**The beginning of the gospel of Mark**

Text: Mark 1:1

Rev. David Waldron

**Scriptures:** Isaiah 40:1-8; Mark 1:1-8

**Songs Chosen:** [SttL] 122, 206, 73b, PH412, 529

**Series:** The gospel of Mark (#1)

**Theme:** Mark begins his gospel by declaring that he will be revealing the identity of Jesus Christ.

**Proposition:** The good news is that Jesus is the suffering Son of God

**Introduction**

Today we begin a new preaching series – through the gospel of Mark. The very first word in this gospel in the original Greek is ‘beginning’. Mark’s written words which we read in our Bibles were originally a manuscript written on papyrus (a material similar to thick paper which was made from the pith of the papyrus plant). Scripture recorded on manuscripts like these did not have any page numbers, chapter or verse references; just a continuous stream of Greek letters without spaces or punctuation between them. Mark’s first word ‘beginning’ would have been really helpful to his first readers because they would know that they were at verse 1, page 1 of his manuscript and not just at the start of a fragment that had been torn off from the whole. The word ‘beginning’ not only indicates the start of this ancient document, but also the central message ‘*good news about Jesus Christ the Son of God*’.

Our situation today is obviously very different from that of those who first read Mark’s gospel almost two thousand years ago. Many of you have listened to my preaching now for many years and you know that I do not like to use the words ‘likely’ or ‘probable’ when I am explaining the meaning of God’s Word. I believe that the clearer and more definite I am, the more accurate and powerful the preaching.

However, there is benefit in trying to understand the original situation, both of Mark himself and of his readers so that we can more effectively apply this portion of God’s Word to our own lives today. So, you are going to hear the word ‘probably’, ‘likely’ and ‘possible’ quite a few times as we explore the background to this gospel because there are many details that we can’t be absolutely sure about because the Scriptures don’t reveal them.

Mark was **probably** the first of the four gospels. It is **likely** that Matthew and Luke used Mark’s gospel as a resource when they were writing their accounts. Mark’s gospel was **probably** written between AD 60 and 70 – that is about 30 years after the death of Christ. If this is the case, then it first appeared around the time of the deaths of both Peter and Paul about AD 64. The author of this gospel was **probably** John Mark whose name does not appear in this gospel but is found elsewhere in the NT (e.g. Acts 12:12). John Mark was younger than Paul, Barnabas (his relative, Col 4:10), and Peter.

We know that Peter was planning to write a permanent record of his own memories of Christ before his own death (2 Pet 1:15). Many in the early church believed that Mark’s gospel is largely Peter’s own memories, captured in writing by Mark. This is plausible and **quite likely**. Peter’s own faults and failings are revealed in Mark’s gospel, a self-disclosure that would be consistent with the humility that Peter displayed after his transforming restoration by Jesus. It is **likely** that Mark obtained many of the historical facts in his gospel from Peter. We know that these men were together in Rome (1 Pet 5:13). The original audience for this gospel was **probably** in Rome, the capital of the Roman Empire, a large city where the population was mainly comprised of Gentiles, non-Jews.

In this sermon, we will see three key purposes for Mark’s gospel that are evident from the Biblical text, but also fit very well with the view that the first readers were mainly Gentiles living in Rome and experiencing turmoil and tyranny under the reign of Emperor Nero around AD64. These three aims of Mark’s written work are:

1. An understandable gospel
2. An encouraging gospel
3. An apologetic gospel
4. **An understandable gospel**

Social media today enables rapid communication of information to large numbers of people. Basic literary techniques for spreading a written message effectively to a wide audience include: Keeping it brief by only including what is essential for the central purpose of the message; Avoiding jargon or technical terms that people might not know or if they are used, explain what they mean; and using a narrative approach that conveys the information in an engaging, memorable, unfolding story.

We see all these characteristics in the gospel of Mark. Firstly, this is the shortest of the four gospels (with just over 11,000 words in most English translations). As we start this preaching series that I anticipate will cover many weeks, I would like to encourage you to sit down and read all 16 chapters of Mark’s gospel in one go. I did so last week, and it took me about an hour – I am not a particularly fast reader and I also made a few notes along the way.

Mark was able to economise on his words by keeping tightly to his main theme – that of revealing the true identity of Jesus Christ. You can imagine a few decades after the crucifixion that there was a range of ideas in the Roman society about Jesus, including: He was a good teacher; He was a revolutionary who still has a dangerous following ; He was a prophet; He was an obscure unimportant Jew with some nutty ideas.

