

St Thomas's Advent 2 Sunday 10 December 2017

Have you ever had a something to tell that was so exciting that you couldn't wait to tell people? Some piece of really exciting news that you couldn't wait to share? I don't mean in a gossipy sort of way, but in a happy news that just can't wait sort of way

Today we heard the beginning of Mark's Gospel. "The beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ Son of God." It's a short Gospel (try reading it all the way through.)

Mark is the microwave Gospel. Its short and snappy. It's only got just over 11,000 words and if you think that's a lot, then remember a paperback might be 60, 80 or 100,000 words long. If you're like the Christian who prayed for patience and moans that God's not giving him patience quickly enough then Mark's the gospel for you.

There are a few things that strike most people when they read and study Mark.

The first bit about Marks gospel that strikes you if you read it all the way through is that one third of it is about one week in Jesus's life. The passion, (Jesus's life and death and subsequent resurrection) is one third of the whole book. Jesus and his teaching and parables are important to the Christian message, but Mark knew that its what happened in and through Jesus that really matters.

Secondly the pace and urgency of the text. Its non-stop and it's relentless. The story can't wait; Mark can't wait to get the story down and told. There's not a lot of waiting and watching and pondering on the mystery of God. Have you heard the story about the boy waiting at the bottom of the escalator gazing at the treads as they come round? A kindly woman asks if he's OK? I'm fine he replies, I'm just waiting for my chewing gum to come round. If the boy had been Mark, he'd have been bounding up the escalator trying to find it quicker, there's no waiting. Mark gets on with it.

Which leads me to the third thing that strikes you and that is there's no Christmas story. Mark starts with a sentence that would have left anyone

reading it two thousand years ago in no doubt what the writer was on about. The words lose their shock value to us, but when they were written, Mark knew exactly what he was doing.

Ἀρχὴ τοῦ εὐαγγελίου Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ Υἱοῦ Θεοῦ

The beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, SON of GOD. It was supposed to hit you straight between the eyes. This is about salvation and God and what has happened. It's a head-line statement.

The words flow off our tongues because we are used to them. Gospel, Son of God, Jesus Christ are words and phrases we've grown up with. Even those who have no faith have often heard them used, but imagine what it was like in their society 2000 years ago.

And then Mark reminds us that the prophet Isaiah spoke about these things. Which is kind of convenient for me preaching today because today is the second Sunday of Advent and the theme is 'The Prophets' And as the saying goes, you really aren't clued up on the old testament and the prophets if you think the minor prophets worked in the quarries.

Its so easy to think of the prophets as some sort of fortune tells. People with mystical physic powers. Just remember to tell anyone who has this mistaken misunderstanding that there's no future in it. The prophets were actually perceptive people who weren't afraid to speak out. As you've probably been told before from this pulpit, more about forth-telling than fore-telling. Through their perceptive and prophetic ministry they could see that God would work through the people of Israel, and Mark identifies key texts that support his understanding of God's plan for us all. As we prepare for the coming of Jesus and to celebrate his birth, the prophets remind us that the Old Testament sets the scene for God's intervention in the person of Jesus.

The Bible is a progressive revelation. If you skip the first half of any good book and try to finish it, you will have a hard time understanding the characters, the plot, and the ending. In the same way, the New Testament is only completely understood when we see its foundation of the events, characters, laws, sacrificial system, covenants, and promises of the Old Testament.

If we only had the New Testament, we would come to the Gospels and not know why the Jews were looking for a Messiah (a Savior King). We would not understand why this Messiah was coming (see Isaiah 53), and we would not have been able to identify Jesus of Nazareth as the Messiah through the many prophecies that were given concerning Him [e.g., His birth place (Micah 5:2), His manner of death (Psalm 22, especially verses 1, 7–8, 14–18; 69:21), His resurrection (Psalm 16:10), and many more details of His ministry (Isaiah 9:2; 52:3)].

So some things to think on today: First of all we wait patiently for God just as we wait patiently for the coming of Christ at Christmas.

Do you remember the story about the husband who wasn't known for his patience, and he had absolutely no use for negative conversation. When he got a call from his wife during a busy day at work, she talked slowly and didn't seem very upbeat. Frank interrupted her and exhorted her to be brief and positive. She paused for a moment and then cheerfully replied, "I discovered the airbags in our new BMW work great!"

And secondly, as the saying goes, if we forget our history, we can make no sense of our present. The prophets weren't psychic but they could stand back and see how things were going.

But the thing I would most of all like us all to grasp is something of the excitement and urgency of Mark. Our faith in Jesus as Lord is knowing him as The Son Of God. It's the birth of our Saviour that we anticipate and as a child can't wait for Christmas day and their presents, but is so excited that they can't go to sleep either, so it should be with us as we yearn to celebrate Christmas and share the Good news with those among whom we live and work.