

## Study following Sunday December 6th

**Prepare:** Think about a time when you heard good news, or when you shared good news with others.

**Praise:** Spend time thanking God for his merciful nature that allows us a new start or a new beginning when we turn back to him.

**Passage:** Read Mark 1.1-8

**Ponder:** As we begin looking at the Gospel of Mark we may note a few things - firstly this Gospel is thought to have been written by Mark (probably John Mark) based on the preaching of the Apostle Peter. John Mark is first mentioned in Acts 12.12, he joins Paul and Barnabas (Acts 12.25, Acts 13.5) but then deserts them (Acts 13.13). However the last two mentions of him show that he regained Paul's trust (Colossians 4.10, 2 Timothy 4.11). It is thought, by some, that this was the first Gospel written and then it became a major source for Luke and Matthew's Gospel. Mark's Gospel seems to be written especially for gentiles -those outside of the Jewish faith who needed some customs explaining (ie 7.2-4) and a translation of some Aramaic words (3.17, 5.41).

Our passage opens with the phrase 'The Beginning' and we are reminded of 'In the Beginning...' from Genesis 1.1 and so the whole book is 'the beginning of the Gospel about Jesus the Messiah'.

- Try to read through the whole of Mark's Gospel in one sitting. As the shortest Gospel it only takes an estimated 90mins to read it all through. As you read, notice that Mark focusses more on what Jesus does rather than what he says. It also gives us an honest picture of the disciples as they struggle to grasp what it means to follow Jesus. The word 'Gospel' comes from an Old English word '*godspel*' meaning 'good story' or 'good news'. Jesus came to **be** good news and to **bring** good news for us to pass on. Mark quickly moves on to a quote from Malachi and Isaiah.

- See Malachi 3.1 and Isaiah 40.3 and notice the context they are set in.

Mark shows that to properly understand Jesus we need to look back at the Old Testament. The prophecy is about a messenger, the desert and the Lord, all of which come together in the story of John the Baptist.

Just as John was baptising, submerging or plunging people into the cold water, so Mark was seeking to wake up a sleepy people to the reality that the Messiah, the long-promised saviour, was coming (Wright 2001). The people had been waiting, since the time of the prophets some 500+ years before, for a Messiah. They hoped this Messiah would arrive like a King and lead them in victory against the enemy - the Romans.

John's message was about repentance - a turning away from sinful behaviour, and back towards God. He was re-enacting the Exodus story of God's people moving from slavery in Egypt, through the waters and on into freedom. John was calling them to leave behind the slavery to sin and the world, and to step into the freedom of God's forgiveness, preparing them for the coming of the Messiah.

- Think about what repentance means to you - is it more about turning from wrong choices, turning towards God's ways or accepting forgiveness and love from God?

- Think about what part of your life of faith may need a wake up call today.

**Pray:** Pray for those who are desperately in need of good news in these times. Pray that God would break in to their lives both practically and spiritually in this season when we celebrate God coming to be with us, God dwelling with us and within us.

## Study following Sunday December 13th

**Prepare:** Think about John the Baptist and how he inspired many people to return to God, and did it with humility and modesty despite attracting a lot of attention.

**Praise:** Spend time thanking God for his servants the prophets, in Old Testament times, in New Testament times and through the ages to today.

**Passage:** Read John 1.6-8, 19-28

**Ponder:** John's Gospel opens with another John - the baptiser. It seems that all the Gospels agree this is the beginning of Jesus ministry as John the baptiser calls the people to repent and look for the light.

- see Matthew 3.1, Mark 1.1-4, Luke 3.1-3, Acts 1.21-22

John the evangelist (Gospel writer) reports that John the Baptist came as a witness to testify to the light. This word 'witness' can be used in a legal context such as Deuteronomy 17.6, or it might be in a more religious context - Isaiah 43.9-10, or it can be that someone is deemed a 'witness' for the truth, a truth that may not be perceived or understood by everyone, see Isaiah 55.4. In Greek the word 'witness' is 'matureo' and is the origin of our word 'martyr' indicating the cost of witnessing to the Gospel.

As John comes before the Jewish leaders he already has a large following of people. There was an eager expectation in those times for the coming of the 'Messiah' (Hebrew), 'Christ' (Greek) or 'Anointed one'. But, despite his popular following, John remains unaffected by his success and points only to preparation for the anointed one who is to come. Some thought the Messiah would be a bringer of righteousness, but others thought this was the moment for a military saviour to come and conquer the occupying Romans. There are three important aspects understood about the Messiah:

*Firstly* the Messiah is seen as a Kingly figure who wields the authority of God.

