

And So It Begins

Mark 1:14-20

Introduction

“You Christians, you say you’ve got good news to share, well all I see is a bunch of rules! You can’t do this and you can’t do that. You can’t say this and you can’t say that. You know what I say you can do with your good news, don’t you?”

Ouch! Is it true that the good news which Christians have to share is essentially that we want people to be good or behave? If that’s the case, no wonder we’ve lost out to the world. The primary message that people receive today, from cradle to the grave, is to be happy. What message could possibly be better than “be happy”? Yes, we may have lost some morals along the way, but ultimately, how can there be good news compared to the message of “be happy”?

This morning we’re going to see what Jesus presents as the good news and consider how it impacts our lives and this may also impact the way we share the good news with others.

Jesus’ Message (Mark 1:14-15)

So what was Jesus’ message? We’re told, “After John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. ‘The time has come,’ he said. ‘The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!’”

First, Jesus was “proclaiming the good news of God.” We think that good news must primarily be about us, but the good news is first and foremost from God and is about God. If the good news is primarily about God, this doesn’t immediately grab us in terms of how we can share this with others. Maybe if we hear how Jesus says it that will make all the difference?

‘The time has come,’ he said. ‘The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!’

No, no, no! This doesn’t sound very appealing at all! So this is God’s good news, it’s about his kingdom and we’ve got to change course from our current agenda and instead put our trust in God’s good news? How am I suppose to share that with others? This doesn’t sound better than the message to “be happy”!

I wonder if a key reason we struggle to see this message as good news is because we take Jesus’ words which we’ve just heard but we think that it’s saying, “Jesus proclaimed the news of being good. ‘The time has come,’ he said. ‘The rules for goodness have come near so stop doing things you like and instead behave yourself.’”

In contract to that way of thinking, perhaps it may help if I paraphrase this section? I will amplify things a bit but I’ve tried to still be faithful to what I believe is written and intended here:

“Jesus went to Galilee announcing the good news that God was finally going to sort out the mess we found ourselves in. ‘Wake up,’ Jesus said, ‘God’s rule and authority starts right here. Stop mucking about thinking that you know perfectly what’s best and instead put your trust in the way God is making things right.’”

The good news is not particularly about being good and it’s not especially anti being happy. But what the good news is really focused on is God’s kingdom and how God is the one to sort out the problem which we humans have with him. It has been said that religions are humanity’s efforts to connect with the divine or the spiritual. The message Jesus proclaims here though is not about our efforts to connect with God but instead about God stepping in to human history. This is good news because God achieves what we can’t.

Jesus called upon people to “Repent and believe the good news.” ‘Repentance’ means, “to turn around,” and ‘believe in’ means “to trust in”. These two words essentially form one image, “To turn away from one thing and set a new direction or agenda.” What do people need to repent from? Is this where we’re finally going to hear that we should tell people to stop doing bad things (which many people will hear as ‘stop having fun’)? Well, what does the context tell us? Jesus has turned up effectively declaring that he’s bringing God’s rule and authority. So what are people to repent from / to turn away from? Well, if God wants to reign in people’s lives people need to turn from whoever or whatever rules their lives other than God.

Yes, for some people the answer is obvious, some people are ruled by drugs or alcohol. “I’m free to drink or take drugs,” they may say. But are they free to stop? In some cultures, people are ruled over by fear of spirits and so offerings are made with the hope of being safe. However, while those examples of objects or beings which rule over someone’s life are obvious, there are plenty of other ways that people are ruled over which look far more acceptable. Some people are ruled by the desire to be successful. They think they’ll take a break after they close the next deal ... or maybe the one after. Other people are ruled by their desire to be good ... and so be better than others. “If I don’t slip up then I control my own future.” Finally there are those who are ruled by religious duty. These people do not have God ruling in their lives but rather they know all the religious practices that are expected and do them for the purpose of maintaining their position in the religious community.

One of the reasons why the good news is indeed good news for people is that we can turn away from the people or things which rule over our lives but will eventually disappoint us. Ultimately even the desire for happiness will disappoint us and is shown to be a false god. People might say, “I’m happy and that’s better than any good news you’ve got.” But is the mantra of “be happy” all that it is cracked up to be? If you’re goal in life is to be happy does that mean that you don’t have

permission to be sad? Or, if you're unhappy, how hard should you have to work at being happy again? And when will you know if you're happy enough?

It's one thing to accept what we are to turn away from but what are we to turn towards? What are we to trust in / to believe in? Jesus said that people were to "believe the good news." We've heard a little about what the good news refers to but if we were to bring things together we could say that we're to trust in God overcoming the broken relationship between him and us and this comes to pass because of Jesus. Not only will Jesus heal the broken relationship but Jesus also brings God's kingdom and displays God's character.

So Jesus' message was, 'The time has come,' he said. 'The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!' In this announcement, Jesus is calling upon people to turn away from anything that exerts rule in their lives and instead put their trust in him as he brings in God's kingdom. However, in sharing this message with others, the next little section helps us by highlighting an aspect of this message which our generation desperately needs.

