**Preparing the way of the Lord**

Text: Mark 1:2-8

Rev. David Waldron

**Scriptures:** Exodus 23:20-25; Isaiah 40:1-5; Malachi 3:1-3; Mark 1:1-8

**Songs Chosen:** [SttL] 371, 32, 233, 291, 180

**Series:** The gospel of Mark (#2)

**Theme:** Mark begins his gospel by going back to the Old Testament predictions of a forerunner who would prepare the way for the promised Messiah and then he reveals that John the Baptist was this anticipated herald who preached Christ; who was superior to him in person and work.

**Proposition:** Our gospel ministry is to prepare people to meet Christ.

**Introduction**

The media is full of sad tidings at present – so much so that wise for us to ration ourselves so that we are not exposed to a constant barrage of fear and anxiety-inducing news. Epidemiologists, politicians, predictive mathematical model makers and other ‘experts’ are heralding the coming rising wave of COVID-19 Omicron infections in our New Zealand communities. Many of these voices are well-intentioned heralds who seek to bring a message to us so that we can prepare for the disruptions and suffering that they predict are coming.

Mark’s gospel, like the current message about the virus that is beginning to spread around the country, also has an emphasis on suffering and yet, in complete contrast to the mainstream media today, the Word of God reveals not sad, but glad tidings which would spread around the whole world. This gospel does not bring fear and anxiety to those who receive it, but calm confidence and trust in God, who alone knows the future.

We focused last week on the first verse of this shortest gospel: “*The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God*”. Mark does not begin, as does Matthew, with the human ancestry of Christ starting with Abraham and listing a genealogy of 3 stages with 14 generations each to Mary, the mother of Jesus (Matt 1:1-17). Mark does not begin, as does John, with Christ the Divine pre-incarnate Word who was with God in the beginning before this Creation came into existence. Mark does not begin, as does Luke, with Zechariah the priest and his wife Elizabeth and the promise of a son to be born to them in their old age. We know him as ‘*John the Baptist’ who would ‘go before the Lord in the spirit and power of Elijah…to make ready for the Lord a people prepared*’.

Mark begins with the Old Testament to show, not only that John the Baptist would go before Jesus, but that he was foretold long before he arrived. This sermon focusses on the preparatory work of John the Baptist, a forerunner who went before Christ to ‘prepare the way of the Lord’. John’s ministry was a unique part of God’s unfolding plan of salvation in history. However, his mission also reveals truths about our calling, brothers and sisters, as forerunners of Christ speaking into a world where there are changes coming that are far more devastating and terminal than any pandemic.

Against the backdrop of so many ‘sad tidings’ of a disrupted, difficult and uncertain future, we are the heralds who bring glad tidings of the kingdom of God. We do not proclaim possible predictions of what might happen in the future, but sure truth about the return of Christ who is coming to judge the world in righteousness (Acts 17:31) and to rule over a renewed earth forever. We also proclaim the present reality that Christ meets all who come to Him in repentance and faith at their own point of need. Our task, though different from John the Baptist’s in many details, is similarly to prepare the way of the Lord as forerunners of Christ in the hearts of many who are yet to believe. Let’s focus now on our text from Mark 1:2-8 under three headings:

1. The expected forerunner
2. The baptising forerunner
3. The Christ-glorifying forerunner
4. **The expected forerunner (2-3,6)**

I came to the church building last Lord’s Day about half an hour before the service began. Strangely there were a couple of police cars parked on the street when I came into the carpark which was completely empty. There were 22 people worshipping in the congregation that morning, 17 in the afternoon (excluding minister, musicians, sound desk, an elder and a deacon). Like so many aspects of life at present, I had never expected to experience these things: vaccine mandates, border restrictions, and not seeing most people in our congregation on a weekly basis.

