

The Text: Mark 1:14-20

Mark's method of writing his gospel account seems to be short and straight to the point. Mark doesn't even mention the account of Jesus' birth, but goes straight into John the Baptist's ministry where Jesus seemingly just 'pops up', coming from Nazareth and meeting John in the Jordan to be baptised by him there. Then he gives us just two verses to tell us that the Spirit sends Jesus into the wilderness for forty days to be tempted by Satan, before sprinting from the wilderness down to Galilee and before we know it, we're at the beginning of today's passage:

After John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. "The time has come," he said. "The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!"

Why does Mark write with such urgency and exclude so much of the detail that the other Gospel writers have included? Why does he just gloss over John the Baptist's imprisonment? Isn't this seemingly at odds with Jesus' declaration about good news in our text? I wonder how John would have felt? Perhaps to him it didn't seem as though the Kingdom of God was near. Perhaps to him it didn't seem as if there was very much good news at all. Herod had lost his head in a moment of impulse which resulted in the Baptist literally losing his, all for faithfully proclaimed God's Word. John had dared to stand up to the truth and reprove Herod for unlawfully taking the wife of his brother. Salome is about to have John's head presented to her on a plate! Is this the time to be talking about good news? But that is how Mark begins: After John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. "The time has come," he said. "The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!"

What about for us? After the warm fuzzy sentiment of Christmas it might seem as though the Kingdom of God and its good news is not that near to us after all, but kept at arm's length by the sadness the tabloids and broadcasters deliver to us each day, kept at bay by the mantra of today's society, "Look after number 1"—even at the expense of the peace and wellbeing of others. "The Kingdom of God is near," Jesus says. It's hard to hear him say: the Kingdom of God is near, especially knowing that Mark wrote his gospel account around 55 AD, nearly 2,000 years ago now, which seems to empty "near" of any real meaning. During Advent our Old Testament readings implored God to rend the heavens and come down and save his people. We sang "Come, Lord Jesus, come; into this weary world, O, how we long for you to come, Lord, come." It can be hard to keep on patiently waiting for Jesus to come, can't it - hard as we wait around the hospital beds of our loved ones to watch their final breaths; hard waiting for God's answer as we await the results of scans that threaten the future as we hoped it would be; hard waiting when the farm's posted yet another bad year, or when we see that homes are lost to devastating bush fires; hard waiting for the senseless violence to stop? It's hard waiting for Jesus to come again.

Perhaps we can better understand what Jesus means when we understand what a kingdom is. A kingdom is a province where a King rules for the benefit of his people. God's Kingdom is where God is, ruling with his power and grace. God's Kingdom, then,

is wherever Jesus our King is at work. With the birth of Jesus, the time has come. Jesus has come to rule over sin, death and the devil. Seated on his throne, the Cross, Jesus defeated these enemies to life with God for all eternity. God's kingdom is fulfilled in Jesus yet at the same time it is something we still wait for. God's Kingdom has come to earth in the person of Christ but it will come again when Jesus returns to judge the living and the dead. In that sense we can say the Kingdom of God is near, as Jesus promises he is coming soon.

But 'nearness' also has the sense of proximity; of closeness. When you are travelling and getting close to arriving, you are drawing near to your destination. When someone lives in a town or suburb not that far from us, we say they live nearby. When our school mates sit a few tables away, we talk about sitting near our friends.

Now we start to see what good news Mark is talking about. Jesus says: "The time has come, the Kingdom of God has drawn near!" The time *has* come. What God has promised, he has brought to pass in the person of Christ. With the birth of Jesus in a tiny stable at Bethlehem, the Kingdom of God has drawn near, and heaven has come down to earth. The Kingdom of God has come close to us in the person of Jesus. And so Jesus is saying: The Kingdom of God is here, before you, in me. Repent then, and believe the Good News.

The season of Advent traditionally has a rich theme of repentance to it. Repentance involves a turning around. We often picture this turning as turning away from our sin, and towards Jesus and the life he calls us to. But despite our best efforts we can't do that. We can't leave our sin behind and do a U-Turn to face Christ by our own strength.

