am here to represent you, to identify with you". He was not saying that he wanted to be identified in sin but to be identified in what he came to do, which was to bear the sins of these people he was surrounded by on the cross. It was only 3 years after this moment that this would happen, when he would be judged, not for his only sin – which didn't exist – but for the sins of others. He came to this earth to be one of us, to be one with us, and that is why he was in the River Jordan that day, and that is why he too had to be baptised by John – not for repentance for identification.

And then, as he was coming up out of the water, "he saw the heavens torn open, or torn apart." In this very stark description of what happened, we suddenly get this amazing image of the heaven being torn

open. To see what this means we need to go back to biblical roots. This phrase doesn't mean that Jesus saw a little door ajar miles up in the sky. "Heaven" in the bible often means God's view of the world behind ordinary reality. It's as though an invisible curtain, right in front of us, was suddenly pulled back, so that we don't see the trees and the flowers and buildings, or in Jesus' case the river, or even because we also heard about Jesus going out into the wilderness after his baptism, the sandy desert, or perhaps not even the crowds. We are standing in the presence of a different reality altogether. Momentarily God has pulled back his curtain and displayed to Jesus heaven – and here we have the ultimate trinitarian image – God the Father speaking, God the Son listening, and God the Holy Spirit descending on him like a dove. What an image.

A good deal of Christian faith is a matter of learning to live by a different reality even when we can't see it. Sometimes, at decisive moments in our lives, the curtain is drawn back and we see, or hear, what's really going on, but most of the time we walk by faith, not by sight.

As I have said several times, Mark's gospel has very little in the way of detail, of description, and perhaps we are beginning to understand why that is. We need to discover, we need to understand, we need to work out many of the details of our Christian lives for ourselves.

If I was a chemistry teacher standing in front of you this morning, I could explain the purpose of the experiment I was about to demonstrate. I could tell you what the equipment we need to undertake the experiment is, what the chemicals are, what the reaction will be when we do the experiment, and why what will happen, will happen. And you would be able to go away and perform that experiment for yourselves, and assuming you adopt the proper method, the outcome would be as expected.

I suspect some of you may well be disappointed when I say you that our faith journeys will simply not be like that. I mean how can they possibly be? We do not have the power in our earthly lives to draw that curtain and see what heaven will be like. But what we can do is to take the steps that we need to ensure that one day we will see behind that curtain. And for many of us that first step is baptism – it is us saying to God, I'm here, I want to come in .

Let me remind you of the opening sentences of the baptism service. Faith is the gift of God to his people. In baptism the Lord is adding to our number those whom he is calling. People of God, will you welcome these children and uphold them in their new life in Christ?

Let me pick out three phrases from that introduction.

Faith is the gift of God

Those whom he is calling

A new life in Christ

Fist, Faith is the gift of God. Well, that very much ties in with John the Baptist doesn't it. John is telling all the people that they should confess their sins and be baptised – this is open to everyone, no charge! This is really the first time we heard that our faith and our forgiveness is not something that can be earned – it is there for us to take and accept.

Those whom he is calling. Again, let's start with John the Baptist and what is recorded in Luke's gospel as said by his father Zechariah. "And you child will be called a prophet of the Most High, for you go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him, to give his people the knowledge of salvation, through the forgiveness of their sins." God clearly has a purpose for this child straight from birth. As he does now for

each and every one of us – perhaps not in quite such a dramatic way as he had for John the Baptist, but he is calling each and every one of us, today, to help build his Kingdom in this village and beyond.

And then, 'A new life in Christ'. When we come to accept Jesus as our Saviour, whether that is in our baptism services, or if we were baptised as a baby, later in life through confirmation, our lives are transformed.

So, whilst I said that at the beginning of this talk that it was slightly frustrating that we are still at the beginning of Jesus' ministry, thanks to the readings we get from the Lectionary, those readings show us what underpins the rest of the story we are going to follow – and that is that through Jesus we can identify ourselves with God. By looking at those two baptisms – the baptism offered by John the Baptist and the Baptism offered by Jesus, we learned all about how Jesus identifies himself with us – and so therefore how we are linked to God as one of his children. We also saw how baptism by water, which is what John offered, was just the start of our journey – what we needed was baptism by the Holy Spirit which is what Jesus offered – although isn't it interesting to note that Jesus himself baptised no-one in the bible – it was just his baptism that others used. So, as a quick aside, in John's gospel 3:22 it says, "After this Jesus and his disciples went into the Judean countryside and he spent some time there with them and baptized", but a little later in 4:2 it specifically says – "although it was not Jesus himself but his disciples who baptised". When I was thinking this through I wondered whether Jesus wanted his baptism to be always performed by his disciples – which of course is what we do in our churches today.

So by the baptism of Jesus, whoever physically performs that baptism, we are putting people into the position whereby one day they will see that curtain drawn back, so that they can see heaven for themselves.