

**M**ark has a very ‘cut-to-the-chase’ style. While Matthew and Luke begin their Gospels with stories of Jesus’ birth and elaborate family trees, Mark has no time for such intricacies. He tells us right away what his message is about ‘The beginning of the gospel about Jesus Christ, the Son of God.’

The sprinter Linford Christie spoke about starting a race on the ‘b’ of ‘bang’. That is the urgency that sparks from Mark’s quill. He is desperate to tell people the message of Jesus. And in this opening verse he uses three phrases that are key to that message:

**1. Gospel** – the word means ‘good news’. It is often linked with the verb ‘preach’ in the New Testament. It pictures a town crier announcing the edict of the king. This gospel is God’s authoritative announcement to the world. It can only be ‘good news’ however, if people are clear about the bad news that precedes it. God is angry at our sin (Rom. 1:18–20), but has chosen, out of sheer love, to give us Jesus as a ‘propitiation’ or ‘anger-bearing sacrifice’ (see Rom. 3:25).

**2. Christ** – Jesus did not come into our world in a vacuum. He was the fulfilment of centuries of prophecy that the ‘Christ’ (in Hebrew ‘the Messiah’), would come to save God’s people from their sin. The word ‘messiah’ means ‘anointed one’ and refers to the anointing of kings in Israel who were set apart for the task of

kingship by God. Jesus is God’s anointed king, set apart for His kingly task – dying on a cross to bring salvation to a lost world.

**3. Son of God** – Mark is actually more interested in the title ‘Son of God’ than he is in the title ‘Christ’ (Matthew’s favourite theme). In the first half of the gospel, Mark presents Jesus as the supernatural healer who casts out demons, heals the sick, calms storms, and opposes the Pharisees all at breakneck speed, to prove that He is the Son of God – full of power and authority.

Notice Mark does not introduce the gospel as a set of propositions we need to believe, but as a person we need to believe on (John 3:16) – ‘Jesus Christ, the Son of God’, whom we need to love, honour and obey. Ultimately, the gospel is very personal. It is not just a message to the world; it is a personal relationship with a loving, powerful Saviour. Paul summed it up by calling Jesus ‘the Son of God, *who loved me and gave himself for me*’ (Gal. 2:20).

## REFLECTION

*Do you love Jesus?  
Are you convinced of  
Jesus’ love for you? How  
desperate are you to tell  
others about Him?*

**W**hy did John the Baptist conduct his entire ministry in the desert? Surely that wasn't the best place for God to send him. Why didn't he set up a podium in Jerusalem Main Street on a Saturday afternoon, or better still the Temple with all the crowds milling around? Why do we have this strange scenario where, 'The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem *went out to him*' (v. 5), in a 110-degree desert?

Could it be that God wanted to encourage the people away from the hustle and bustle of their daily city lives, to the austere quiet of the desert, so they could really listen to Him? Emails and demanding jobs and screaming children and 24-hour cities make quiet spaces hard to find. But you need quiet to hear from God, as Elijah learned from the 'still small voice' (1 Kgs. 19:12, KJV). God wanted to prepare Israel for the good news of Christ's coming, but in a context where they were ready to listen to Him.

And perhaps the barrenness and austerity of a desert matched John's austere message. He was not calling people to a razzmatazz revival, but to a 'baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins' (v. 4). If people were going to be truly ready for Jesus, they

needed to strip their own lives bare of pride, apathy and greed, like a desert is stripped bare of any form of earth's comforts.

That's what baptism pictures. We 'died with Christ' through baptism (see Rom. 6:3). Baptism represents the death of my 'old' self, so that my 'new self' in Christ – His love, His sacrificial spirit, His absolute obedience to His Father – can take its place. New life can only take root when the old life is dead and buried. As believers we need to confess our sins each morning to God and ask Him to strip away all that hinders His Spirit working through us to produce Christ-likeness.

*Crucifying the flesh* calls for discipline, stripping away the excesses in our life, and a barren desert is a great visual reminder of that process. That is how we 'Prepare the way for the Lord' (v. 3) in our own hearts.

