

**Sermon for Sunday 10th January 2021, by Richard Bauckham
(Acts 19:1-7) and Mark 1:1-12**

Our Gospel reading today was the opening section of Mark's Gospel. If you had been in church on the Sunday corresponding to this one last year, that would not have been the Gospel reading. Nor would it have been the year before. Nor will it be next year. There is a reason for that. Our Sunday lectionary, the course of readings that's prescribed for the Sundays of the church's year, works on a three-year cycle. But it's more interesting than that. One of the first three Gospels – Matthew, Mark, Luke – assigned to each of the three years. This year is the year of Mark. That means that over the course of the Sundays of the year we read through most of Mark's Gospel. Mark doesn't come up every Sunday, partly because there's not enough of Mark, but also because Mark doesn't cover all the events of Jesus's life that we remember over the course of the year. He doesn't, for example, have any stories about Jesus's birth, and so we haven't read from Mark over the Christmas period. But whenever possible this year the Gospel readings come from Mark. The lectionary has been planned in this way so that this year we get familiar with Mark's particular take on the story of Jesus. The Gospels aren't all the same. Each of them throws light on the story of Jesus from a different angle. We need all of them, but it's a good idea to read them one by one, as they were meant to be read. You may be wondering about John's Gospel. Why don't we have a four year cycle? Indeed, why don't we? Some of us certainly think we should. But as it is we get passages from John scattered about all three years.

Since our reading today is Mark's introduction to his Gospel, I'm going to take a few moments to introduce Mark's Gospel to you. It's the earliest of the Gospels and it's also the shortest. You can easily read through Mark's Gospel at a sitting. Try it some time. It's a fast-moving story, vividly told. If you read it right through at once you'll get a sense of the overall shape of the story that you miss if you only read or study one passage at a time. But Mark has crammed a lot into his short space. Ancient authors never wrote books as long as the ones we're used to. So we do also need to slow down and read carefully and ponder each of the little stories about Jesus that make up the whole Gospel.

So who is Mark? He's one of those characters who pop up here and there in the New Testament. We meet him first in the story of first Christians in Jerusalem in the book of Acts, where he's called John Mark. John was his Hebrew name. Mark is the Latin name Marcus and I think probably he adopted that name when he travelled outside Jewish Palestine as a Christian missionary, accompanying Paul

and Peter at different times. He travelled a lot and a Roman name gave him a kind of cosmopolitan identity.

So far as we know Mark was not a disciple of Jesus during Jesus's ministry. He came to faith rather later. So you might wonder why someone who hadn't known Jesus personally on earth should write the first Gospel? Shouldn't we expect the earliest of the Gospels to be written by one of Jesus's close personal disciples? Well, we can at least say that he *knew* a lot of those disciples of Jesus in Jerusalem soon after the events. He would have heard their stories. But I think there is a further reason why he was well qualified to write a Gospel. Around the turn of the century, just after the New Testament period, a Christian leader called Papias gives us the first information we have (outside the Gospels themselves) about the origins of the Gospels. Papias tells us that Mark worked as Peter's interpreter and wrote down the stories of Jesus as he heard them from Peter. I think this is credible information, partly because if you read Mark's Gospel you find that Peter is there with Jesus through most of the story - not all of it, but most of it, and sometimes when only three or four of the disciples are with Jesus. I could say more about that, but I think we can say that Mark's Gospel is quite substantially Peter's Gospel, which is how it was regarded in the early church. But it wasn't dictated by Peter. It was Mark who took what he learned from Peter – and from surely others too – and formed it into the story of Jesus we have. It is Mark's Gospel, but it owes a lot to Peter.

So what's special about Mark's Gospel, apart from the fact that it's close to source? Mark's overriding concern is to help us understand who Jesus really is. There is much less of Jesus's teaching than in the other Gospels. Only a few parables, for example. There's no sermon on the mount in Mark. There's enough to show that Jesus's teaching was important for Mark but it's not his main agenda. Recall how the Gospel begins: "the beginning of the Gospel (good news) of Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God." Those descriptions of Jesus – Messiah, Son of God – would be well known to any Christian reader of Mark at that time. But what did they mean? What did it mean for Jesus to be the Messiah and the Son of God? Mark knows that to understand those terms we have to understand what Jesus made them mean by saying and doing and suffering what he did. Only by telling the story of Jesus can Mark tell us who Jesus really is. So near the end of the story, when Jesus dies, the centurion at the cross says, "Truly this man was the Son of God," and on behalf of us all the centurion is recognizing what it finally means for Jesus to be the son of God: he must go to his death.

