

Jesus will come for us – bridging eternity and mortality

Rev'd Peter Balabanski

Advent 2 B – Isa 40.1-11; Mk 1.1-8

Mark begins with the words, *The beginning of the Gospel*. We know what comes next – what *Gospel* means to us – because we know the story. It's an old story to us. But it's not an old story for Mark's first hearers. So what would they have thought when they heard *The beginning of the Gospel*. In Mark's time, the word *euangelion* (Gospel) had a more general use. It meant an announcement of any sort of good news – like a town crier calling out good news about the end of a battle, or that the harvest had been plentiful. It was an effective way to start.

In fact, the whole of Mark's Gospel is utterly direct, and beautifully crafted. It starts with these words, *The beginning of the Gospel*, so everyone who first hears it will immediately expect news about something that is going to delight them and be good for them. They'll turn and listen to find out what this good news is. And Mark doesn't waste a word getting to the point. *The beginning of the Good News of Jesus Christ, the Son of God*. We turn; we listen; and immediately, there is Jesus.

Mark sets out the story with breathless speed. The word *immediately* makes frequent appearances. Today Mark reminds us of God's promise that we just heard from Isaiah; that God would send a messenger to prepare the way of the Lord

Isaiah 40.1-8 –

see also Malachi 3.1, Mark says the promised messenger is John the Baptist; John is the prophesied messenger in the wilderness.

And we're only four verses in!

Mark tells the story of John calling us out to the wilderness so we can recognise the wilderness inside us; to recognise that we are people in need of wholeness; that we're lost and lonely.

In another Gospel that we'll hear next Sunday, ^{John 1.28} we learn that John the Baptist called people to the other side of the Jordan River to receive his baptism – to be like the people Isaiah wrote to – the people of the exile – crossing back to Judea. To do this would make them like the returning exiles, reclaiming their birthright as God's people, in the land promised to their ancestors in the faith.

John the Baptist calls *us* from the other side of the Jordan; calls us to symbolically re-live those ancestors' exile. To repent – to turn around and face a different direction in life. As it did for them, it means for us to leave our current lives behind – go to the other side of the river to confess our sins like the Judeans and people of Jerusalem did with John. ^{v.5} Then we can turn back to face God, to cross the river back to God again, this time in baptism, washing off what we had to confess and rising fresh and new from the water – fit for a new life which honours God's call on us.

This a humbling call – the call to repentance . But if that's not daunting enough, John the Baptist tells us that the one who will come – the one he's preparing us to meet is so great that even he, John, isn't worthy to untie the strap of his sandals. If John's daunted by him, what will meeting him be like for us?

John's baptism washes us in water – washes away whatever it is we've confessed – in order to consecrate our bodies and make them fit for that meeting; fit to dwell in God's Land. Then he calls us to watch with him; to wait for the one who will come. And that is our task in this season of Advent.

John the Baptist says the one who is coming will wash us in the fire of the Spirit of God. We will become whole in a way we couldn't have imagined; restored in a way we've always *needed*, but may never have believed we *could* be. Mark confronts us with the prophecy of Isaiah who says that whatever exile we experience, whatever keeps us from that promised wholeness – be it as tall as a mountain or as wide as a desert – it will be no barrier to the one who's determined to come to us. And the Baptist tells identifies the one who is coming as Jesus the Christ, the Messiah, the anointed one; the Son of God.

Like Isaiah's divine shepherd who would cross the desert to rescue God's people from exile, Jesus will come for us – bridging eternity and mortality. He will accompany us in our wilderness, and take us to wholeness. On our journey to that promise, we will explore together our own lost-ness; our own brokenness. Each Advent we renew our commitment to this journey – our commitment to getting ready to meet this Jesus; the one who has come, and who is coming again. And in particular, we renew our commitment to follow him wherever he leads.

Part of that commitment includes a willingness for life in the desert – for learning what God wants it to teach us. We experience the desert in being alone, in choosing stillness. It can also come uninvited in unanswered prayer or unexpected loss. These desert times help us grow in reliance on God. In the desert, we can also learn to be at peace with ourselves. That's a challenge, because in the desert, we see ourselves for who we really are. We face our demons, and gradually, we learn to whom our trust really belongs.

We discover where our life has been heading. We own our part in responsibility for it. We become ready to turn from a life filled with the clutter of things we once treasured. We're ready to drop all that, and to reach out empty-handed to the hands that are stretching out to us. Those hands stretch

across the mountains and canyons of brokenness – wilderness.
We let ourselves be taken in them, and we know we are welcomed
home; forgiven; healed; free; suddenly buoyant; and
miraculously ... whole. Amen.