## REFLECTION

*Where can you find quiet so that you can hear God's voice? What needs to be stripped away from your life to make it ready for Jesus?*

Simon and Garfunkel used to sing about ‘The Sound of Silence’. And before we race on with Jesus’ public ministry, it is worth meditating on ‘Jesus – the silent years’. Mark says absolutely nothing about the first thirty years of Jesus’ life. He simply begins ‘At that time [when he’s about 30 years old] Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee’ (v. 9).

The longer gospels don’t add much either. Matthew says a little about His birth, and Luke adds a wonderful story about Jesus the 12 year old confounding the Bible scholars in the Temple with His great learning. But other than that, the gospels are deafeningly silent about Jesus’ early years.

The snippet Mark gives us, ‘Nazareth in Galilee’, suggests Jesus was brought up in modest seclusion. Nazareth was a tiny town which archaeologists have struggled to find (population 120 in Jesus’ day), and so despised by Jews that Nathaniel asked, ‘Can anything good come from there?’ (John 1:46). Jewish sophisticates lived in the south, near Jerusalem where the pulse of Israel’s national life was measured. But Nazareth? It was obscure even by backward Galilee standards!

Jesus lived for thirty years in a quiet, dusty town, where nothing much ever happened, under the authority of His working-class parents. Luke’s ‘Jesus in the Temple’ story ends with Jesus going home and being ‘subject’ (Luke 2:51, κϋν) to His parents again, and He probably attended His father’s funeral

in His teenage years. Joseph is not in the picture by the time Jesus goes public.

But sometimes silence is striking. Jesus, in His first thirty years, represents us in the mundane things of life. He obeyed His parents, was brought up in a dull little town. Nothing is known about Him, not even if He was longing for adventure, like Luke Skywalker as a farm boy longing to be involved in intergalactic *Star Wars*.

None of us can escape the mundane in life. Hanging out the clothes, taxi-ing the children, filling out endless paperwork, stacking the chairs on a Sunday. We spend more time sleeping than we do in church. ‘Jesus – the silent years’ reminds us that He lived through all our dreary Mondays, all our ‘what’s-life-all-about’ sighs, and He did it in obedience to His Father. In ‘Jesus – the silent years’, we hear the echoes of Paul – ‘whatever you do [even if what you do isn’t very thrilling], do it all for the glory of God’ (1 Cor. 10:31).

## REFLECTION

*How can you glorify God in the mundane responsibilities of life? Think about work, church service, everyday activities such as shopping, cooking, walking the dog, visiting friends, taking care of children, elderly parents and so on.*

Neil Armstrong's words as he first stepped onto the surface of the moon, have been immortalized – 'That's one small step for man, one giant leap for mankind.' Clearly the Apollo 11 astronauts saw their mission as, in some sense, for the whole of humanity.

So did Jesus at His baptism. As Christ stepped into the River Jordan He was deliberately accepting God's mission as a representative of all humanity. He represents us

**1. In the decision He makes.** It was a bold move to come out of the 'safety' of Nazareth life into the cauldron of public preaching, healing and conflict. Jesus calls all of us out of 'safe' living, into the firing line. Is our testimony for Christ bold and visible enough to make us unpopular? Is God calling you to step out of the shadows and take on a challenging ministry?

**2. In the sin He carries.** Why was Jesus baptized? Baptism was about repentance, but Jesus had nothing to repent of. Yet Jesus chose to be baptized to identify Himself with sinners. One day He would be clothed in our sins, becoming our substitute on the cross. He later referred to the cross as His 'baptism'. Peter says, 'He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree' (1 Pet. 2:24).

**3. In the approval He receives.** As Jesus stepped out of the water, the heavens opened and God affirmed, 'You are My beloved Son' (NKJV). Jesus the man probably needed that affirmation, and He got it before He had ever done anything eye-catching in public ministry. God calls you and me His 'beloved sons'. If we trust in Jesus, we have that status regardless of whether or not we do anything that pleases the Father (see Rom. 8:17).

**4. In the temptations He faces.** In the Greek, the word for 'sent' is 'throw', so the Spirit literally 'throws' Jesus into the desert. For the devil this was a chance to tempt, but for God it was the opportunity to prove His Son's obedience. God sometimes throws us into fiery trials to prove that our faith is worth more than gold (see 1 Pet. 1:6,7).

## REFLECTION

*Do you need to come out of the shadows in your Christian life? In what area? Do you realize that you are God's beloved son/daughter in Christ, and that you are accepted and unconditionally loved by Him?*