

# 1

## The good news begins

*Please read Mark 1:1–13*

**H**e seems to have appeared from nowhere. One day, there was nothing; the next, there he was, out in the desert, the dry wilderness area away to the east, across the river. A strange character, they say—wild-looking, with a strange light in his eyes. He looks like one of those prophets from long ago, those wandering holy men who used to live in strange places and eat strange food. They call him John, and out in the desert is where he lives. He wears the *clothes* of the desert, rough-woven from the hair of camels, the animals of the desert. He eats the *food* of the desert—locusts, grasshoppers and the honey from swarms of wild bees. If he invites you to dinner, you had better think twice before accepting the invitation! They call him John the Baptizer, because that is what he does. Down by the River Jordan, the people come out to him in their droves and he leads them out into the water and dips them under. Strange! A strange man, apparently *from* nowhere, in the middle of nowhere—John the Baptizer. Thus Mark begins his story (1:2–6).

This is Mark's '*gospel*' (1:1)—good news as told by Mark. But who decides whether the news is good or not? In Rome, where Mark is writing, this word *evangel*, good news, is a proclamation throughout the empire: for instance, that a new emperor has taken power. Good news! Or is it? That would all depend on where you stand. If you don't like this emperor, if you are his enemy, you may not think it is good news at all. Clearly, Mark thinks what he is about to tell is good news—but it can only be good news if you are going to be a friend of the new emperor, this new King.

### **John the Baptizer appears**

So when this mysterious character called John the Baptizer appears in the desert, it is not necessarily good news that he brings. Look at what he says and does (1:4–5). If you know your Bible, this should remind you of something. Here are crowds of people, thousands of them, streaming out from all the places where they live, from town and country, going out into the desert. Notice the word '*out*'. They go *out* into the desert, called there to meet with God. When they get there, they have to pass through *water* in order to encounter him. If you know the Old Testament, this will remind you of the story of the Exodus, when God brings his people out of the land of Egypt into the desert and meets with them in a decisive way. Time and again in the Bible, the desert is where God takes people to meet with him. He takes them away from the places where they are comfortable, the busy situations they are embroiled in, out where there are no distractions and they can hear him speaking. It's a biblical pattern, and here it happens again. Even today, the Lord so often takes us to a place where we have no resources of our own, a place that feels dead and dry, so that we can hear his voice without distraction. Have you been there?

In verses 2–3 Mark has quoted the prophecies of Isaiah 40:3

and Malachi 3:1. Those prophets, hundreds of years earlier, look forward to a day when God is going to do something new; this is all in God's plan. '*Prepare the way for the Lord,*' he says. God is doing something new. This time it is not just another prophet who will come; it is the Lord God *himself* who is coming into the world. God is coming in human form in the person of Jesus Christ, God's final word to humanity.

Is this good news? That depends on what people do with the one who is coming. John calls people out into the desert to repent (1:4), to recognize that they are guilty and they need to change. Then, as these thousands of people swarm out to meet with John, and they *do* want to repent and confess their sins to God (1:5), he gives them a message of hope. Running through the dry, brown desert there is a river, with a narrow green strip of living vegetation on either side, an avenue of hope in the wasteland. And there, near the point where the River Jordan runs into the Dead Sea,<sup>1</sup> he baptizes them and tells them their sins can be forgiven.

### **The one who is coming**

By being baptized, these people are saying that they are ready for a new start. They are ready for God to do something new. But this is just the beginning, because John goes on to say that someone else is coming who will do far more than dip them under some water. John cannot forgive their sins; only God can do that. See how he announces this in verses 7–8. In those times in Israel, untying someone's sandals was the most menial task you could undertake. It wasn't just that people's feet got very dirty and smelly; this was simply a job for the lowest of the low. Jewish slaves didn't have to do it at all. Now John says of the one who is coming, 'It's not just that I am low enough to undo his shoes: compared to him, to his greatness, I am even lower than that. There is simply no comparison between him and me: I'm

just the messenger boy. He's the real news! He won't just dip you under this water; he will baptize you in the Holy Spirit—in other words, he will immerse you in the very presence of God. He will bring God himself into your life. I can do nothing like that,' he says, 'but the one who is coming can, and he will.'

