

“The Beginning of Christ’s Ministry”

Mark 1:14-20 (NRSV)

During my Moderatorial year, a family from Trinity Presbyterian Church in York Mills, where I served for three years in the early 1970s as a student intern, working mostly with young people, sent me a few digital photos of **Colleen and myself** with their teens in their back yard. What a blast from the past! With her lovely long hair and gingham dress, and my own dark, bushy beard and bell-bottomed pants, we looked like **a couple of hippies**. I can only shudder to think what the congregation must have thought of me as I tried to preach some of my first sermons in their pulpit. In spite of my strange get-up and rudimentary ramblings, the people were very kind. But I suspect the sermons were nothing to write home about!

I’m sure most preachers have had shaky starts. I read of one, later to become one of Scotland’s greatest preachers, who stood up to preach for the first time and, instead, ran out of the church! There are a few, only a few, who have had fine beginnings – like the famous Greek preacher and theologian of the fourth century, **John Chrysostom** -- the “golden mouthed one” as his last name implies – whose excellent style had great influence. No doubt, God develops his preachers in different ways, to his glory.

Of course, there was One who had it all together – perfectly so – from the very first. That One was **the Lord, Jesus Christ**. His word, his reasoning – **his logos** – his preaching was perfect. Whatever he said was absolutely authentic and true. His interpretation of Scripture was flawless. His application of spiritual truth was penetrating and powerful.

Further, his whole being – **his ethos** – the kind of person he was, was without parallel in the human race. The way he looked, the tone of his voice, the expression on his face, his eyes must have flowed with integrity. And his compassion – **his pathos** – obviously came from his heart. Jesus Christ was absolutely convinced of people’s needs; he was totally loving; and, he was absolutely determined to make contact, to make a difference to the people to whom he spoke. I’m sure there has never been anyone as passionate as Christ in human experience.

These three: his **logos**, his **ethos**, and his **pathos**, blended in Jesus Christ with such ineluctable force that, from the very beginning, he was the greatest communicator the world has ever known.

Notwithstanding all I've said about **John the Baptist** being the greatest of Christian witnesses, he couldn't hold a candle to **Christ the preacher**. In fact, John's Gospel tells us that after Jesus was baptized, more people attended his preaching than that of John the Baptist, causing great consternation among John's confused disciples (Jn. 3:25-30). When we read, later, that John the Baptist was jailed by King Herod, we find Jesus shifting his ministry into high gear in his home country of Galilee (Lk. 4:14a; cf. Mk. 1:14a; Matt. 4:12; Jn. 4:1-3), for with the quenching of John's light, his unquenchable light burned even brighter.

So **stupendous** was Jesus Christ's preaching in Galilee that St. Matthew feels he must quote what is by now a familiar passage from the prophet **Isaiah** (9:2), declaring it was truly fulfilled in Christ: "The people who sat in darkness have seen a great light, ... for those who sat in the region and shadow of death light has dawned" (Matt. 4:16). What he means to say was this: before Jesus Christ, the people in this region were paralyzed by a **spiritual darkness**, unable to find their way. Physically and metaphorically, they were subject to "**the shadow of death.**" But then Christ came preaching, and the people saw "**a great light**" -- the dawn of a new day! They'd never heard and felt the impact of such preaching.

1. **The heart of Jesus Christ's preaching** (Mk. 1:14-15).

Verses 14 and 15 tell us **what Jesus' preaching was like**: "Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God and saying, 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.'" Jesus' preaching had **three elements or emphases**: the announcement of the good news of the kingdom, a call for repentance and a corresponding response of sincere faith or belief.

Jesus' preaching called for the Galileans to believe in "**the good news of God.**" The "good news" is a phrase that encompasses all the richness of meaning implied in the biblical word – "**euangelion**" – often translated as "good tidings," the "good message," or simply the "**gospel.**"

Someone has helpfully described **the gospel** this way: A child is born – God came into the world he made; God identifies with us; God reveals his glory. A calling is fulfilled – Jesus Christ, the suffering servant, the Messiah, is called to incarnate and demonstrate the good news of God's kingdom ... Jesus Christ manifests God's goodness; he expresses God's heart. Further, a

life is given – the good shepherd became a lamb to offer himself meekly ... he gave his life freely, ... he forgives us completely. A hope is secured -- Jesus Christ rose from the dead, triumphing over darkness and death, securing for everyone who believes an eternal home, to be with God forever.
(Roy Lessin).

Certainly, and most importantly, **the gospel** centered in the events of the life and death and resurrection of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ himself. Above all, the gospel is about Jesus. In theological terms, the gospel, or the **“good news of the kingdom,”** must always include the amazing truths of his incarnation, his atonement, his forgiveness of sins, and his resurrection.

