

MARK – LOVE WINS

Who is this Man?

We ended our series on the Minor Prophets with the prophet Malachi. As far as we know, what Malachi recorded are the last words God spoke to his people in what we call the Old Testament. It is generally regarded that Mark is the first of the Gospels to be written. While some of the New Testament was written before Mark's gospel, Mark wants to continue the story of God from where the Old Testament left off. But here's the thing: there is roughly a gap of 400 years between Malachi and the story of Jesus Mark will tell. And, as far as we know, in that 400 years, there is silence. There is a gap of 400 years in which, as far as we know, God does not speak.

Anyone know what that's like? Anyone know what it's like when God is apparently silent?

Perhaps one of our challenges today in our modern world, is that we want and expect everything to be instant. Waiting is not a particularly common currency.

I was watching a drama in which two teenagers found an old camera with a roll of film in. They took it to a camera shop and asked if it could be developed. The shop assistant asked them if they wanted the fast-track one-hour service. As they walked to the till to pay, one of the teenagers commented: "A one-hour fast track service – I'm glad we're not still living in those times!"

Perhaps the temptation for us is to live in a hurry – its all about now and instant. God, it seems, is not in a hurry! Which can be a huge challenge for us perhaps. Perhaps, silence begs the question: What is God doing? And maybe we struggle with that.

What we know, because we have the Gospel of Mark and the rest of the New Testament is that God is still there. What we know, is that God will keep his promises. What we know, is that God has not forgotten. What we know, is that God has his best work yet to do. What we know, is that God will give his best. What we know, is that God has a bigger and a better story, a story he will write. What we know, is that God might have been silent, but he wasn't doing nothing. What we know, is that God will bring his best.

What we also know is that it doesn't always look and feel like that. Mark writes his gospel precisely to tell the people who follow God, that God is not done, that he is awake and active and has not forgotten what he has said, or his people. Mark writes his gospel to followers of God who are quite possibly wondering where God is and why he isn't doing anything. Mark writes a gospel that tells the people, followers of God, something really important: God has come to them, as one of them, to be with them and to complete God's bigger and better story. Mark writes a gospel to encourage the followers of God in difficult and challenging times, reminding them of God's presence and action, even when it might look like he is doing nothing or remains silent.

And, maybe, as we read Mark's Gospel together over the next weeks and months, it will do the same for you.

1 The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God. (Mark 1 v 1)

Mark wastes no time, but starts with a bang. The first two words: "The beginning," have echoes of the first words of Genesis: "In the beginning." There's a link here: "You know the story of the beginning of creation, well here's something in line with that – but new." Perhaps right at the beginning (excuse the pun) of his gospel, Mark is pointing out the continuity with an old story – the story of God is alive and well!

The beginning of the good news. In Mark's context 'good news' meant an announcement of joyful news about the emperor. Good news in Mark's day meant an event that would change the world. Mark's good news though, is about the world changing event of the coming of Jesus: God coming to earth and through his life, death and resurrection, bringing life and hope to everyone.

It may be really important for us to pause here: the coming of Jesus is good news – the event in history that changed everything.

History has only one main event. Mankind's timeline is dotted with important moments: The first spark from the first flint; the rolling of the first wheel; the treating of the first wound. Who dares minimise these events? But who dares compare them with the cross? History has only one main event, scripture has only one main event – others matter, but only one is essential.

The story of Jericho might stir you, but falling walls can't redeem you. Moses will give you direction in the wilderness, but no solution for your sin. David's defeat of Goliath may reduce you to timidity. But the cross prepares you for eternity.

Scripture only has one main event. Even in the life of Jesus there is only one main event. For if there is no cross of Christ, then there is no truth to Christ. And when it comes to your life the same is true. To remove the cross, is to remove the hinge pin from the door of hope – the door of your hope.

For if there is no cross, then there is no sacrifice for sin; if there is no sacrifice for sin, how will you face a sinless God? Will you cleanse your own sin? And if there is no cross of Christ, there is no resurrection of Christ. And if there is no resurrection, how will you live again? Will you push back your own grave?

*Forgiveness of sin, deliverance from death; these are the claims of the cross. Let there be no mistake, the cross is not **an** event in history, it is **the** event in history.¹*

Mark is reminding the followers of God there is a far bigger and a far better story than the one about Roman Emperors. It is the story of Jesus. Friends, as we look around the world today, as we examine our own lives, we would do well to remember that.

Mathew begins his gospel with a genealogy to prove to his Jewish readers that Jesus was the rightful King of the Jews. Luke records the birth of a Saviour to show his Greek readers that the perfect baby grew to be the perfect man. John writes a complicated piece about eternity to show Jesus as the Son of God. Mark goes straight in with: here's the good news of his life, the event that changed history.

In ancient times, before a king visited any part of his kingdom, a messenger would be sent to prepare the way.

² as it is written in Isaiah the prophet:

“I will send my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way” —

¹ Quote by Max Lucado

³ “a voice of one calling in the wilderness,
‘Prepare the way for the Lord,
make straight paths for him.’”

⁴ And so John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁵ The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River. ⁶ John wore clothing made of camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. ⁷ And this was his message: “After me comes the one more powerful than I, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. ⁸ I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.” (Mark 1 v2-8)

Mark quotes the prophets Malachi and Isaiah to show the story of God continues – God is at work in the silence. John the Baptist comes to prepare the way – to point to the story of God. John, it turns out, according to Mark, becomes very popular. ‘The whole Judean countryside and all the people went out to him. Confessing their sins, they were baptised by him in the River Jordan.’ (v5) Perhaps it could have gone to John’s head!