The key question that Mark answers in his gospel can be simply expressed as ‘who is Jesus?’. He gives the answer in summary form in his introduction in what we know as chapter 1 verse 1: “*The beginning of the gospel of* ***Jesus Christ, the Son of God***”. Given this main theme it is not surprising that Mark records the heavenly words of God the Father at the baptism of Jesus ‘*You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased*’ (1:11) and again at the Transfiguration: ‘*This is my beloved Son, listen to him*’ (9:7).

Mark also includes the words of the demons who identify Jesus using the mouths of those they possess: ‘*I know who you are – the Holy One of God*’ (1:24); ‘*What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God?*’ (5:7). Peter, a Jew, speaking on behalf of all the disciples, confesses the true identity of Jesus declaring ‘*You are the Christ*’ (8:29). Then, when Jesus died on the cross, a gentile centurion also identified Christ ‘*Truly this man was the Son of God!*’ (15:39).

When Mark had finished writing his brief gospel about Jesus Christ, the Son of God, he wanted to leave all his readers in no doubt about who Jesus is. When we proclaim the gospel to others in our city, we also should aim to leave our hearers in no doubt about who Jesus is by the time we have finished speaking with them.

There are four techniques Mark uses to make his gospel more understandable to a wide audience, these are: **Firstly**, he doesn’t include very many Old Testament quotes which would have been unknown to many Gentiles. However, he does connect his opening word ‘beginning’ to the prophecy of Isaiah in predicting a coming messenger. Mark then simply shows how the coming of Jesus was already foretold by God many centuries before and that John the Baptist was the fulfilment of Old Testament prophesy.

**Secondly**, Mark’s use of the word ‘gospel’ in his introduction would have been understood, at least in part, by his Gentile readers. The Greek word ‘evangel’, meaning ‘glad tidings’ was used by the Romans on the Emperor’s birthday or when he had won a great victory. Here Mark takes a known term and masterfully uses it to describe the glad tidings about Jesus Christ, not the ruler of a human kingdom or a military conqueror, but the Sovereign of the universe and the Defeater of sin, Satan and death.

**Thirdly**, Mark is careful to explain Jewish customs (e.g. 7:3-4) and to translate Aramaic expressions (e.g. 7:11) helping a Gentile audience to more readily understand the gospel about Jesus the Son of God. When we explain the gospel to others it is helpful if we explain key Biblical words, concepts and theological terms and not assume that these are known and/or understood by our listeners.

**Fourthly**, Mark’s gospel is mainly an unfolding story about Jesus. There are small sections containing Christ’s teaching, but the main focus is on story of the suffering and death of Jesus. The narrative is fast paced in Mark; even in the use of the word ‘immediately’ which is employed over 40 times to convey rapidly unfolding action. Stories have been used since ancient times to powerfully transmit information in an understandable and memorable form. Mark’s narrative is a true historical account, recording events that were witnessed by people like Peter and Paul with whom Mark had close contact. It is also a gospel designed to encourage those who are persecuted, which brings us to our second point:

1. **An encouraging gospel**

Imagine a government that confiscates people’s private assets. Imagine an oppressive rule where people live in constant fear. This was the situation in Rome under Emperor Nero. The first five years of his reign had actually been reasonably responsible. Christians at that time were largely ignored by the general population and by the authorities. Occasionally they were accused of being anti-social haters of others because they would not join in with pagan festivals, idol worship, and the immorality that characterized many in that culture. So whilst the early Christians were marginalised, there’s no evidence of criminal charges being brought against them during the early years of Nero’s reign.

This all changed with a fire that swept through the city of Rome in the summer of AD 64. Many at the time thought that the Emperor himself was responsible. However, Nero sought to aid the homeless and injured, levied a tax for a relief fund, and lowered the price of grain for the poor. He used the opportunity provided by the devastation resulting from the fire to clear the slums, widen the streets, create new parks and change the building code to mandate the use of fireproof materials like brick and stone. All of this Imperial activity did not remove the public’s suspicion that Nero was the arsonist who caused all the suffering that he was now seeking to gain credit for relieving. Finding a scapegoat upon whom to put the responsibility rapidly became a political necessity for Nero’s government.