The *Da Vinci Code* is popular for many reasons. It's not just that it is a clever story and offers to explode a conspiracy. It's also because it seems at the end of the quest to offer a spirituality that costs nothing. The book ends with a man falling to his knees in front of—nothing, really: a myth that will cost him nothing and demands nothing from him. People love that—just one more idea to put into their heads, like one more wristband or bracelet to wear, a mystical book to read, some cards or crystals to play with, costing them nothing. So many people are reaching out for something and clutching at emptiness. But here is the good news—if it really is good news—a message that will cost you, not nothing, but everything. John's message was simple, straight, uncompromising: 'Repent. Turn round and let Jesus bring God himself into your life.' Good news? That depends on our response!

### **The trailblazer arrives**

In the world we know, heroes do not shun the limelight. They will not avoid the glare of publicity. This world's heroes want to be known; they need to be admired; the last description they would want is 'anonymous'. Yet when Mark introduces us to his main character, his hero, it seems that anonymity is exactly what he is aiming for. When Jesus makes his appearance, he does so as an unidentifiable figure in a great crowd. The crowds are still coming out to John, out from Judea and Jerusalem to be dipped under the water, and hidden somewhere among those crowds is the man John has been talking about (1:9). He simply appears. He doesn't even have the cachet of coming from the capital; he

is from Nazareth, the original one-horse town, right out in the sticks of Galilee—for Jewish purists, a dodgy area. He turns up with the crowd, stands in line with the others, wades out into mid-stream and comes face to face with John to be baptized. What kind of a grand entrance is *this*? But Mark’s brief account of the baptismal scene and what follows is packed with clues to Jesus’ identity and mission.

### **The unexpected baptism**

If Jesus is the hero of Mark’s story, it is surprising enough that he appears in the way that he does, as just one of the crowd. But it is even more surprising that he appears *where* he does. Imagine that you have to take an exam in the coming week. There, as you make your nervous way into the examination room, you see your lecturer, or your teacher, coming in with you, and he is not there as examiner—he sits down at the table next to you, gets his pen out of his pocket and starts working his way through the exam paper. That would be unexpected, to say the least! Jesus’ appearance here is just as unexpected. John has been telling people to come out to him, to turn away from their sins, and be baptized in water to show their clean break with their past. But why should *Jesus* need to do that? Why does *he* need a baptism of repentance? Mark points it up for us: if you put verse 5 and verse 9 side by side, you can see how pointed he makes it. Only the mention of ‘confessing their sins’ is missing from the second verse, for Jesus has no sins to confess. This is the perfect man. We have already had strong hints about this. In verse 3, the message was: ‘Prepare the way for the *Lord*’—this is no ordinary man; this is God himself in human flesh.

Whether they understand it fully or not, the crowds are there with John to acknowledge that they have done wrong and that they are under God’s judgement. Jesus joins them, not because he has sins to confess, but because he wants to identify with

them. That is his mission. He is here to place *himself* deliberately under the judgement and condemnation of God. The sinless one is standing with the sinners; he is going through the water with the sinners: as Isaiah put it long ago, he is here to be ‘numbered with the transgressors’ (Isaiah 53:12). All of this points ahead to the day when Jesus will take that judgement on himself even though he deserves none of it, when the *one* who has come from Nazareth will take the place of the *many* by suffering God’s punishment on the cross and, crucified between two criminals, he will again be numbered with the transgressors.

Ahead of him and behind him in that line stand men and women with the guilt of their sins hanging round their necks—sins that fully deserve God’s condemnation. Only he stands there as the one who can take that condemnation, that judgement, on himself, in place of them, can forgive their sins and bring them freely to God. So he takes his turn and is immersed in the water that means sins are washed away, blazing the trail for us, opening up the pathway for men and women to come back to God.

### **The unique qualification**

But what makes it possible for Jesus to perform this mission? How can this apparently anonymous figure attempt such a task? Look at verses 10–11. As Jesus emerges from the river, with the water still streaming off him, something amazing happens. As he looks up, he can see what seems like a tear in the fabric of the sky and, descending from above, the shape of a dove, flying down and alighting on him; at the same time he hears a voice that speaks to him words of assurance and affirmation. However anonymous Jesus may appear in the surging crowds around the river, however little they may recognize his real identity, with God there is no doubt. Far from it! This is an

apocalyptic moment—heaven is opened to show that God is breaking through, intervening in human history in a new way.

This scene is full of echoes from the distant past—echoes of creation itself, when God spoke the word and brought the universe into being, and we read that the Spirit of God was moving over the formless waters. Here, once more, God speaks and the Spirit descends from heaven and moves over the waters, to show that, in his Son Jesus Christ, he is beginning his *new* creation, the new people he will call to himself. Once again Father, Son and Holy Spirit are here together to fulfil their unique roles.

