

## Holy Trinity Pro-Cathedral Brussels

### Sermon at Morning Eucharist

Advent 2, 4 December 2011

#### Readings

Isaiah 40: 1-11

2Peter 3:8-15a

Mark 1:1-8

Psalm 85

#### God's New Thing

As love and faithfulness meet together; as righteousness and peace kiss each other, we lift our gaze in anticipation of the approaching glory of God and pray:

Lord, give us weak eyes  
for things of little worth,  
and eyes clear sighted  
in all of your truth.

*The beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.* Mark is speaking of a new beginning: and what a new beginning the arrival of Jesus was. Jesus: *God saves*. That is what the name means. Jesus Christ, *the Anointed One of God who saves*.

Mark's opening is a point of discontinuity, a moment when things change.

When Mark wrote his gospel, reading and writing was essentially confined to a scribal elite, and was used to preserve tradition, the things that did not change.

But Mark does not write his gospel to preserve the old tradition: he does it to insert the good news of Jesus in its midst.

Ched Myers has likened the opening verses of Mark to minimalist theatre, with the world collapsed into a few stark images: Divine voices off; human cries at the centre of the stage; penetrating action.

From the prophetic past, intertwined so that we mix them up, we have the voices of Malachi, maybe also Exodus and Isaiah 40, part of our Old Testament

reading: *A voice of one crying: In the wilderness, prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths.*

The Lord will be coming down his high road and his messenger has gone before him to prepare his people to meet him.

This takes us straight to John, baptising in the wilderness, the place through which God will come on the way to Jerusalem. He is baptising for repentance, for turning again to God and away from all that is foreign to him. Graciously God will forgive: so we must be ready when he comes.

*The whole Judaeian countryside and all the people of Jerusalem* pour out, recalling Isaiah's call to Jerusalem and to the towns of Judaea (40:9).

Ezekiel had a vision of a mighty river pouring forth from the Temple. It speaks of the Spirit of God streaming down into the Arabah, where it will transform the dead waters of the salt sea into something living and productive (Ezekiel 47:1-12 – it was in the Lectionary on 30 November).

Mark reverses this picture. It is the people who pour forth, to meet the God who is coming to renew Jerusalem and to redeem his people.

As the people of God, led by Joshua (the Hebrew form of Jesus) had entered the Promised Land from the wilderness, through the waters of the Jordan, so the people of Jerusalem and of Judaea go to the Jordan to prepare themselves to receive the God who will come from the wilderness.

Who is this man John? Why, he is wearing the garb of Elijah, greatest of the Old Testament prophets. And like the Old Testament prophets, his message is of God: *After me will come One more powerful* (1:7).

Isaiah, too, had pointed to *The Sovereign Lord, who would come with power* (40:10a).

Across Mark's gospel, Jesus will demonstrate in word, but far more in action, that he is indeed the powerful one.

Up to now the Evil One has been the strong man in possession of the house, but now One who is stronger comes, and Mark will show us Jesus tying up the Evil One and expelling him from the places where he has taken up his abode, until Peter recognises Jesus as *the Christ* (8:29), the Strong Man announced by

Isaiah and pointed to by John: the One strong enough to tie up the Evil One, to plunder him as he has so often plundered God's people and eventually to defeat the Evil One forever.

God's New Thing is worked out across the whole gospel.

*I baptise you with water, says John, But he will baptise you with the Holy Spirit.*  
God himself will act to entirely renew believers.

Was there ever a more dramatic announcement?

Until now, the written word of God had been the guarantee of what was unchanging sacred tradition of the fathers in the world of antiquity, that longed for continuity and hated change.

Mark introduces a new approach, a new genre, an unprecedented new form of literature.

Mark is launching us into the story, the ideology, the teaching of Jesus, a story guaranteed by God.

He is reaching out to us to establish something about Jesus, something that will survive his earthly life and will speak to generations yet unborn, that will carry God's New Thing into the future.