If that kind of thing were to happen today, it would be all over the social media channels: “look what’s happening!” But John has only one purpose in mind, to point to the one who is coming after him. He only wants to point to the bigger and better story of God.

Maybe it’s just me, but perhaps we can have a tendency to become a little self-absorbed sometimes, and if we’re not careful, it all becomes about ‘me’. Maybe that’s our problem with silence – it’s harder to be at the centre!

Perhaps it’s true, that we fully find ourselves when we serve God in the best way we know how. A key verse in Mark is this: Forever the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many. (10v45)

So, how are you doing, friends?

⁹ At that time Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. (Mark 1 v 9)

Jesus is a common name, Nazareth is a common town and baptism was a common experience for followers of God. Mark’s point? Jesus is God with us,

God one of us, one who shares our humanity. Maybe another way of saying that is that God gets it, you know that thing we call life!

What is extraordinary is what comes next. As Jesus is baptised, the heavens open and a dove descends on Jesus and a voice from heaven speaks: "You are my Son, whom I love, with you I am well pleased." Here's a question – at this point in his life what has Jesus done? In terms of his ministry – nothing. Absolutely nothing! This comes at the beginning of his ministry, before he's actually done anything. And yet the Father says he is well pleased! Don't you love that?

Whatever else the life of Jesus would go on to be, whatever he would go on to do, he is already greatly loved by his Father who is already well pleased! Jesus is loved because he is loved because he is loved because he is loved. He has done, and will do, nothing that can earn that love. You, friends, have done, and will do, nothing that can earn God's love.

Perhaps some of us especially need to hear that truth again today. Especially in the silence. He loves you because he loves you because he loves you. One commentator expressed it this way: I claim you, I love you, I'm proud of you! Maybe you need to hear God say that to you right now, in these moments: "I claim you, I love you, I'm proud of you."

No sooner had Jesus been anointed by the Father, than he obediently goes into the wilderness to be tempted by Satan. Maybe this is about Jesus character. Maybe it's about identifying with the people Mark is writing to who are being fed to wild animals. Maybe this is about the truth that following God will not be an easy journey. Maybe it's about the challenge that being a disciple is more about following God than feeling good. Maybe it's about the hard truth that sometimes, following God is a lovely place to be. Maybe it's about all of those things in some way.

Mark has begun his Gospel, his good news of the event that would change the world, and told of Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God. We will discover as we go through this gospel, the characters in the stories are desperately trying to figure out who this Jesus is. The disciples ask, after he's calmed the storm: "Who is this? Even the wind and waves obey him." (4 v 47) A stunned crowd in a Synagogue ask: "What is this? A new teaching and with authority." (1 v 27) Theological experts ask: "Why does he talk like that? He's blaspheming! Who can forgive sins but God?" (2v7) The Pharisees think he's in league with Satan. Herod thinks he's a reincarnation of John the Baptist!

Here's a question for you: Who do you think this Jesus is? And then there's another question you must answer: What are you going to do about it?

In verses 14-16 Mark tells us Jesus announces that the kingdom of God has come near and goes to Galilee and is taking the kingdom of God with him. The kingdom of heaven is still near, friends, and we still need to hear it.

Here's a thought: What if you're the only part of the kingdom of the heavens someone else will see? What would you be telling them about the kingdom of the heavens from the way you are, the way you live, the priorities you have and hold dear, the things you say and do? What message would they see and hear?

In verse 16-20 Jesus makes it clear that he invites people like us to be disciples – he doesn't do this on his own! If you have responded to the message of who Jesus is, and chosen to follow him as best you know how, you are a disciple of the Son of God. And you have been invited to share the message of the good news about Jesus – the event that changed the history of the world.

How are you doing?

From verses 21 – 39 Mark begins to show the mission of Jesus as he brings the kingdom of the heavens. The kingdom of the heavens is about proclaiming the truth about the great and magnificent story of God. The kingdom of the heavens will confront the spirits and forces of evil that stand against it. The kingdom of the heavens will have great compassion on those who suffer. The kingdom of the heavens welcomes anyone, whoever they are and however they come.

Friends, as followers of God, as disciples of Jesus, we have been invited into this extraordinary, challenging, but wonderful story. We have been invited to live out this bigger and far better story than the one we see in front of us. When Mark wrote the good news, his gospel, he wanted to encourage the followers of God who were struggling in the harsh reality of the kingdom of the world in which they lived – a reminder to them of a bigger and better kingdom of which they were part. Mark, all these centuries later, invites us to do the same. So, perhaps the question becomes: What do you say, friends?

At the end of this section in verses 35-39, the disciples, it seems, are easily distracted from following Jesus. They realise how popular Jesus has become and point out to him that everyone is looking for him. Perhaps they like the idea of being known as the guys who know the popular guy – the Jesus

everyone is looking for. Perhaps they would have been happy to entertain the crowds – or at least be next to Jesus as he entertains the crowds. Jesus though, is not distracted. He turns down the possibility of enjoying his popularity. He is more concerned about taking the kingdom of the heavens to others who have not yet heard of it.

Perhaps to Mark's first readers this was the encouragement they needed to hang in there, however easy it would be to be distracted from the truth of the kingdom of the heavens. Perhaps too, it's something we would do well to hear, today, in these moments. The invitation to follow God, as best we know how, whatever the circumstances and challenges that surround us. To remember the bigger and better story of the kingdom of the heavens.

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