There are further echoes in the words Jesus now hears his Father speak: ‘*You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased*’—echoes, among others, of Isaiah’s words about the Servant whom God is sending into the world (Isaiah 42:1) That passage goes on to explain how this Servant will bring hope even to the islands at the ends of the earth; he will be a light for the Gentiles; he will open blind eyes and set captives free. All this Jesus has come to do, not just as a Servant, but as the unique, beloved Son of the Father. The hopes and longings of the centuries are focused and fulfilled in Jesus Christ.

So, with the Spirit descending from heaven and with the words that he speaks, God the Father publicly sets the seal on the mission of his Son. He smiles down at the Son he has sent into the world out of his love to save it. Jesus himself knows his unique qualification for his mission. Looking back, we too can understand and know. This is the Lord Jesus, who is both God and man so that he is able to stand in the gap that separates us from God: the man who can identify with us in our weaknesses, who feels the cold as he stands on the riverbank and the wind dries him off; but who is also God the Son, with the authority and power of God, the authority that will be seen throughout

his ministry as he heals diseases and drives out demons with a word—the one who is qualified and able to save us.

### **The unavoidable encounter**

Now Jesus comes up from the River Jordan, commissioned by his Father, equipped and prepared for his ministry. We might expect that he will immediately swing into action—a preaching tour, some healings to prove to everyone who he is. But not yet: his mission has to begin in a much more remote and lonely place (1:12–13). The Holy Spirit *drives him out* into the desert (the same word is used regularly for driving out demons—the sense is that this is an absolutely inevitable part of Jesus’ divine mission) and there he comes face to face with the greatest enemy of all. His name is Satan, the evil power that the Bible calls ‘the god of this age’ (2 Corinthians 4:4). Jesus has now come into the world, and Satan sees his chance to attack and to destroy his mission. Jesus opens the conflict by taking on Satan himself, alone in the desert, in forty intense days. Unlike Matthew and Luke, Mark doesn’t name the specific temptations; he wants us to see that the whole of Jesus’ ministry is one long battle against Satan and his servants. Mark will show us that much of his time is spent dealing with demons, freeing people from Satan’s control. This battle will not reach its climax until Jesus finally defeats Satan at the cross.

The fight takes place far from where people can see it. It lasts ‘*forty days*’—a time that links Jesus directly with the prophets Moses and Elijah, both of whom spent forty-day periods out in the desert at key points in their ministry. Yes, Jesus will be like Moses and Elijah in their ministry of speaking God’s words faithfully to the people. And yet he will be so much more. Only he can take on Satan directly and win the decisive victory which will set people free.

Mark adds something that none of the other Gospels tells us:



*'He was with the wild animals'* (1:13). For modern city-dwellers, perhaps, that sounds quite appealing! But if we take off our urban spectacles we will see it differently. The desert is a place of danger. Wild beasts can kill unwary travellers; Jesus has both spiritual and physical danger to face. But there is more to it than that. Mark is probably writing from Rome during Nero's violent attacks on the church which followed the great fire in AD 64. Christians in Rome were likely to face persecution, vicious persecution—and for some of them that would mean that they were sent to the arena to be torn apart by wild animals. We have vivid contemporary accounts of how this was done. The event that was supremely likely to make you a target for official persecution was *baptism*, when Christian believers took a clear, public stand and declared that Christ was their Lord and King. In some cases they might go straight from the baptismal water to face the wild beasts. Now Mark writes to tell them that their Saviour faced that too. The message for his readers is this: 'The Lord Jesus has been there before you. He has blazed the trail for you. If you face the ultimate test in the arena, be assured of this: he knows what you are facing, and you too will receive God's help so you can stand firm in the trial. There, in the place of terrible danger, where the temptation to give up, to abandon your faith, is at its most acute—he will be there with you, and he will send his angels to look after you. Not that you will escape from the trial—the trials are unavoidable—but he will keep you safe through it, and, if the end is death, even that is not to be feared when Jesus is waiting for you on the other side of it.'

Perhaps you know what it means to face the 'wild beasts' of persecution. For Christians in so many countries around the world today, persecution is very real. Today Christians are facing physical attack, imprisonment, torture, deprivation, hunger and even death because they will not abandon their Lord and Saviour Jesus. There are others who face pressure of a quieter

kind, from family or friends, at work or in their community. All that is normal. The normal Christian life involves being persecuted. It happened to Jesus; it happened to the early church; it will happen to us. God will send his angels to protect and defend us too. Take courage; be strong; he has not forgotten you or abandoned you. Nothing can separate you from his love.