

## The beginning of the Good News

### Mark 1:1-8 The Preaching of John the Baptist

This is the Good News about Jesus Christ, the Son of God. It began just as God had said in the book written by Isaiah the prophet,

“I am sending my messenger to get the way ready for you.  
In the desert someone is shouting,  
‘Get the road ready for the Lord!  
Make a straight path for him.’”

So John the Baptist showed up in the desert and told everyone, “Turn back to God and be baptized! Then your sins will be forgiven.”

From all Judea and Jerusalem crowds of people went to John. They told how sorry they were for their sins, and he baptized them in the Jordan River.

John wore clothes made of camel’s hair. He had a leather strap around his waist and ate grasshoppers and wild honey.

John also told the people, “Someone more powerful is going to come. And I am not good enough even to stoop down and untie his sandals. I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit!”

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Dear friend, this has been a year with lots and lots of good news.

That comment might make you might think I’ve gone nuts because in many ways it’s been a year of bad news. We’ve had fires, floods and a pandemic. You might add more bad news to your personal list.

But bad news and good news often go together. The bad news of fires is followed by the good news they’re under control and extinguished. The bad news of closed borders is followed by the good news they’re open again. The bad news of the virus is being followed by the beginning of some good news of a vaccine.

We often begin to hear some good news during the time we’re still experiencing bad news. It’s not good news yet, but it gives us hope - good news is on the way.

Mark begins telling the story of Jesus with the word ‘beginning’. It almost sounds like a heading, ‘The beginning of the Good News of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.’ Or the beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

So here’s a preliminary question? Does ‘the beginning’ refer to this section we’ve just read where John the Baptist prepares the way for Jesus? Which makes sense. Or should we understand the whole Gospel of Mark as the beginning of the Good News of Jesus. Which is it? Is it one of those questions we can give the answer ‘it’s both’?

Mark gets straight into the story. He quotes an Old Testament prophecy and tells how John was fulfilling the prophecy in the wilderness. John’s message is brief. Turn back to God and be baptised, a baptism of repentance. The more powerful and most important one is still to come. I’m baptising with water but he’ll baptise with the Holy Spirit.

John features at the beginning of the Good News of Jesus Christ. John doesn’t begin the Good News, he’s a forerunner, preparing for the beginning of the Good News. John isn’t the Good News but prepares the way for the Good News. Jesus begins the Good News and is the Good News.

I think it's interesting to think about how beginnings often follow endings. For example, if we begin a new life it means we're ending an old one. How is this reflected in the message of John? When he challenges the people to turn back to God he's challenging them to make a new start. We could say a new beginning. In the case of the people John is addressing this isn't a beginning from scratch but a new beginning with an old ending. Does that make sense? To put it another way, to turn back to God assumes there's been a turning away from God. There's a connection that's been lost.

When we think about our lives of faith and the faith lives of others, we can quickly identify people who appear to have turned their back on God. I'm thinking of people who've been taught about God and who've had an active life of faith but have turned away from it. There is also a growing number of people who've never been taught about God and therefore never known God.

For the first group, the encouragement to turn back to God makes sense but for the other group it's about turning to or coming to God for the first time.

The people came to John, confessing sins. What sins were they confessing? How had the people who came to John turned away from God? How did they need to change their mind?

So when we think about the two groups of people, I just mentioned; those returning and those turning for the first time, what will be different about the sins they're confessing? And how does the Good News of Jesus Christ sound different to these two groups?

Some of these questions are really hard to answer. Some of us will be in a better position to answer them than others because we've been there. They are relevant questions because of who we are. So let's change tack and think about a question we can answer with confidence. Who are we? We're people who've heard the Good News of Jesus and believe he's our Saviour. We're Good News people, we're gospel people. We know the Good News is good news for us.

Our parish mission is to live for Jesus, grow in Jesus, and share Jesus with others. We've heard the Good News and we know the one who is the Good News and we learn from him and grow in our relationship with him. He commands us to share the Good News with others. You could say we've been Good News-ed and we're expected to Good News others.

How are we doing? Do we know and appreciate the Good News but keep it to ourselves? Are we keepers of the Good News or spreaders of the Good News? Are we protectors of the Good News or proclaimers of the Good News? Are we building walls and fences around the Gospel or building bridges for the Gospel? Jesus wants us to be bridge-builders. I want to be a bridge builder and I know you want to be as well.

This brings us back to our theme, "the beginning of the Good News". Just as John was preparing people for the beginning of the Good News, we prepare people for the beginning of the Good News. John was preparing the people to hear the beginning of the Good News through Jesus.

John was preparing the path for Jesus, making a straight path for him. Jesus was coming as the Good News and with the Good News. John didn't prepare a path for people to come to Jesus but prepared a path for Jesus to come to the people. It makes me think of someone clearing an overgrown path so it can be walked on, so it can be used.

We don't need to be the good news, but to prepare a way or path for the Good News. Do people travel the cleared path to come to God or does God travel the path to come to them. It appears to be a bit of both although in reality it's mostly God coming to us.

We have this reading just before Christmas as a reminder to ensure the path is clear in our lives for Jesus to come to us? It's a reminder to help clear the paths for our friends and others in our community so Jesus can come to be the beginning of the Good News for them?