Jesus' Call (Mark 1:16-17)

In verses 16 and 17 we read, "As Jesus walked beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen. 'Come, follow me,' Jesus said, 'and I will send you out to fish for people.'"

In a generation where, from the cradle to the grave, people are essentially told that their goal in life is to be happy, we have a message which is good news. I've already mentioned how having "be happy" as a primary goal in life will disappoint, confuse and indeed ultimately damage us, but what alternative message do we have to share which sounds positive? Jesus provides us with a great example here. Jesus doesn't just tell us to turn away from people or things which rule over our lives and instead put our trust in him, Jesus also shows that the good news gives our lives purpose.

The first purpose which Jesus gave to Peter and Andrew, and which is relevant for us today, is "Come, follow me." One of the most effective ways of sharing about Jesus with someone is to say, "Would you like to read about Jesus is with me?" [Show Mark and Luke Gospels] The best way to do this is if someone is free every day and you just read a chapter a day together but most of us can't do that and so I know that there are people who say, "Let's read a chapter a day five times a week and we'll talk about those five chapters when we next meet." You don't have to be an expert in the Bible and it's best if you don't try to answer all the questions your friend may have. What we want is for people to look at Jesus for themselves.

Again, this is why I've chosen to start my ministry here at Laidley and Hatton Vale Uniting Churches with Mark's Gospel. The first purpose which Jesus gives to us, his disciples, is not to

support the homeless, save the environment, campaign for justice, construct church buildings, or any other very worthy causes. The first purpose that Jesus sets for our lives is that we are to follow him. I need to be reminded of this every day and so do you. As we follow Jesus more and more closely, any service or worthwhile causes which we're involved in will grow out of Jesus' rule in our lives, not some other rule which churches seem to be commonly afflicted by (like the great desire to appear relevant, the drive to appear big and significant, or the intent to save the world ... here's a little hint, when we follow Jesus more closely we realise that that is his job).

Jesus didn't just tell Simon and Andrew to follow him though, he also said, "and I will send you out to fish for people." At this point some of us may think, "Well, that command was specific to Simon and Andrew and maybe the rest of the first disciples." Others of us are likely to think, "Hey, if you're wanting to share the good news in a way that people will respond to, isn't this a big turn off? Telling people that as they follow Jesus they should also share him with others."

I don't want to get bogged down in providing long answers to these concerns but I'll say the following. First, the fact that these are Jesus purposes as he calls the very first disciples, to follow him and that he will make them fishers of men, tells me that these two purposes must have been very important to Jesus and do appear to be form something of a prototype for all who would follow later. Second, I actually don't know if people are turned off when they hear that their lives gain purpose even if the purpose isn't necessarily easy. I particularly think that young men respond to healthy challenges and opportunities to grow and be stretched.

Jesus' Rule (Mark 1:18-20)

So then, we've considered the message of Jesus, 'The time has come,' he said. 'The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!' And we've looked at the call of Jesus, 'Come, follow me,' Jesus said, 'and I will send you out to fish for people.' Now we turn to the response of these first four disciples.

As Jesus walked beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen. 'Come, follow me,' Jesus said, 'and I will send you out to fish for people.' At once they left their nets and followed him.

When he had gone a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John in a boat, preparing their nets. Without delay he called them, and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men and followed him.

For anyone who still thinks that the good news is really a message about being good, then apparently a good thing for people to do will be to drop out of work and abandon their parents! Of course, that's not the intended application of the response of Peter, Andrew, John and James. The

focus instead is on the rule of Jesus. Jesus earlier had said that “the Kingdom of God has come near.” The imagery is of Jesus bringing the kingdom of God. For the Jews of Jesus’ time a kingdom was less to do with realm, a geographic area under a king’s dominion, and more to do with rule, the subjects who submit to the king’s authority. Here in the response of these four disciples we have a presentation of people submitting to Jesus’ authority. The mention of John and James leaving their father behind with the hired men indicates the completeness of their allegiance to Jesus.

In the actions of the fishermen we also have an example of Jesus’ command to “Repent and believe the good news.” The fishermen left their nets, indicating a repentance / a turning away from finding their identity in their work and family, and they followed Jesus, indicating their trust in / their belief in the good news.

Conclusion

What rules your life? Have you bought into the prevailing attitude of this generation? Do you believe that the purpose of your life is to be happy? Are you like me as I have been thinking about the house I live in a lot recently and I realised how much I’ve been worrying about it, which indicates that it has rule over my life? Are you ruled by the desire to look better than others? Or perhaps your heart is committed to Jesus and you’re trusting him for your future?

The good news of Jesus is indeed great news because he will never disappoint us, unlike the counterfeit gods around us, and he gives us purpose for our lives. Have you considered ways of sharing about Jesus so it sounds like the good news that it is?

And perhaps I can leave us with one last challenge, why don’t you start praying about someone to read a Gospel with? By praying you’re more likely to be ready to ask and when you ask, you may be surprised that there are people who are interested.

[Pray to close]