- How does your view of Jesus fit this Kingly role?

Perhaps it is hard for us to appreciate the idea of obeying a monarch who has power and authority over us, but in preaching about the kingdom Jesus does claim to reign over our lives.

- see Colossians 1.13 and Ephesians 1.20-21

*Secondly* the Messiah is seen as one who is empowered and energised by the Holy Spirit

- Think about how you understand the Holy Spirit empowering you in your life.

This leads to an awareness that Jesus exercises his ministry in dependence on the supernatural resources of the Holy Spirit. As such he is an example for us, and helps us see that we too will need this anointing in order to fulfil God's call to us.

- see Luke 3.21-22, Luke 4.1, 4.14

*Thirdly* the Messiah is seen as fulfilling prophecy from the Old Testament, and so Jesus' messiahship brings a divine connection between Old and New testament.

There are many ways that Jesus features in the Old Testament prophecy, and he himself claims, not to abolish the law and the prophets (a large proportion of our Old Testament) but to 'fulfil' them.

- see Matthew 5.17-18, but also Jesus summary of the law in Matthew 22.34-39

- How do you think Jesus wants his hearers to relate to the Old Testament?

- How might that help us to see the relationship between the Old and New Testaments?

**Pray:** Pray for the Holy Spirit to give us energy for the tasks God has prepared for us. Pray, too, for those under fire for their faith across the world, facing punishment, imprisonment and even death as a result of speaking of Jesus the Christ, the Messiah.

## Study following Sunday December 20th

**Prepare:** Think about the call to servanthood and what it might look like.

**Praise:** Spend time thanking God for the way he calls the least and lowest to carry his light and his message to the world.

**Passage:** Read Luke 1.26-38

**Ponder:** Luke's Gospel opens intriguingly with the foretelling of the birth of two special babies, two miraculous babies, both foretold by Gabriel. First mentioned is John, at the start of the chapter, and he will be great but the second baby will be the messiah.

- reflect on John's role as a pointer to the King, he is a true sign pointing away from himself. How might that relate to our role as bringers of God's good news?

For Mary, to be pledged to be married is a legal and binding agreement, probably made when she was very young. It is hard for us to appreciate this aspect of life from a distant culture but perhaps part of the reason is to provide protection for Mary in a very male orientated society. For Joseph to be a descendant of David means that Jesus will be 'of David's line' from his earthly father.

As the Angel Gabriel appears, Mary is greatly troubled, not necessarily by the sight of this messenger of God but by his words.

- Why do you think the words concerned her?

Perhaps she was just so humble as not to consider herself worthy of a heavenly visitor, particularly one who greets her in such a way? The Angel twice uses the word 'favour' to describe Mary, as she is deemed worthy of this special call from God.

- See Isaiah 7.14 for OT reference to conceiving and giving birth mentioned in verse 31. The name for this special baby will be 'Jesus', this is a Greek version of the Hebrew 'Joshua' and literally means something akin to 'the Lord is Salvation'.

Already we can see that this is not just any great baby, and then Luke reports the Angel saying 'He will be called the Son of the most high'

- See Mark 5.7 for use of this title.

Gabriel continues to reference the 'throne of his father David',

- See 2 Samuel 7.12-13 for more on this prophecy, also Matthew 1.1

The everlasting Kingdom features in a number of prophecies too:

- See Micah 4.7, 2 Samuel 7.16, Psalm 89.3-4, Isaiah 9.7

This is a rule and reign that is beyond the earthly temporal realm, and is a Kingdom that Jesus spends much of his teaching trying to explain.

Poor Zechariah is struck dumb when he questions Gabriel (see verse 20) but Mary is less disbelieving and more puzzled than Zechariah and so receives an explanation from the Angel. The Angel's gentle explanation leads to the first reference to 'the Son of God' explaining that the term 'Son of God' applies to Jesus because he will be conceived by the Holy Spirit and be the 'holy one'.

Finally, Mary declares her obedience to God, as she says to the angel 'May your word to me be fulfilled.' What an example Mary is, she answers God's call wholeheartedly. We may not receive an angelic visitor, but God continues to speak to us and call us, through his word and by his Spirit.

**Pray:** Pray that we would be humble and honest enough to recognise our weaknesses and to let God use them to bring glory to himself. Pray too, for all unmarried mothers around the world who may be suffering persecution and shame from those around them. Ask God to bring them peace and comfort amidst their troubles.