But in more practical terms, what exactly is **the kingdom of God** all about? Early on in his ministry, Jesus stood up in his home town synagogue, and quoting the prophet Isaiah, declared:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.

He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour.

(Lk. 4:18-19; quoting Isa. 61:1-2a)

Many Christians understand these statements of Jesus to be true, first and foremost, in **spiritual terms**. Jesus has come to set us free from the sins that enslave us. Only secondly are these statements to be understood in physical and material terms. Of course, there’s no doubt Jesus wanted people to be really and truly free. But true liberation begins with spiritual emancipation. Jesus came, first, to offer a gospel of **spiritual salvation**.

Later on, Jesus would describe what the “mysteries of the kingdom of God” (Mk. 4:11; Matt. 13:11; Lk. 8:10) were like in his incomparable, famous parables. Evidence for the presence of the kingdom of God included such **practical attitudes and actions** as spiritual maturity, faithful service and good stewardship. And the apostle Paul later echoed this truth by affirming “the kingdom of God is not [just about tangible things like] food and drink but [about intangible and eternal things like] righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit” (Rom. 14:17).

So, this is the **“good news of the kingdom”** or the gospel that Jesus preached. Specifically, he called his hearers to believe the good news that the kingdom was about to happen. They were to believe the Messiah had arrived and was on the scene and everything would change for the better.

But listening to this message and learning from it would require **repentance**.

No different than John the Baptist’s message, Jesus’ message required a **change of behaviour**. The message had to effect change. Otherwise people would just go on living in the old ruts of their lives. If “the kingdom of God [truly had] come near” it could only be realized and experienced when people would decide to “repent” – or turn their lives around – “and believe in the good news.”

Repentance is a **new attitude**.

Longtime Anglican missionary to India, **Lesslie Newbigin** (d. 1996) wrote:

I remember once visiting a village in the Madras diocese. There was no road into the village; you reached it by crossing a river and you could do this either on the south side of the village or the north. The congregation had decided I would come by the southern route, and they had prepared a welcome as only an Indian village can prepare. There was music and fireworks and garlands and fruit and the performance of a South Indian martial art done on ceremonial occasions -- everything you can imagine. Unfortunately I entered the village at the north end and found only a few goats and chickens. Crisis! I had to disappear while word was sent to the assembled congregation, and the entire village did a sort of U-turn so as to face the other way. Then I duly appeared.

This is what repentance (“metanoia”) means. [Although it was no fault of the Indian congregation they had to completely turn around.] The point is: the reign of God has drawn near, but you can’t see it because you are looking the wrong way. You are expecting the wrong thing. What you think is ‘God’ isn’t God at all. You have to be as Paul says, “transformed by the renewing of your mind.” You have to go through a mental revolution; otherwise the reign of God will be totally hidden from you (Mission in Christ’s Way, 1987, p. 2-3).

Repentance is also **a new action**.

Bishop **Ambrose** of Milan once said, “true repentance is to cease from sin, and to strike out on a completely new course of action.” Repentance is **not like the person** who sanctimoniously sent a cheque for \$150 to Revenue Canada with the note, “If I can’t sleep, I’ll send you the rest.” I **myself** only know all too well when I’ve missed the boat or dropped the ball. I’m not afraid to admit it. And I want nothing more than to try to avoid that mistake and to act differently and to do better.

Given our contemporary materialism and sensuality, we can be sure that if Jesus were to begin his public ministry among us today he’d begin by calling us to **repentance**. If he walked the streets of our town, he’d call us to cease from our adulteries, repent from our materialism, renounce our jealousies and gossip and embroidering of the truth.

And he would call us to **belief**, to real faith in God. Many people, today, of course would say that they do believe. But what does it mean to be a believer? It’s more than glorying in our religious heritage, affirming the Apostle’s Creed, using the right words, or following a few Christian conventions. Real belief in Jesus Christ changes our life. If you say that you believe, but there are no substantial changes in your life, you’d better consider whether you truly believe.

As a clever way of checking our faith and practice someone has come up with the following series of comparisons of **a believer’s understanding of the gospel and the world’s way of understanding life**:

The gospel says, “You are dead in your trespasses and sins.”
 The world says, “Live it up with fun and games.”
 The gospel says, “Christ frees you from your sins at the cross.”
 The world says, “Give yourself an out.”
 The gospel says, “God will forgive you in Christ.”
 The world says, “Indulge your weaknesses.”
 The gospel says, “We are justified by faith.”
 The world says, “There’s a psychological justification for everything.”
 The gospel says, “Repent.”
 The world says, “Get a lawyer; this is a put-on.”
 The gospel says, “Christ will make you whole.”
 The world says, “You will find immediate relief through pills.”

