

MARK – THE BEGINNING

Mark 1:9-15 [MW21-07]

Sermon preached by Rev Wayne Thornton at Mangawhai and Wellsford, Sunday 21 February 2021

“I don’t come here to be upset!” he said

- punching the air with his finger
glaring menacingly at the church door after the service
- I come here to be reassured
to touch base with things that really matter
- my life is confusing enough without church being that way too!

All Vicars, Pastors, Preachers have heard something like this at least once in their ministry

- from someone who has been upset by a change
in the accustomed order of things

And I can sympathise with that

- church ought to be a place of
orderly pews, traditional lay out, predictable sermons, time-tested liturgy
- and yet, and yet ... that’s not good news

Sameness, the familiar, the comfortable

- may seem like what we want
pleasant, bearable, nice
- yet God loved the world so much, loves us so much
that God didn’t make everything “nice”
- that God dared to disturb us

I invite you to keep in mind two things

- two seemingly contradictory things
as we continue to look at Mark’s gospel
- the two things? ‘good news’ and ‘being disturbed’

Has anyone read Mark? Is anyone reading Mark?

- did you notice the breathless tempo
it’s almost tiring to read it
- a favourite word of Mark’s is “immediately” or a synonym of it

If you start, as our gospel reading did, at Chapter 1 verse 9, you get this

- about that time Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee
then ...
- as soon as ... right away ... after John was ...
the time has come ... right then ...at once Jesus ...
as soon as Jesus ...
- are you exhausted yet? that’s only part of chapter 1!

Mark’s pace is fast, events tumble over one another

- we heard today how Jesus burst on the scene
as if out of nowhere
- in less than a dozen verses Jesus is baptised, tempted and begins preaching

Matthew in his gospel prepares the way for Jesus with his genealogy

- Luke has wonderful tales of Jesus' nativity in Bethlehem
- in both Luke and Matthew it's near the end of chapter 3 before Jesus is baptised
- but not for Mark!

This gives us a bit of a clue about what Mark is telling us

- Jesus' ministry is like a bolt from the blue
- a jolt, a shock, an unplanned intrusion, an unwelcome disturbance ...

During the time leading up to Christmas we sometimes sing that traditional hymn

- 'Come O Long Expected Jesus'
- in Mark's gospel, Jesus is not the long expected one
- Jesus is an unwelcome intruder

And once he intrudes, Jesus is off like a runaway car in the trolley derby!

- at his baptism the Spirit may have descended like a dove
- but then it hurled him into the wilderness
- where Satan, not slow to recognise a fundamental change
- immediately confronts him

Once Jesus appears there is no time for us to catch our breath

- no time to step back and have a quiet think
- it's all now or never
- Repent! Now! The kingdom of God is here!

We might be, may be, tempted to think

- here it is Lent again: same old routine
- same old boring stuff, heard and done it all before
- got the tee shirt, several tee shirts in fact ...
- an ordinary trek through forty days to Easter
- nothing exceptional, nothing new going on here
- if there was a "Tui billboard" it might say:
- There's something new under the sun. Yeah right!

Today is the first Sunday of Lent

- into our accustomed way of doing things comes Jesus
- breathless, fast-paced, intrusive
- when Jesus preaches only one matter is placed on the table: change
- the kingdom of God is here: it's time for you to change!

You know that old lightbulb joke?

- How many Anglicans does it take to change a lightbulb?
- Change?

Change?

- sounds more like bad news than good news maybe?

If what's happening now is okay, why change?

- why give up what is working?
- why step out into the unknown?

Maybe, definitely, because what Jesus offers is always something better

- changing from the ordinary to the satisfying, engaging, fulfilling
- changing from the routine to the exciting and inspiring
- bringing out the best in us

Perhaps I can illustrate change and being disturbed as good news with the help of this book

- *The Great Divorce*, by C. S. Lewis

It is a disturbing, discomfoting story concerning a group of people

- who, having spent some time in dreary hell are allowed to board a bus to heaven
- they get off at a bus stop where a long walk awaits them residents of heaven are to be their guides
- surprisingly, many refuse to go because they would have to give up something that would keep them out of heaven
- one person won't go because his guide is a convicted murderer whom he can't forgive
- another would have to give up his discussion group in hell that argues moral and religious theories and resists any kind of practical application
- there is a man who would have to give up his well-developed cynicism and a woman who would have to give up her need to control other people

All these poor souls cling to whatever is keeping them from entering heaven

- because they have grown dependent on their problems they want to be included in the kingdom
- but not at the price of their liberation from their comfortable sins and sicknesses

However there is good news ...

There is one going toward heaven who carries on his shoulder a little red lizard

- with a twitching tail and that continually whispers things in the person's ear
- the person though turns back because he cannot enter heaven with the lizard
- an angel approaches and asks if he may kill the lizard this is what happens:

"Honestly, I don't think there's the slightest necessity for that. I'm sure I shall be able to keep it in order now. I think the gradual process would be far better than killing it."

"The gradual process is of no use at all."

"Don't you think so? Well, I'll think over what you've said very carefully. I honestly will. In fact I'd let you kill it now, but as a matter of fact I'm not feeling frightfully well to-day. It would be silly to do it now. I'd need to be in good health for the operation. Some other day, perhaps."

"There is no other day. All days are present now."

"Get back! You're burning me. How can I tell you to kill it? You'd kill me if you did."

"It is not so."

"Why, you're hurting me now."

"I never said it wouldn't hurt you. I said it wouldn't kill you."

"Have your permission?" said the Angel to the Ghost.

"I know it will kill me."

“It won't. But supposing it did”

“You're right. It would be better to be dead than to live with this creature.”

“Then I may?”

“Damn and blast you! Go on can't you? Get it over. Do what you like,” bellowed the Ghost: but ended, whimpering, “God help me. God help me.”

Next moment the Ghost gave a scream of agony such as I never heard on earth. The Burning One closed his crimson grip on the reptile: twisted it, while it bit and writhed, and then flung it, broken backed, on the turf.

After this growing every moment solidier, was the upper arm and the shoulder of a man. Then, brighter still and stronger, the legs and hands. The neck and golden head materialised to the actual completing of a man - an immense man. It looked as if the operation had failed. So far from dying, the creature was still struggling and even growing bigger as it struggled. And as it grew it changed. Its hinder parts grew rounder. The tail, still flickering, became a tail of hair that flickered. There was a great stallion, silvery white but with mane and tail of gold. It was smooth and shining, rippled with swells of flesh and muscle, whinneying and stamping with its hoofs. At each stamp the land shook and the trees dindled.

The new-made man turned and clapped the new horse's neck.

After which the Angel observes

- nothing, not even the best and noblest can go on as it now is
- nothing, not even what is lowest and most bestial
- will not be raised again if it submits to death
- [page 108-112]

The Gospel of Mark begins with Jesus

- intruding among us
- bursting in on our lives
- so may this be our motivation and encouragement as we move through Lent:
- it's time for a change
- and it's good news!