

THE WAY

Mark the evangelist does a number of remarkable things when he opens his Gospel. In the very first line he gives a basic structure for his work. He announces the Good News of Jesus, the Christ, the Son of God. Those titles will be heard again about half way through the Gospel and near its end. Half way through, Jesus asks the disciples “Who do you say I am?” and Peter replies, “You are the Christ”. Jesus goes on to describe how the Son of Man will suffer and die. The second title ascribed to Jesus in that opening sentence is 'Son of God'.(1) We hear this used of Jesus a number of times in the Gospel but only by demons and evil spirits who have some super-human knowledge. The first and only time the title is used by a human being is when the centurion who has seen Jesus die says, “Truly this was the Son of God”. So the Gospel moves to a mini-climax at the half way mark but the way 'Christ' is understood is being radically revised. This Christ is to be a suffering Messiah. And the title 'Son of God' is heard when Jesus is dead. The meaning of 'Good News', announced as the Gospel opens is something very different from what we might expect. This 'Good News' concerns suffering and death. What sort of 'Good News' is that?

Mark attempts to explain in another remarkable way. He introduces a quotation from the Old Testament which, he appears to say, comes from the prophet Isaiah. However, those of you who have a comprehensive knowledge of the Old Testament, or access to a commentary on the Gospel, will know that the quotation is a compilation of texts, bringing together snippets of Exodus, Malachi and Isaiah. What Mark is actually meaning is: This is the Good News of Jesus, the Christ, the Son of God as Isaiah tells us and as Isaiah (and other texts) have said, “Look, I am sending...”. So Mark is pointing us towards Isaiah as a key to interpreting this Good News, which fulfils what Isaiah and the Old Testament in general was pointing to. (2)

But where should we look in Isaiah? Well a good start would be the text quoted – handily given to us in today's first reading; and another significant clue would be the phrase 'Good News', which is a recurring phrase in the prophet. Not too surprisingly they are found close together in, what scholars call Deutero-(or second) Isaiah (chapters 40-55).

So what is Isaiah saying in those chapters which Mark is pointing us towards? The prophet is announcing an end to the time of exile, when the people had been forced from Jerusalem and the Land to languish in Babylon. God had forsaken his people to punish their faithlessness. Now God was returning. Cosmic forces would be at work – how else can valleys be filled in and mountains laid low in order to construct a super-highway suitable for *Yahweh's* cavalcade. This is the Good News: God is coming to his people; coming as all-conquering hero. Later Isaiah will say, “How happy on the mountains are the feet of the one who brings Good News”, and the Good News is

Yahweh coming as triumphant King.

The Israelites returned from exile and Jerusalem was restored. But Mark is saying, the prophecy remains unfulfilled – until now. Now God is coming to his people; Now the time of exile is ended. John the Baptist appears as a voice crying in the wilderness. For five hundred years there has been no prophetic voice in the Land. God has not spoken for half a millennium. Now a prophet is heard in the wilderness – the place where God always begins his sacred action (and which will be an important theme in the Gospel). John, in the guise of Elijah who was believed to come first, as the fore-runner of the Messiah, announces 'a stronger one', 'one who will baptise with the Holy Spirit'. Isaiah has told us that God himself is the 'stronger one' who is coming. The 'way of the Lord' which is being heralded is the highway that God will travel. Then Jesus comes to John for Baptism.

It is a remarkable identification of *Yahweh* with the man from Nazareth who is about to make his entrance in the Gospel. The identification is close but not absolute. It would take the Church another three hundred years to define that Jesus, the Word of God [*Logos* in Johannine thought], was 'one in substance' with the Father, using the word *homoousios* – 'consubstantial' as the new translation of the Nicene/Constantinople Creed puts it. For Mark what Jesus does is an act of God; Jesus speaks and God's voice is heard but, at this time, it would be over-simplistic to say Jesus is God, and anachronistic to say Jesus is Second Person of the Blessed Trinity. But the ground is being prepared, the trajectory is being aligned so that when that definition is defined, Athanasius, the great defender of the Council of Nicea can rightly say: the word – '*homoousios*', is not Scriptural but its meaning – that the Father and Jesus are of the same stuff, is in Scripture.

'The Way' which John announces in these early verses is another important theme of Mark's Gospel. Jesus will follow 'the way' which leads to Jerusalem and death. The once blind Bartimaeus, when healed, will follow Jesus 'on the way'. But here is another surprise: Isaiah envisaged cosmic forces rearranging the topography to make a six-lane express-way for God's glorious cavalcade as God comes to bring his people salvation. The triumphal procession is actually to be the journey on foot of a motley band of poor and frightened men straggling up towards the Holy City led by a man of determination who is going to die. This is the Good News.

This was the message Mark proclaimed to his community. They were facing persecution; they knew of the revolt which was asphyxiating Jerusalem. What they needed to hear and believe was that Jesus' way was, despite all appearances, the victory of God, the breaking into the world of his Reign.

John the Baptist will soon be 'handed over' and his death will be described at length. John foreshadows Jesus' fate for he too will be handed over to death which anticipates the fate of Jesus' disciples [Mk. 13, 9-13]. So the Way of God, announced by Isaiah, taken up by John, becomes the way of Jesus which becomes our way.

Matthew and Luke tell a story of Jesus' conception and birth. Each in his own way proclaims a Gospel-in-miniature to prepare for the rejection that is to come. Matthew has an evil King and all Jerusalem in uproar against the infant; Luke has shepherds as the first visitors to a homeless baby. Each story anticipates the opposition and rejection which will follow.

Mark prepares us for the same conclusion. But does so in a few brief, remarkable verses whose meaning might easily be missed; But which announces the Good News that the Lord is coming; His Way is the one which Jesus travels, and he asks us to accompany him.

(1) Son of God' does not appear in all manuscripts, as is omitted from Sinaiticus. See any good commentary, eg Marcus, J., *Mark, 1-8*, Anchor Bible , Vol 27, Doubleday, New York, 2000, 141

(2) For an explanation of the citation formula as a bridge see Marcus J., *The Way of the Lord*. Westminster / John Knox Press, Louisville, Kentucky, 1993, 17-18.