Repentance is turning *to* Jesus *with* our sin. We give Jesus our sin and he frees us from it. When we turn to Jesus and confess our sin, we surrender our self-imposed burden of trying to deal with our sin our way—of justifying it, defending it, re-labelling it in more acceptable language, covering it up from the sight of others, fleeing from God. We agree with God that we have transgressed the standards he has set for living a holy life. We also confess that by our very nature we are sinful, and that therefore we can't repair our own brokenness ourselves and we agree with God that we need *his* help.

In this, God does not view our repentance as a good work from us by which we might earn his favour. Instead, repentance prepares us to receive God's good work in Christ. In his Large Catechism, Luther says that confession consists of two parts. "The first is our work and act, when I lament my sin and desire comfort and restoration for my soul. The second is a work that God does, when He absolves me of my sins through the word placed on the lips of another person". That is good news, isn't it! As Luther says: "*This is the surpassingly grand and noble thing that makes confession so wonderful and comforting.*"

"Repent and believe in the good news!" That's something worth focusing on, isn't it? Jesus' call to you to "believe in the good news" is not a call to believe in a set of facts about something. Jesus is proclaiming himself as the good news. This is how Mark begins the gospel: "The beginning of the good news *about Jesus the Messiah, the Son*

of God..." The Greek word Mark uses for belief is really in the sense of a loyal commitment. Repent and believe the good news—not just information but what it means for your daily life. Trust in Jesus and his gospel. Cherish it. Guard it close to your heart. Let it permeate your life and daily walk. Live it and breathe it.

I think that Mark glosses over John the Baptist's imprisonment and death because what John pointed to and prepared the people for has been fulfilled. Christ has arrived! Mark's focus is on Jesus' ministry of freeing people with the good news. The good news is that Kingdom of God is near. Christ our King came into the world to suffer the same fate as John on our behalf. The word used for John's arrest, literally means "handed over" and it's the same word used for when Jesus was arrested and handed over to Pilate.

That handing over of Jesus to ultimately suffer and die was not defeat for Jesus, for shortly after he would rise victorious with new life for the world. Ascending to the right hand of the Father he opened the way to heaven for us. Present everywhere, he is present through particular means with his promise to personally bring the forgiveness, life and salvation he won for all with his death and resurrection at Golgotha. Wherever Jesus' word and sacraments are, there is Jesus himself, invisible to the eyes of mortals but nonetheless truly present and powerfully at work. The Kingdom of God is indeed near. It is near you when Jesus baptises trusting adults and unknowing infants alike in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. The Kingdom of God is near you when Jesus speaks through human lips the absolution of all your sin. The Kingdom of God is near you when he speaks through those reading the lessons, or the Gospel proclaimed in the sermon, or in the devotions parents read with their children. The Kingdom of God is near you when through the lips of children Jesus sings the gospel in songs of praise. The Kingdom of God is near you when through a simple round wafer Jesus puts his body into your hands and through a cup of wine gives you his outpoured blood to drink for the forgiveness of all your sins. That is the gospel—that our crucified, risen Christ is beside us, in us, with us-

Jesus is near us, close to us, powerfully at work even when our life circumstances and the chaos of the world around us would tempt us to think otherwise. As he speaks to us, Jesus draws us into a new reality in which he dramatically changes our lives.

Through the Creed which we confess each Sunday, we say that we believe *in* God. Perhaps we would do better to remove the 'in' and say "We believe God". We believe what God has to say about us. We believe his promises. We won't live as if God is far off and everything is solely on our shoulders. With God's help we will trust the good news that with God all things are possible—that God is still God, still the Creator who can make all things new, still the Redeemer who can bring light and life where it seems like there is only darkness and despair, still the Advocate who stands with us and gives us strength. The good news is that our reign—our time of having to be totally in charge, struggling, worrying, regretting—can be over! God's reign is at hand. The time is fulfilled. May this year be for us a year filled with much blessing from Christ as we turn to him and believe the good news he preaches to us. Amen.