No one knows that yet when Jesus turns up at the river Jordan with all the other people coming for baptism by John the Baptist. Mark has no Christmas stories. He starts his story where early Christian preachers usually started when they told the story of Jesus – with his first public appearance: “In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan.” It’s Jesus’s first appearance in public but actually no one knows anything about him yet. Very soon, in Mark’s fast-paced story, Jesus will be a huge focus of public attention. But not yet. The vision he sees and the voice he hears as he comes up out of the water is a private experience, or if anyone shares it only John does. The experience is for Jesus alone, in a way his commissioning for the unprecedented mission he is to undertake.

Of course, by telling the story Mark puts us readers in the picture. He lets us into the secret of who Jesus is. Unlike any of the people who were there at the Jordan as Jesus came up out of the water, we are privileged to witness what happens between Jesus and God his Father. This is an amazing moment because it is a trinitarian moment. There is scarcely a moment like it in the Bible when the three persons of God the Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit are manifest to us in their intimate relationship. The Father addresses the Son: “You are my Son, the Beloved.” The term beloved there means effectively “my only son.” It’s a term for the child who is the parent’s only child and therefore especially loved. Jesus is not a son of God; he is *the* unique Son, bound to his Father in a bond of love like no other. The Father continues, “with you I am well pleased,” a quotation from the prophet Isaiah, which says a lot more than that God delights in his Son. It involves also the Son’s vocation. Being the uniquely Beloved Son qualifies Jesus for the unique mission that only he can undertake.

Much later in Mark’s Gospel Jesus tells the parable of the vineyard. The owner of vineyard rents it to tenants, but when he sends a servant to collect the rent they beat him and send him packing. The owner sends slave after slave, and they are all ill-treated, insulted or even killed. Finally, he sends not a slave, but his beloved son, his only child, saying to himself, “They will respect my son.” The tenants treat him like just another slave. They ill-treat him and kill him.

That was the mission Jesus was given at his baptism, though, of course, the parable does not tell the whole story. Jesus has much to do before he dies, and for that he is endowed with the Spirit of God. In his vision as he comes up out of the water, Jesus looks up and he sees the sky torn apart as the power of God descends like a bird in flight and rests upon Jesus. The third member of the Trinity, the Spirit, the mysterious one who always in the Bible appears only under cover of

images from the natural world – breath, wind, fire, water and, here, uniquely, a dove. Everything here is unique because this is a world-changing moment. From this communion of the Father with the Son, and this empowering of the Son with the Spirit, flows the whole story the Gospel tells and the story of the church that follows. That's the secret of Jesus's identity that Mark shares with us at the beginning of his story, but we do not know the half of it until we reach the end.

Like many things in this Gospel, what happens next is a surprise: “the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness.” Here is Jesus commissioned and empowered for ministry, but he doesn't head into Jerusalem or back to Galilee to start preaching the kingdom of God, healing the sick, casting out demons. The Spirit has something else for him first. He must go where there aren't any people. The wilderness in the Bible is the place it is difficult, even dangerous to travel through, a place that is not at all hospitable to human life, a place that lacks even the basic requirements for human life to subsist. And so it is also a place of testing, as it was for the people of Israel after the Exodus, a place where faith is tested, where people can get by only by relying on God to sustain them.

I don't know about you, but in the period since Christmas I have felt exactly as though we are heading into a wilderness, a place where life is suddenly more perilous even than we had previously thought the virus could make it, a world of isolation, where our faith will be sorely tested and we shall need to depend radically on the sustenance of the Spirit. Jesus went into the wilderness with the assurance that he was God's beloved Son. Nothing could shake that, but even Jesus had to find through severe testing the right way to fulfil his vocation. We are not Jesus. Emphatically we are not Jesus, and we should be very cautious about putting ourselves into the place of Jesus in the narratives of the Gospel. Usually our place in the story is with the disciples or with those who come to Jesus in their need. Yet we are those with whom Jesus has shared his Father's love. He has made us his sisters and brothers. He has sent the Spirit of God into our hearts too.

So as we find ourselves in our wilderness, in depressed spirits, fearful perhaps, lonely perhaps, anxious and concerned about the people we know and the world we live in, knowing that there is a long journey through inhospitable territory before we shall emerge again into human togetherness, we can be assured of God's love to uphold us and to stand the test. As for Jesus, the Spirit can empower us beyond our ordinary coping, and, like Jesus, we may even find that angels come to minister to us.