Marginalised, stigmatized, minority groups are always an easy target for such evil schemes. Christians were an obvious choice for an evil ruler who desperately needed to spread some convincing misinformation and distract the population from his own faults and crimes. A generation later, the Roman historian Tacitus wrote:

*“Neither human resources, nor imperial munificence, nor appeasement of the gods, eliminated sinister suspicions that the fire had been instigated. To suppress this rumour, Nero fabricated scapegoats – and punished with every refinement the notoriously depraved Christians (as they were popularly called)”*

*“First, Nero had self-acknowledged Christians arrested. Then, on their information, large numbers of others were condemned – not so much for incendiarism as for their anti-social tendencies. Their deaths were made farcical. Dressed in wild animals’ skins, the were torn to pieces by dogs, or crucified, or made into torches to be ignited after dark as substitutes for daylight”.*

*“Despite their guilt as Christians, and the ruthless punishment it deserved, the victims were pitied. For it was felt that they were being sacrificed to one man’s brutality, rather than to the national interest”*

Now, these are not the inspired Word of God, but the viewpoint of a secular Roman historian.

If the gospel of Mark was written firstly to an audience in Rome, living after the great fire in that city in AD64, then the background is one of intense persecution for the early Christians. This seems highly likely as we see the emphasis that Mark puts on the suffering of Christ and His foretelling of the suffering of His followers (8:31-38). Mark’s gospel notes that Jesus was tempted by Satan in the wilderness where he was with wild animals (1:13). This would have been an encouraging detail for those awaiting death in the Roman arena or mourning those who had died by being exposed to ferocious creatures. Mark records the imprisonment and execution of John the Baptist, who lived and suffered very much as the prophet Elijah had done at the hands of Ahab and Jezebel (1 Ki 19:1-10).

Mark’s gospel has been described (by Mark Kahler) as a *‘passion narrative with an extended introduction’*. This statement highlights just how much of Mark’s gospel (chapters 10-15) recounts the final week of Christ’s pre-crucifixion life rather than the thirty plus years of his life and ministry prior. Mark’s emphasis is very much on the persecution of Jesus whose death is foreshadowed early on in chapter 2 (v19). Mark includes the deceitful testing of Jesus by the Pharisees (12:13-17), the plotting of the chief priests and scribes against Christ (14:1) and the betrayal of Judas Iscariot (14:10). For those who first read this gospel there could be no doubt that Jesus suffered much injustice and was ill-treated, both before and during his execution, by Roman authorities

There could also be no doubt that Jesus expects that His followers will also suffer as they live faithful lives in a broken world. "*If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it.* (Mark 8:34-35).

Our situation today is obviously not the same as those who lived under the oppressive rule of the Roman Emperor Nero. However, living for Jesus as part of His church today is to be a member of a minority group that is often misunderstood, viewed with suspicion, and at times misrepresented. Christians in many parts of the world today, are an outnumbered group living in a multi-cultural country with a secular civil government. In New Zealand we are mostly not actively persecuted but we are certainly marginalized from public debate and discourse. A Christian worldview seldom finds a voice in the mainstream media.

Congregational worship is not seen by our governing civil authorities as an ‘essential service’ for those who fear God and who yearn to gather together in both response both to their Lord’s good command and because they know their need of God’s healing gospel. As churches today we are largely seen as gathering for potential ‘super-spreader social events’ in exactly the same way, or worse than, a nightclub, concert, bar or restaurant. Congregational life is difficult at present in this COVID-19 pandemic, although by no means as troublesome as it was for the first readers of Mark’s gospel.

It is encouraging to know, and to be reminded, that Scripture speaks to us today as God’s Living Word. It is encouraging to know that difficulties, disruptions and distress are nothing new for God’s people. It is encouraging to know that Mark’s gospel is both a very understandable historical account written for a wide audience and that its focus on the suffering of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, strengthens us as we look to Him. The earlier quote from Tacitus about Christians living under Nero’s reign (‘notoriously depraved, guilty deserving of ruthless punishment’) points us to a third key purpose of Mark’s gospel.

1. **An apologetic gospel**

“I am sorry that I lost your book”. “I am sorry that I said mean things to you when I was angry”. “I am sorry that I am late”. “I am sorry that I let you down”. I expect that all of us have apologized for an offence or failure at some time. My dictionary defines an apology as ‘*an admission of error or discourtesy accompanied by an expression of regret*’. Giving an apology means a person is taking responsibility for their own fault or mistake.

