



Sleepwalking into the future

An Advent Sermon December 2014 - Mark 1:1-8

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About 15 years ago Hillary and I attended a summer camp run by the Church Missionary Society at Living Springs, near Christchurch. We remember it well because it was a somewhat formative experience for both of us. The main speaker was a man named Michael Raiter, a former missionary, and was at that time a lecturer at Moore Theological College in Sydney. During one of his talks I had something of an epiphany, a revelation about my own understanding of what it means to be a Christian in today's world. You see, this particular talk was about how culture influences the decisions we make, about how easy it is to get sucked into the world's way of thinking, and how we often don't even realise we're doing it. We just go along with everybody else because, well, everyone is doing it. Then one day we have a bit of a wakeup call, and that is what happened to me on that day. You see, without realising it I had let myself be swayed by popular opinion. Michael's talk woke me up with a jolt to what I'd had been doing. It was such a sudden realisation it was as though he had walked across the room and slapped me round that face shouting wake up!

That's kind of like the opening scene from the gospel of Mark. Now Mark has a rather straightforward, get right to the point style of writing, and we can see this in the first eight verses of his Gospel, eight verses that pack a real punch. Notice the Mark doesn't begin with angels whispering in Mary's ear, there are no shepherds keeping watch over their flocks by night, no wise men from the East following a star, and no big-eyed animals standing around a straw-stuffed manger. Nor does Mark attempt to give us a theological explanation of the incarnation, we have the Gospel of John for that. Rather, Mark simply states the fact that he is writing about the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

It is as if Mark doesn't care about how the birth of Jesus took place, or how the incarnation occurred.

He just states that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and after loosely quoting an Old Testament

prophecy, he jumps to the wilderness of Judea, to this old-time style prophet named John the Baptist and his call to repentance. And he makes quite an entrance, doesn't he?

But, given the terse, get right to the point style of Mark's writing, it's a little bit strange that he would take the time to describe how John was clothed and what he ate. Yet he takes the time to tell us that John was clothed in a cheap, scratchy robe woven from camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist. And just look at the diet he was on, certainly not one that would interest me. I think I would rather starve than eat locusts, even if they were dipped in honey. That sounds more like a page out of a script of a "Fear Factor" challenge. Actually, I doubt that anybody, if they were to meet a person dressed like John, living off the wilderness by eating locusts, wouldn't look at him as some kind of freak. So what is Mark telling us by his description of John?

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Well a camel's hair robe with a leather belt is the exact same outfit that the prophet Elijah wore 800 years before him. Mark's description of John the Baptist identified him as the messenger of God, predicted by Isaiah, and dressed like Elijah, a prophet in the classic sense. It is Mark's way of telling us right from the beginning of his Gospel that the fulfilment of God's promise to send the Messiah, the Christ, was at hand. I guess at least some of those who saw John would have understood his strange dress and demeanour. They may even have understood it as a sign that he was called by God. Why else would the people

from the whole region, including the city of Jerusalem, go out to hear him preach. Think about it. John planted himself in the middle of nowhere. He set up shop in the wilderness, so anyone who wanted to hear what he had to say had to go to a lot of trouble just to get to within shouting distance.

And yet, the people went out to see a man who seemed to step right out of the pages of Israel's past. And they came by the thousands. And I don't think that they made this journey into the wilderness just to see a freak. It wasn't just John's attire that identified him as a messenger of God, it was also his message. They must have wondered if he was the messiah.

But here's the thing, even though many people at that time had been looking for some sort of sign from God, a sign that God had not abandoned them, that he would help them in their struggle against their Roman overlords, John the Baptist was not what they were expecting. They wanted a messiah to lead them against the Romans, but what they got was a prophet telling them to repent. They wanted freedom, but had no clue as to what this 'freedom' would look like when it came. So John the Baptist bursts onto the scene and, metaphorically speaking, slaps them across the face with his message of repentance.

John the Baptist had an interesting way of doing things, didn't he? He was certainly unconventional, that's for sure. But his mission was plain to see: To tell the people to repent, and to expect someone greater than he to come after him. But he did it in the style not seen by the people of Israel for over 400 years. It's almost as if John is acting out a scene from a play, a play from Israel's own past. Anyone who saw him would have understood what he was getting at, but for us it's not so easy. So let me put it into context for you.