The first Christian readers of Mark’s gospel likely did not expect to live under the oppressive rule of the tyrant Emperor Nero. They probably did not expect to suffer as they did being, (in the words of the Roman historian Tacitus), “*Dressed in wild animals’ skins, torn to pieces by dogs, or crucified, or made into torches to be ignited after dark as substitutes for daylight”.*

Mark, in his gospel, reveals the reality that the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, was expected, because God had already been at work in ages past to bring about the coming of the Messiah. It was a practice in the Ancient Near East to send messengers in advance of a visiting king to announce his coming and to remove any obstacles before his arrival. A forerunner is a messenger or herald who precedes and warns of the approach of another.

Mark begins his gospel not with Jesus, but with Christ’s ‘forerunner’, John. Mark doesn’t just start with the appearance of John in the wilderness, but with ancient prophesies that predicted his coming. Mark blends together a sequence of texts spanning the Old Testament from Exodus (23:20), Isaiah (40:3) and Malachi (3:1). This is a combination of prophecies carefully selected across the whole sweep of the Scriptures that existed at the time Mark wrote his gospel. It is an effective way of revealing in a few words the truth that the coming of Jesus Christ, the Son of God had been expected throughout the history of Israel.

All these Old Testament references reveal a messenger who prepares the way of the Lord. John did not appear unexpectedly in an uninhabited desert place. It was in the wilderness that God had first met with His people Israel and given them the terms of His covenant with them at Mt. Sinai. It was not a surprise that John’s food and clothing were like those of an Old Testament prophet (Zech 13:4) because just as God’s prophets of old foretold of the coming Messiah, so John brought a message of His imminent arrival. John was dressed like Elijah with a leather belt about his waist in the wilderness (2 Kings 1:8). (Having a belt fastened at the waist not only kept the loose robe from blowing and tearing apart, but also enabled it to be tucked up for walking or running). Mark clearly identifies John with Elijah later in his gospel (9:9-13). John was not actually Elijah reincarnated, but Elijah was the Old Testament ‘type’ who prefigured John’s ministry (Luke 1:17).

Many of those who first read Mark’s gospel would likely have heard about John the Baptist, but many of the Gentile Christian first readers may not have known that his coming had long been expected many centuries before. The fulfilment in John’s life and ministry of many prophesies about the coming messenger who would prepare the way of the Lord reveals God’s control over all events in unfolding history in order to bring about His plans. That would have been a great comfort for the first readers of Mark’s gospel, living under the Roman Emperor Nero; a ruler who appeared to be out of control and answerable to nobody.

Later in Mark’s gospel they would read of how King Herod had “*sent and seized John and bound him in prison for the sake of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, because he had married her. For John had been saying to Herod, "It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife*." (Mark 6:17-18). Mark records that ‘*Herod feared John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man*” (Mark 6:20). The first readers of the gospel would learn about the way in which Herodias conspired to have her husband Herod behead John by having her daughter dance for the king.

So here’s the thing: just because John had been specially sent by God to be the predicted, expected forerunner of Christ didn’t mean that his life would be easy or that it would end peacefully. Just because John boldly spoke the truth to a wicked ruler, didn’t mean that he would escape imprisonment and execution. Just because John lived a righteous and holy life did not protect him from evil on this earth.

God’s good plans for His people through history do not exclude the afflictions of pain, suffering, injustice and death. The knowledge that this had been true for the great prophet John (Matt 11:11) would have been a comfort and source of strength for the oppressed first readers of Marks’s gospel just as this revealed knowledge is a comfort and strength for us all today in these troubled times. John was an expected forerunner. He was also a baptising forerunner, which brings us to our second point:

1. **The baptising forerunner (4-5)**

Some people have titles attached to their name that indicate what they do: for example Doctor Smith, Pastor Jones, Professor Plum. These titles can raise questions like: ‘Is Doctor Smith a medical doctor or has he obtained a research doctorate at a university?’ ‘Is Pastor Jones trained in the Scriptures and ordained by a church or has he just taken the title upon himself?’ ‘Is Professor Plum a real person or a character from the game Cluedo?’