It’s understandable that some people may think that the word ‘apologetic’ means saying sorry about something, in this case the gospel. However, that is most definitely **not** the meaning of ‘apologetic’. It comes from the Greek word translated ‘defence’ in 1 Peter 3:15: “*but in your hearts regard Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a* ***defence*** *to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you*”. Christian apologetics defends Christianity against objections.

As we’ve already seen there were many complaints and grievances against the early Christians. Some of these were due to ignorance about Christianity. Some resulted from the purposeful marginalizing and stigmatising of Christians both by authorities and by the wider society back then. Today there is much ignorance and growing hostility towards Christians and the Christian faith. We may be accused of being homophobic, bigoted, intolerant, antiquated, unscientific, anti-social, unstable, stupid, pathetic, weak or just plain irrelevant.

For many, Jesus, as a real person, is unknown to them. Even though his sacred name may frequently be found on their lips as they swear blasphemously. As we’ve already noted, Mark, in this gospel, answers the central question ‘who is Jesus?’ and this forms the theme of the content of his gospel from the beginning in chapter 1 to the end in chapter 16.

Mark makes it abundantly clear that the charges against Jesus – that he was a rebel and a danger to both Jewish and Roman society - were fabricated and completely false. It is clear from his gospel that the death of Jesus was not a tragic accident, but the fulfilment of God’s great plan of salvation. Jesus was not merely a good man or even just a prophet. He was, and is, the Son of God who, though completely innocent, greatly suffered.

Mark records the evil attempt by the Pharisees and some of the Herodians (a sect of Greek speaking Jews) to trap Jesus ‘in his talk’ (12:13). When asked if it was lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, Jesus asked for a Roman coin bearing the Emperor’s likeness and inscription to be brought to him. Using this denarius as a symbol of civil authority, Jesus said: “*Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s*” (12:17). Imagine, as one of those Christians who first read Mark’s gospel, paying taxes to the same Roman government that had unjustly imprisoned and executed members of your own family or church? That must have been so very hard. In his gospel, Mark shows that Christians were good citizens of the Roman Empire, not troublesome revolutionaries.

Explaining the truth about Christianity is as important now as it was back when Mark’s gospel was first written because false ideas and ignorance about Christ hinder the spread of the gospel just as much now as then. So now you know, if you didn’t already, that you can read the readily understandable and encouraging gospel of Mark in about an hour. Alternatively you could tackle it over a week with 10 minutes per day. That’s the time it takes to drink one cup of coffee slowly.

Imagine the early New Testament church in Rome reading these same words of truth in extremely difficult times. Church life must have been very disrupted with constant fear of what the government of Nero might do next, whether they would be imprisoned and be painfully and publicly executed. Gathering for worship in large numbers was difficult and many met secretly in small groups in each other’s homes, as many of us are doing today for a different reason (due to COVID-19 gathering limit restrictions). Then there would have been questions about how to respond to those who denied the faith or who collaborated with the authorities. I imagine that there would have been many different opinions within the church in Rome. It’s likely that there would have been disagreements about how best to respond to the rapidly changing and threatening situation.

Into this turmoil, uncertainty and threat God ordained that John Mark would reveal the glad tidings about Jesus Christ, the Son of God. As we end this sermon, our focus is on the gospel, on the glad tidings that we have heard from God. Our focus is on Jesus Christ. He was not a criminal, not a political revolutionary. He was not a man who accidently got killed by mistake. He was not merely a good teacher or just a prophet.

He spoke the truth with supreme authority (Mark 1:22). He supernaturally healed many, had power over evil spirits and controlled the creation of which He had become a part using the words he spoke. He suffered willingly, unjustly and without complaint, knowing the great purpose for which He had been sent to this earth by God His Father. He, as the only truly innocent human being who has ever lived, died a cruel death for crimes he had not committed.

The good news of the gospel is that He did all this for people like you and me. By faith in Him, His perfect goodness is gifted to us and His death in our place grants us life forever. John Mark knew these things to be true and he wrote an understandable, encouraging, defensive-of-the-truth gospel so that we and others may know too. As we continue through the gospel of Mark, and as we continue to move forward in faith as a congregation, remember above all the good news about Jesus Christ, the Son of God and live, suffer and conquer for Him.

AMEN