You see, Israel had been in this situation before. Back then they were slaves in Egypt, oppressed by a foreign power, longing for their freedom. And God sent Moses, a messiah like figure, to lead the people to freedom. But to gain their freedom they had to pass through a body of water, in fact they had to pass through two bodies of water. First they crossed the Red Sea as they fled from Pharaoh's army, then they spent 40 years in the wilderness because they disobeyed God.

The second body of water they encountered was when they crossed the river Jordan and entered the Promised Land. And where is John the Baptist? Well he's in the wilderness, telling the people to repent of their disobedience to God's commands,

and telling them to be baptised in the river Jordan, that same body of water they passed through on their way into the Promised Land.

Now this symbolism may be lost on us, but not to those who heard him at the time. The promise Land they are to enter this time is not the earthly kingdom of Israel, but a kingdom yet to be established by the one who is to come, the kingdom of God. But entry into this kingdom is not through John's baptism, not baptism by water, but baptism in the Holy Spirit. John's baptism was one of repentance. His purpose was to tell the people to wake up! the messiah is coming, and if they want to enter his kingdom then they had better be prepared. So repent! Get your spiritual house in order, be baptised! be cleansed! The messiah is coming!

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That is the good news that Mark tells us so tersely. John the Baptist was the messenger, and his message lit him up like a bonfire in the wilderness. People were drawn to him, not just because of how he dressed and what he ate, but because what he had to say offered the people hope - a chance to come clean and start over again. And it was to begin with his baptism of repentance, because the people needed preparing. They may have wanted a messiah to build them an earthly kingdom. But they were unprepared, so they needed a messenger to get them ready. And that messenger was John the Baptist.

Isn't it interesting that the good news of God's intervention into our lives to redeem us from sin and death, always starts with a messenger. Whether it is an angel whispering in Mary's ear, or shepherds beholding the heavens open to proclaim the birth of God's Son, or a skinny prophet standing waist deep in the Jordan river calling us to repent, God always seems to begin with a promise, spoken by a messenger. And Mark tells us that John knew his role in proclaiming the advent of God's Messiah. John was just God's messenger. He did not seek recognition for himself. His mission was to prepare people to receive the one who was greater than himself, the one whom John himself waited for, the one who

would redeem even God's earthly messenger. For John knew that to his baptism of repentance, the messiah would add the gift of God's Spirit, which would empower those who entered the waters of baptism to be become the redeemed children of God.

John proclaimed that someone was coming, someone so spectacular that it was not enough simply to hang around waiting for him to arrive. He called upon the people to be honest with themselves, to step back from their daily routines and prepare their hearts to receive the one whom God was sending, who would redeem them from their sin, and offer them new life. He challenged them to repent, and embrace the Son of God.

The beginning of Mark's Gospel may be terse and to the point but it is still a message that we all need to hear. It is a message that calls upon us to prepare our hearts and minds to receive Jesus the Christ, the Son of God into our lives anew. It is a message that begs us to leave our daily routines, to put into perspective the many activities that we engage in, and truly remember whom it is that has come into our lives.

The appearance of John the Baptist was a shock to the people of Israel. And when God moves it can catch us off guard too. God challenges our preconceived ideas, questions our motives, and exposes our own iniquities. As God works in the world, drawing people to himself through repentance and faith in Jesus Christ, We might ask ourselves: How do I fit in? Are we awake to what God is doing in our part of the world? Or have we succumbed to the prevailing culture of the day?

Are we walking in the light of the gospel? Or are we doing our own thing, pursuing our own goals and the cultural mores of our day?

You see, those are the questions that slap us round the face to wake us up. It's what woke me up. It is a tragedy that so many people don't take seriously the word of God. It was the same in the days of John the Baptist, many people had fallen away and were just assimilating into the surrounding culture. Not surprising when you consider that they had had at least 150 years of first Greek and then Roman rule. It's no wonder then that John calls them to repent!

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Instead of faithfulness to God's word we have let's be like everyone else. We are sleepwalking into a disaster. It's time to wake up! To listen to what God is saying, and be faithful to the calling he has given us to proclaim the good news of Jesus to the world.