

## Sermon First Sunday of Lent 2018

Over the last ten years it seems like wave upon wave of scandal has broken over so many organisations which are central to our society and culture: organisations which need to be credible, which we need to be able to trust. Scandals of financial irregularity, sexual abuse, and injustices have been uncovered in almost every sector: banks and financial services, Parliament, the police, the press, the BBC, political parties, the churches, Hollywood, the security forces, the Government, wealthy individuals and families, – this is not a complete list sadly - and now Oxfam and other aid agencies are in the spotlight. Individuals and groups have used their privileged positions or resources, setting aside their duty to do no harm and ignoring their responsibilities to others who have entrusted those positions or resources to them, in various ways; to make the most for themselves, feather their nests, satisfy their desires, harm those they hate, and avoid or undermine laws and policies which they disagree with. And often the accusations against those organisations, which sticks most painfully, is that they were more careful of their reputation – because we need them to be trusted – than they were careful of those who were harmed and in the future, might be again.

You may wonder why I'm starting today's sermon with these dismal reminders of failure – the litany of bad news we hear every day in the media? Isn't the gospel reading today from St Mark precisely that gospel which means good news. Doesn't Jesus urge his hearers to "Repent and believe in the good news"? So why David remind us of all the bad news you may be asking?

Well a simple and not wrong answer would be just to say that if there were genuinely no such thing as bad news then all the news in the world would be good and there would be no need to exercise faith in believing in the good news – because faith is being sure of what we do not see – but we would see good news everywhere. I'm no big fan of that last book in the Bible the Book of Revelation – it's a very mixed bag – but it has that wonderful image of the City of God which has no longer any need of a Temple because the light and presence of God is everywhere.

And this leads to the more complicated answer. The situation we are in this side of heaven is that there is still bad news in the world. In the Christian view of the world it is called sin. It begins in the human heart. We have sinned - we confess it every time we come to meet with the Lord in such a Eucharist as this. Irrespective of which theological side you lean towards, whether you think that sin is such an ineradicable constituent of human nature that everything we do or say or think as humans beings, even including our good deeds, is stained by sinfulness; or you lean more to consider that sinfulness is not what defines or constitutes us as human, but it is a universal tendency in the human condition – whichever view we take there is agreement in Christian interpretation that all of us sin in some form or another at some time. We all contribute in some way to the bad news.

And there is also agreement among most Christian theologians that sin has a corporate dimension as well as an individual one – that is, there are degrees of responsibility on us all, varying depending on our role and position, as members of groups and societies, for the bad news, for the sins, committed by those groups, organisations and societies in which we have a stake ourselves. In the context of the financial crash of 2007-8, this idea was forcibly expressed in William Nicholson's play "Crash" about the blame game following the crisis. The play confronts its audience with our collective responsibility for the financial crisis, not only the bankers who stand culpable, almost everyone benefited from the boom years and turned a blind eye to signs of overhanging collapse. The tendency to sinfulness belongs to corporate bodies, to groups and societies as well as individuals.

And so from the Christian perspective on sin, there is little room for self-righteous condemnation; but rather there is a call to ensure those harmed are helped, injustice is recompensed and action taken to prevent further harm.

What then? What message – what good news amongst the bad news - have these opening verses of St Mark's Gospel and this headline call of Jesus at the start of his public ministry?

Let's remind ourselves of the picture St Mark swiftly paints in a few powerful verses about Jesus' arrival on the scene. Jesus was baptised by John in the Jordan. He submitted in solidarity with all the people to this symbolic action showing the need for God's help, doing the same thing as the people who were confessing their sins, making a change in their lives and turning back to God. Next, the heavens were torn apart when Jesus came out of the water of the river. This was a sign God was at work here, breaking into the world. Jews familiar with the book of the prophet Isaiah would recognise the echo of a verse in Isaiah 64 which is a prayer to God to come and save his people "O that you would tear open the heavens and come down". And then the only other time Mark used the phrase "tear open" is at the moment of Jesus' death on the cross when the curtain of the Temple was torn apart from top to bottom, symbolising the removal of any barrier between humanity and the presence of God.

Then, Jesus received the Spirit of God descending on him like a dove: another sign this was a God-filled event and that Jesus was at one with God. The dove? Perhaps a reminder of the Noah story, from which we read in Genesis today, of the everlasting promise and agreement made by God with all living flesh; to renew creation, never again to destroy the whole earth. Then the voice from heaven was heard confirming what the opening verse of the gospel had already announced: "Jesus Christ, the Son of God" and again in echo of a verse from the Hebrew Scriptures, from Psalm 2 a confirmation of the special status of Jesus "You are my Son". It's worth noting in passing that even here in the very start of the story about Jesus we have a sense of God as Trinity, Father Son and Holy Spirit - God speaking of Jesus as his Son, the Spirit of God descending upon Jesus. This was God at work.