By writing his gospel, Mark is taking the risk that it will be appropriated by the literary scribal elite, as indeed it repeatedly has been down history.

But he is not presenting to us a Jesus dead and embalmed in a text. Rather he is providing future generations with an experience, a New Thing of God that will upset and overturn the elites and the dead traditions of every age, setting free the poor, the humble, the needy and the oppressed.

Mark gives us a narrative, a practical manual, life in its complexity. His gospel presents Jesus through the drama of his life and actions, not through monologues.

Mark teaches us about Jesus above all through dramatic interaction, in challenging parables and through deeply symbolic performance. Already, in these few verses, he has taken us with a jolt into the world of action.

People are streaming to the wilderness, John is baptising, the preparation for the arrival of the Strong Man of God is in hand.

Words are indeed spoken, but they are always subordinated to the deed.

So now they tell us that the mighty action is beginning, that the Sovereign Lord is coming with power, that Evil will be bound with unbreakable chains, and that the Glory of the Lord is to be revealed in the midst of his people.

This, then, is the Good News of which Isaiah spoke and which Mark brings to us.

The Good News is that with God's New Thing the dominance of evil will be ended; the exile will return home; and our longing for wholeness, freedom and peace will be fulfilled.

It announces the Advent of the Kingdom of God.

It is with excitement that we must read this gospel, and the prophecy of Isaiah from which it springs, so that it may wash over us and we may never be the same again.

The excitement of Mark is matched by the comfort which we are promised. This is the gospel for the poor, good news for the disinherited, the repressed and the downtrodden.

The way of the world seems too often to solve its problem at the expense of the weak.

When God's Good News breaks in upon his people, when he comes in his might, when we cry *Here is your God*, what do we have but a God who *tends his flock like a shepherd*. One of the oldest images of God in the Bible, one which Jesus made especially his own. He it is *who gathers the lambs in his arms*, and embracing them in the fold of his cloak, *carries them close to his heart*. He it is *who gently leads those that have young*.

What words could be more appropriate on a day when in Holy Trinity we celebrate baptism and new Christians, one an infant, the other already a grown woman, set out on the Christian life?

They know that they have a shepherd to lead them, one to guide them and to support them, one to care for them when they fall into difficulty.

But is this only a harking back to things that happened 2000 years ago? No. For, as our epistle tells us, it is all about how we live now.

The God who has intervened so dramatically in our world is the God who will come again. When he will come, we do not know. But 2 Peter reminds us that he will come: and that the time until he does is one that we should use to put our own lives in order and to share the Good News with others.

When all the structures and illusions and props upon which we build our own importance melt away, where will we be? What will we look like? Will we be seen then as the ones who have gone out to Jordan to meet the Lord as he comes? Will we rejoice as his glory is revealed?

My mother's 100<sup>th</sup> birthday would have been last Friday. It looked very much as if she would make it until a day last April, when unexpectedly, beautifully in the midst of her family, her life on earth ended. Live we to be ever so old, death will come to us all. And then, what will our life look like?

When a dictator fell, a tyrant met the wrath of his people or a businessman who thought he was a lord of the universe found his empire collapsing around him, my mother would say: *Why can we not see? It always ends the same way.*

2 Peter is telling us that *the heavens will disappear with a roar, the elements will be destroyed by fire and the earth and everything in it will be laid bare.* There we will be, as it were naked as a new-born child. And we will see and be seen for what we are.

That is why 2 Peter urges us to use the time that is made available to us to live lives that are *spotless, blameless and at peace with God.*

If we live as Christians in that way, then like the crowds that stream from Jerusalem, we can meet with our Lord as he comes, we can join the procession down the royal high road, to the establishment of the New Jerusalem. And we can rejoice as the Glory of the Lord is revealed and as all mankind will see it together.

Of this we can be sure: in this we can have confidence when all around us doubt and when there seems to be no continuity in life: for if *the grass withers and the flowers fall*, yet we know that *the word of our God stands for ever.*