The gospel says, "My words shall not pass away."
 The world says, "We need to re-interpret the Scriptures."
 The gospel says, "Overcome evil with good."
 The world says, "Get even at any cost."
 The gospel says, "The last shall be first."
 The world says, "Others come first – after me."
 The gospel says, "People do not live by bread alone."
 The world says, "Eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die."
 The gospel says, "Lay up for yourselves treasure in heaven."
 The world says, "I'll settle for cash."
 The gospel says, "The Scripture will be fulfilled."
 The world says, "To know what will happen check your horoscope."
 The gospel says, "Have faith in God."
 The world says, "Don't be a sucker."
 The gospel says, "Pray."
 The world says, "Save your breath."
 The gospel says, "Trust."
 The world says, "I'd be careful if I was you."
 The gospel says, "Love never fails."
 The world says, "People will let you down every time."
 The gospel says, "Christ in you, the hope of glory."
 The world says, "Life is short, look after yourself."
 The gospel says, "When Christ comes he will straighten things out."
 The world says, "We will straighten it out ourselves."

Sherwood Wirt, Decision, 1976

Have you ever repented of anything you've done wrong? Do you still find opportunity to repent now and then? If Christ were to appear on the scene today how would you respond? Would you fall flat on your face in response to him? The fact is he is here; the question is, are we responding?

2. **The radical effects of Jesus' preaching** (Mk. 1:16-20).

In those early days, at the very beginning of his ministry, **the response to Jesus' preaching was remarkable**. We are told, "All [were] going to him" (Jn. 3:26). No doubt to listen to what he said. Among them were some fishermen named Simon, Andrew, James and John. They came to believe the kingdom had come. They probably didn't understand how, but they were convinced. They'd also come to believe that Jesus was the Messiah, though I'm sure they had no idea how he would achieve his ascendancy.

They also **repented of their sins**, and they were beginning to see that their **belief** in Christ was making demands upon their lives. As they fished, they talked and talked and talked. Whenever there was an opportunity, they were off to sit at Jesus' feet. **They longed to be with him** and they said so.

And so it happened, one morning as they worked along the shore of the lake, the Saviour came. Verse 16 and following describe what happened. As the call from Jesus rang out, you might have anticipated a momentary lapse of time before they responded. But, as Mark tells us, having heard first-hand from Peter, there wasn't a pause, not even a second look. "... **immediately** [Simon and Andrew] left their nets and followed him" (1:18b). And, if that wasn't enough, when he'd gone a little further and saw the brothers, James and John, and called out to them, **they, too, jumped into responsive belief and action**, leaving their father and the hired hands to manage their fishing enterprise.

In these few lines we have one of the most famous **acts of obedience** in history. Christ came with a radical message and a radical call, and these four responded in radical obedience. Today whenever men and women and young people think of obedience, they sing of these four.

What did their obedience mean? It meant an immensely **expanded life**.

The horizon of these fishermen's lives was bound by the margins of Galilee. Once in a while they might have gone down to Jerusalem for a festival. But, by and large, they knew little more than the deck of their boat, the currents of the lake, and a handful of people in the marketplace. Their conversation would have consisted of trade talk, local gossip, family affairs and Galilean politics. In a word they were remarkably provincial, even to the extent of having their own accent.

Then Christ came and **how their world changed**. In place of Galilee came the world! John was to become Bishop of Ephesus; Peter went to Rome; and, Andrew, they say went as far as the borders of Russia. Later they say his bones were to be carried to Scotland. Their hearts were enlarged to take in the whole known world. Their minds, once circumscribed and committed to small interests, now overflowed with deep and wide-ranging thoughts. They became thinkers, theologians, pastors and strategists – all because of the gospel. Their heart and their souls opened wide to embrace the world.

This happens to all who decide to follow Christ. Much more than you ever imagined or dreamed of can begin to happen to you and your family. You will be different and you will make a difference in the world.

Rick Warren, North America's current favourite pastor, has just published a book entitled, The Purpose of Christmas (2008). In it he details three reasons **why we should observe Christmas**. First, because in spite of the various sad things that are happening in our lives, it is a time for **celebration**. The heavenly angel told the shepherds, as he tells us, "Do not be afraid; for see – I am bringing you **good news of great joy** for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord"(Lk. 2:10—11).

Secondly, there is **good reason for Christmas** because in it Jesus Christ begins to bring us his **salvation**. Ever since the first Christmas we can begin to understand that we can really become God's children. "But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children" (Gal. 4:4-5).

Thirdly, **Christmas is good** because everybody needs some measure of **reconciliation**. People need to find new ways of coming and working together. The biggest problems in the world are not somebody else's problems. We are our own biggest problem. As we admit it to Christ, we find his reconciling power working in us. "So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation...." (2 Cor. 5:17-18).

That's why this is **the Sunday of joy!**

Amen

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