

Prayer

As we face all that lies ahead, Lord Jesus, establish our faith firmly so that we live the Gospel in which we believe. May we not be guilty of religious hypocrisy, and may we be kept secure in our faith through all the circumstances of our personal lives. Maintain in us the truths we have been given through revelation and the Word, so we may praise You throughout our lives, and forever; AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: 'Anointing'

Pray that God will anoint His people not just for special ministry and for leadership, but for the essential Christian witness of 'loving one another' within the fellowship of the church.

On-going prayers

- Give thanks to God for those you know who show God's love
- Pray for local migrant workers
- Pray that Christians will heed the prophecies being given about our world today

Meditation

Almighty Lord and God who speaks to us all
through the wonder, majesty and greatness of creation;
speak to me through the quiet whisper of a breeze,
the wonder of colour, or the flight of a simple butterfly.

Almighty Lord and God who speaks to us all
through history, and through the lives of great people;
speak to me in the everyday events of my everyday life,
both in what seems important, and also what seems trivial.

Almighty Lord and God who speaks to us all
through the magnificence of music that touches the soul;
speak to me through psalms, hymns and songs of praise,
those songs of faith that linger within and teach Your truth.

Almighty Lord and God who speaks to us all
through epic events unfolding in the world all around us;
speak to me in the trials and joys I experience every day,
and show me how You care for all things, even me.

Bible Study - Mark 1:1-8

¹ The beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. ² As it is written by the prophet Isaiah: 'Look, I am sending my messenger ahead of You, who will prepare Your way; ³ a voice of one crying out in the desert, "Prepare the way of the Lord, make His paths straight,"

⁴ So it was that John the Baptist appeared in the desert, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁵ People from all the Judean countryside and from all Jerusalem went out to him; they were baptised by him in the river Jordan when they confessed their sins. ⁶ John wore clothes of camel

hair and a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. ⁷
This is what he preached: 'One who is far more powerful than me is coming after me. I am not worthy to stoop and untie the straps of his sandals. ⁸ *I have baptised you with water, but He will baptise you with the Holy Spirit.'*

Review

The beginning of Mark's Gospel is quick and sudden. The Gospel of Jesus Christ is announced (1:1), the Old Testament is quoted indicating that a messenger is coming to prepare the way for Jesus as the Son of God (1:2,3), and John the Baptist is announced as the one delivering this message (1:4-8). For those of us who like the 'Christmas' stories of Matthew or Luke or the rich theology of John chapter 1, this brief introduction to a Gospel seems rather weak. The beginning of Mark's Gospel nevertheless holds much, and we miss it far too easily.

So, why did Mark begin like this and not with a story about Jesus' birth? In the early days of the church, the Kingdom of God grew as preachers spoke about Jesus Christ, and the 'good news' of His death and resurrection brought people into a new relationship with God (see various stories in the Acts of the Apostles e.g. chapter 17). Through this message, people were 'saved' by faith, and other information about Jesus' life, such as how he was born, was passed on later. It seems that Mark's Gospel came into existence at this early phase of the life of the church as something more like a sermon preached to a congregation rather than an integrated story designed to tell us all the details about Jesus' life. Throughout the Gospel, Mark's concern appears to have been to offer people the Gospel of Jesus Christ so that they could hear it and be saved, rather than methodical story telling! So, just like a good sermon, Mark's Gospel starts with a powerful series of quotations from the Old Testament telling people to prepare for the Lord's coming with a messenger ahead of Him, crying out 'prepare the way of the Lord ...' (1:3)!

Mark's quote from the prophet Isaiah (Mark 1:2,3) is very important, but it is more complicated than it looks. It has obvious similarities to Isaiah 40:3, but the quote is made up of three passages; Exodus 23:20, Isaiah 40:3 and Malachi 3:1! This is no casual connection, and Mark placed these prophecies together like this in order to give us plenty of information about how both John and Jesus fulfilled Old Testament prophecy.

After the introduction (1:1-3), most of the opening verses of the Gospel are about John the Baptist (1:4-8). It was clearly Mark's intention to tell his readers that John the Baptist was the connection between Jesus and the Scriptures of the Old Testament. This was important, because before Mark began to write, the only Scriptures possessed by the early church were the Old Testament, and it was essential that he prove to his readers that the God they knew from Scriptures and their own traditions was indeed the God to be found in Jesus. So Mark connects John with not just one, but all the famous prophecies of the forerunner of the Messiah (as in the quotes above); but most importantly, that he was like Elijah (see 2 Kings 1:8) the prophet people believed would 'come again' before the Messiah (see Malachi 4:5).

In addition, Mark's style as a preacher is also shown in what he said about John, and this connected strongly with his message about Jesus. He highlighted John's appeal for 'repentance', 'baptism' and the 'forgiveness of sins' (1:4), and then quoted his significant comment that Christ would 'baptise ... with the Holy Spirit' (1:8). All of this is remarkably similar to Peter's powerful preaching on the day of Pentecost when the church came into being (see Acts 2:38); this famous sermon and the call for response given by Peter at the end was the first 'model' sermon for those preaching the Gospel in the Church.

All this is a tantalising glimpse into how and why Mark began to write his Gospel. Some say that Mark was a servant of Peter and wrote down his story. Certainly, the opening of the Gospel gives us good reason to suspect that this may have been the case; and it certainly seems to have copied Peter's style of preaching.

Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. Discuss what you believe to be the 'Gospel of Jesus Christ'. How does this relate to the introduction to Mark's Gospel?
2. In what ways is John the Baptist an important role model for preachers today?
3. From what this passage says, what do you believe is the difference between baptism with water and baptism with the Holy Spirit?

Discipleship

Personal comment:

I find that reading Scripture is something that can be easy or difficult. Sometimes I read a passage that stops me in my tracks and forces me to spend time with it, because it says something I had not expected and I need to check it out. At other times, I read Scripture too quickly and do not take on board the important details it contains. This passage forces me to go back over it many times, and each time I do this, I find more layers of meaning; more things to discover and find out.

Ideas for exploring discipleship

- *Read through this passage several times yourself; after each time, write down one sentence that comes to mind. You will then build up quite a stock of ideas about this passage that can be very useful.*
- *Pray for those who preach the Gospel and seek to make it intelligible for people today. Pray that they will be gifted by God for their task and faithful to the Gospel of Jesus.*

Final Prayer

Call each of us, Lord Jesus, according to Your plans for the world and for the future. May we be prepared to play our part in whatever way you require of us, so that Your Gospel may be proclaimed throughout the world, and to Your glory! Thanks be to God; AMEN