In his gospel, Mark doesn’t introduce the expected forerunner by the title ‘John the Baptist’ as used by Jesus (Matt 11:11) and his disciples (Matt 16:14), King Herod (Matt 14:2) and John’s own disciples (Luke 7:20). As with the examples of Doctor Smith, Pastor Jones, Professor Plum, the title ‘John the Baptist’ still leaves some remaining questions: What sort of baptism did John practice? Was his baptism the same as, or different from, the baptism that Jesus would late command his disciples to perform? (Matt 28:19). Was baptism the only thing he did?

Let’s answer these questions by looking at what the Lord has revealed in His Word. John’s baptism was a ‘*baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins*’ (1:4). His baptism did not operate to actually forgive sins, nor did it automatically produce repentance in those who were baptised by John. This baptism was a sign of the desire of those who came to John in the river Jordan ‘confessing their sins’ that they wanted to be cleansed from their sins.

It was not surprising and unexpected that John baptised people. The Jews were already familiar with the baptism of proselytes; Gentiles (non-Jews) who wanted to become part of the covenant community of Israel and worship the One true God. What was new about John’s baptism was that this was a sign of a fundamental transformation of mind, heart and life which was required even of the children of Abraham. The Jews, as well as the Greek needed to be converted. Notice that the people who came to be baptised by John came from ‘*the country of Judea and from Jerusalem*’ – they were mostly, perhaps entirely, Jews.

John’s baptism clearly demonstrated that being born as a Jew was not sufficient to cleanse a person from their sins. It never had been, a living relationship with the Lord had always been the central reality of salvation (e.g. Isaiah 29:13). God had foretold the inner regeneration that He would produce in His chosen people, for example through the prophet Jeremiah: “*This is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people*” (Jer 31:33). John’s forerunner ministry demonstrated that this expected new covenant was about to come.

John’s baptism was **not the same** as the baptism that Christ would later command as a sign and seal of a union with Him. His baptism was a ‘forerunner’ – a preparatory rite pointing forward to the coming Lord. Paul later explained this to a group of John’s disciples in Ephesus, saying: "*John baptised with the baptism of repentance, telling the people to believe in the one who was to come after him, that is, Jesus*" (Acts 19:4).

John’s baptism did not signify that the sins of all the people who came to the river Jordan confessing their sins had been forgiven, but that repentance (a change of heart, turning away from sin and towards God) is a pre-condition for having the debt of sin cancelled. We could say from a human experiential perspective that true repentance is a ‘forerunner’ that prepares the heart for faith in Christ; the means by which the forgiveness of sins is applied to the believer.

John was not only a baptizer, he was also a preacher. Notice that he ‘*proclaimed a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins*’ (v4). He was a herald who faithfully spoke the Word of God “*Prepare the way of the Lord make his paths straight*” (v3). A longer title for John would be “John the preaching Baptist”. He verbally called all who would listen to repentance and he preached Christ – which brings us to our third point:

1. **The Christ-glorifying forerunner**

The role of a supporting artist in a music concert is to ‘warm up’ the audience in preparation for the featured or ‘headliner’ act. The supporting artist is not the ‘main event’, their role ends when they leave the stage so that the star of the show can then appear. In God’s unfolding plan of salvation, John was like the ‘supporting act’, going ahead of Christ who is the ‘main event’. John the Baptist was a faithful servant of the Lord who prepared the way for the coming of the long-awaited Messiah.

Luke, in his gospel, records the words of the angel to John’s father Zechariah ‘*he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God, and he will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared*’ (Luke 1:16-17). John was like one of the many prophets in the Old Testament who called God’s people back to their Lord. His calling was not to draw attention to himself, but to point forward to the coming Christ whose person was superior to his own. "*After me comes he who is mightier than I, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie”* (v7)*.*

In Bible times, when the master of a house returned home from travelling, his lowly servant would untie and remove his sandals from his feet. Being close to someone else’s feet can be quite unpleasant, especially if they are dirty. Bending down to ground level before someone also symbolises submission to a person of higher rank. By using the illustration of a lowly sandal-removing servant, John humbly puts himself in his rightful place with respect to the coming Lord Jesus. He was inferior and Jesus was superior.