Jesus is then driven by the Spirit into the wilderness and tempted by Satan. Some English translations of St Mark render the name of Satan as "the Accuser". The word used for "tempted", as Jesus is tempted by Satan, is a word also used later in the gospel to describe what the opponents of Jesus – the Pharisees etc - did – when they argued with him and put him to the test. This is not the only time St Mark described Jesus going into the wilderness or deserted places. He went to pray, and he went to rest. It is also in the remote country – also wilderness – that Jesus fed the five thousand. It is a sign that Jesus drew strength and nourishment from the wilderness – paradoxically, the place most empty is the place where he is most filled and sustained through being able to spend time with God.

We can see then that the whole of this introduction and description by St Mark's Gospel of Jesus' arrival in public, his baptism and preparation for his ministry is full of signs that God has taken decisive action with the coming of Jesus – this is God who has sent Jesus, this is God indeed, who has entered into the human situation and come into the world.

Finally, in this opening section of Mark's Gospel we hear the announcement Jesus made to begin his ministry. He does not proclaim himself but God. "The time is fulfilled; the kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe in the good news". There are two words in this announcement it's important to examine more closely. One is the meaning of the word "time" here. In ancient and New Testament Greek there were two words for time; one is *chronos* from which we get words like *chronological* in English, meaning the sequential aspect of time, time which passes; the other word for time, and the one used here in the words of Jesus is *kairos* – which means the critical moment, the opportune time. In modern Greek the plural of the word *kairos* is used to mean "the times", for example as in Bob Dylan's famous song "The times they are a-changing". So Jesus' arrival is a moment of opportunity. God has started to bring his kingdom into the world.

And the second word to examine is the word "repent". The word used in the Greek text is *metanoia* and some scholars challenge whether "repent" really is the best translation. Repent carries perhaps too much of the moment of confession and sorrow for our sins. But literally

metanoia means change of mind, though not in a simply intellectual sense, not just your thinking, but your actions too. So it looks beyond the confession to the changed way of life. Bishop Tom Wright translates it “Turn back” which I think misses the point; but another scholar David Bentley Hart translates it as “change your hearts”, which I like. In fact, let’s hear the whole of David Bentley Hart’s rendering of this headline saying of Jesus:

“The proper time has been fulfilled and the kingdom of God has drawn near; change your hearts and have faith in the good tidings”.

In the face of bad news, in the middle of the sin which blights lives, our own and the world around us, the good news St Mark wants us to hear about is that God has acted to make a difference; in Jesus God has come near and is with us now; and in Jesus God is calling us to change our hearts, and to have faith in this good news. Last week I met a man who said to me that he cannot believe in God because, he said, of “man’s inhumanity to man”. I respect his view, because at least he has thought about it and has hit upon a key issue. Faith is being sure of what we do not see; and being sure of what we hope for. So that man was right to recognise that God’s presence isn’t blindingly visible, taking human history in the round; but sadly he had missed the signs that point the way to having faith in the good news.

When it comes to it then, what is the good news we are called to have faith in, and what do we have as Christians, as the church, to offer as good news amongst the bad news? Sometimes we might think the good news is all the positive things that going to church can bring us – you get to meet friends, you feel happier, there is a caring fellowship – that doesn’t seem to be working for most 18 to 35 year olds does it? – or even for most people of any age actually; or thinking more widely perhaps, we sometimes speak as if the good news is all the positive things that churches do in the community and the world, which are many and good - running food banks, advocating for the poor and the vulnerable, setting up hospitals and schools where no other organisation will, challenging injustice. All are these are wonderful things, but it is not the churches or the people doing these things that are the good news. Churches, and priests and bishops too, are human, just as liable to be part of the bad news as anyone is, and so cannot be the true good news in themselves. If we put our faith in church or in the vicar or in the famous bishop or evangelist we are missing the real good news.

The message and the gift we have as Christians and churches in this world of bad news is to have faith, and to share the offer of faith, in the good news of Jesus, God with us. The only good news we have is Jesus the Christ, the anointed one of God. What that means in practice is another discussion. But it is the case that whatever else we do and however and wherever we do it, we will do this as Christ commanded – to offer and to receive the body and blood of Christ by faith with thanksgiving as we eat and drink this bread and this wine.