Matthew records a detail that is not included in Mark’s shorter gospel. At the baptism of Jesus, John said to Jesus ‘*I need to be baptised by you and do you come to me?*’ (Matt 3:14). Jesus had no need of a baptism to signify repentance. There was nothing for Jesus to repent of. There was no sin for Him to turn away from, no Saviour that He had need of turning towards in faith.

John glorified Jesus by telling the truth about himself and his Master. You and I likewise glorify Christ by telling others the truth about ourselves – we are lowly servants of the King. You and I likewise glorify Christ by telling others the truth about Jesus – He is greater than any of us and needs no Saviour as we do. “*He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power. After making purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high*” (Heb 1:3).

John points forward not only to the superior person of Christ, but also to His greater work. *“I have baptised you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit*." (1:7-8) Water is an effective agent for physical cleansing. That is why we shower or sit in the bath. However, water is completely ineffective as a means of spiritual cleansing. The water of baptism points to our need of the agent of inner transformation – the Holy Spirit. There has been much confusion in the wider church about the work of the Holy Spirit and what it means to receive the baptism of the Holy Spirit. The truth is not difficult to understand.

Proclaiming this truth is one of the ways in which we serve as heralds, or forerunners of Christ. Here it is. Jesus promised the gift of the Holy Spirit to be poured out on upon his disciples in an extraordinary way on the Day of Pentecost following His resurrection (Acts 1:8; 2:17, 33). Now whenever a person’s heart is supernaturally changed by the Holy Spirit, being born again (John 3:3) they are baptised in the Spirit. John’s water baptism pointed to Christ’s Holy Spirit baptism – a spiritual regeneration, a cleansing, a renewing, a coming to spiritual life from death, a being drawn out of darkness into light. The baptism that we administer in this church likewise points to the baptism of the Holy Spirit.

When a person comes to faith Christ as an adult having repented of their sins and trusted upon His finished work on the behalf, the outward washing symbolized through their baptism points to the inward cleansing of the Spirit in their hearts. When a child of a believing parent or parents is baptised, the outward washing symbolized through their baptism points to an inward cleansing of the Spirit that we hope will one day become evident in their own profession of faith.

We are not extraordinary prophets like John the Baptist. He had a special calling from the Lord to be the forerunner of Christ at a particular time in history in fulfilment of many Old Testament prophesies. We are, nonetheless, called to be prophets who proclaim Christ. Humbly living our lives and showing others as we do, that we serve a superior master who is mightier that we are and whose sandals we are not worthy to stoop down and untie. We proclaim our powerful King who is far above us in status and yet through His humble obedience and sacrifice on the cross has enabled us to be children of God and to share in His glorious inheritance. He is far above us and yet is a gentle, kind, compassionate ‘older brother’ who sympathises with our weaknesses (Heb 4:15).

We teach people that baptism is a sign which confirms both our need of inner cleansing and Christ’s sending of the Holy Spirit so that all who come to Him in faith may know that they have been transformed and given eternal life. We are not forerunners like John the Baptist who preceded Christ’s first coming to this earth – we come before His return. We are ambassadors for Christ who prepare the way for His second coming at the end of this age. We, together with all our brothers and sister in Christ throughout the world, are the means by which God is pleased to continue the proclamation of the gospel.

The gospel of Jesus Christ in the lives of the people in your life may begin with you. That is a glorious purpose for your life and mine. Knowing this helps us to keep moving forward without the fear and anxiety that so many around us are weighed down by at this time. Instead the good news of the gospel reminds us that we have every reason to have calm confidence and trust in God who alone knows all the details of the future.

AMEN.