

MARK 1:1-13  
THE NEW BEGINNING

Beginnings are important. How many of you remember your first day at school? Perhaps it's not so traumatic now as it once was, but it is still a big day. Or your first day at a new school, either along with all friends from Primary School or as new person on your own because moved house or as a new teacher. Or your first day in your job and there will be things that stick in your mind, even if that was years ago; I still remember the first time I preached and conducted worship in Juniper Green, and that was scary! Do you remember the first time you met someone, maybe the person who went on to be your husband, wife – hopefully, that first encounter was a good one, and you made a good impression on one another and some kind of good impact; but it may not always be the case – there are times when we get off on the wrong foot and it takes a second meeting to set things straight. You only get one chance to make a first impression so beginnings are important.

Christian beginnings are just as important. How did we first hear the gospel, the stories of Jesus? Where? When? Who told us? What then happened to change things, from simply hearing stories to the time when we believed these stories and began to believe in Jesus, when we began to realise that not only were stories fascinating, but that this person Jesus could make a difference to life for us? Quickly in the life of the Church, baptism developed as something of a beginning, initiation it is called, a way of being brought into the Christian Church, the family of faith, as a time and place to begin Christian faith and life. In early Church new converts were taught basic Christian teaching and lifestyle and then were baptised and so their life of faith began. We still do same and now for our children they begin with baptism for their parents' faith. We nurture that faith till the time when the children have that faith for their own, it becomes theirs independently, the 'own' it for themselves. That, in itself, is a new beginning.

We read the beginning of Mark's gospel which in itself is the beginning of Jesus' ministry. Mark was a friend to Peter, the apostle; so while Mark was not with Jesus for the whole of His ministry, he wrote down what he heard Peter say; we have here the eye-witness account of Jesus from one of His closest disciples, one who was often the first to reply, the first to volunteer, the first to answer questions and who would later go on to be a key figure in the growth and expansion of the Church as he preached the good news about Jesus across the ancient world. Mark's is shortest of the four gospels and is the action-gospel; it moves on at a fair pace; there is not much time to stop and reflect, but Mark tells us one story of Jesus and then moves on to the next and the next and so it goes on, till we get to the last week and the pace slows down and he tells us more about the last week of Jesus' life, His death and resurrection, than about anything else. We are going to work our way through Mark, not to look at all of it, but to consider Jesus, what He's like, and what He did, so that we can grow in our faith, learning to believe Jesus more, to trust Jesus more and to follow Jesus more closely in our faith and life.

*"the beginning..." (1:1)* The word 'gospel' simply means 'good news'. Christian message is 'good news'. It is not a set of rules and regulations about how to behave, what clothes to wear or such like; it does not begin with commands that tell us how to behave. The Christian message is 'good news' for the world, something to tell the world that will be good for people to hear. It is the difference between 2 newspaper headlines: "a new driving law to be enforced"; or "petrol is free!" The "gospel of Jesus" – can be taken in two ways: first of all, this is the gospel that Jesus came to preach, that this is Jesus' gospel, it is His work, He preaches it and teaches it; secondly, it is the gospel about Jesus – He is the centre of it, it is a message about

Jesus. In fact, both are true; Jesus is both the bringer of good news and Jesus is good news, the One about whom good news is written. This is how the story begins.

It begins with a challenge and an assurance:

**1)the challenge** – comes in the shape and form of John the Baptist. John is a strange figure; he was eccentric, to say the least. He lived out in the desert, as a hermit of sorts; he ate locusts and wild honey and he wore clothes made of camel's hair, but that's not why people went to see him. They went to John because his new ministry. 800 years before, God had said through the prophets Isaiah and Malachi: "*I will...*" (1:2,3) So John came preaching in the desert and his preaching was to prepare the people for Jesus' coming. We don't know how long John exercised that ministry in the desert, but might easily have been 10 years or so. The challenge John presented was not because of the strange clothes he wore, or his strange diet, but the content of his preaching: "*so Jn...*" (1:4) "Change your ways" is the theme of his message; 'make a u-turn in the road; you are heading in one direction, but it is the wrong one; you need to change direction, to change way you think and live and learn to think, believe, behave differently.' It is called repentance and repentance is the way into God's forgiveness.

Some people thought he was crackers; "why do I need to change; I'm quite happy as I am" they said. But others saw the sense in what he said; something inside them was pricked by John's message, they realised that he was right and as part of their response to his challenge they were baptised in the river Jordan. Baptism was their way of symbolically washing away all of the wrong attitudes, the wrong ways, and being made clean and new and learning to love God and love other people all over again.

But John always knew that he was just the warm-up act. He was only there to get the people ready for the main attraction. If you've ever been to the recording of a television show, you will have seen the warm-up act in action, getting the audience ready to laugh and clap with enthusiasm. That was John's job, preparing people to meet Jesus: "*After me...*" (1:7f) Someone better to is to come, someone more important, the main attraction, but you will be more ready to meet Jesus having heard and listened to John and recognised your faults and failings and mistakes and repented and turned away from them. There is always this challenge in the beginning of Christian faith: we recognise a sense of need, however we express it; forgiveness for sins and guilt, a need for peace, or hope or self-esteem.

**2)the Assurance** – this comes in the baptism of Jesus. If others were baptised as a way of washing away faults, why Jesus? Was He not the perfect man? Yes, but He did this so that He could be One of us, One with us, to identify Himself with us. There are two things about Jesus' baptism that are important: first of all, what Jesus hears: "*A voice...*" (v11) This who Jesus is, the Son of God; the One whom God loves; the One with whom God is well-pleased. Perhaps this is the first time Jesus' identity is declared; maybe Jesus only had an inkling before! He is, in Himself, God's Son – that is who He is, His identity; it is not a status He has earned; God loves Him and is pleased with Him as He is; He has done nothing to earn that love or pleasure. This sense of acceptance the Father bestows on His Son right at the start of His ministry. Secondly: "*As Jesus...*" (1:10) All of God is here: the Father declares His love for the Son and the Spirit is poured out on Him to anoint Him as God's chosen Messiah/King and to equip Him for ministry, with strength and power, with grace and gentleness. The Spirit is given to sustain and strengthen Jesus and "at once" the Spirit's strength is needed because Jesus goes out into desert for 40 days and is tested and tempted by the devil. This is the beginning of Jesus' ministry and it led on to a life of love and service, to helping and healing others, finally to lay down His life on the cross and be

raised, the life of the Saviour; it began here with a sense of assurance and acceptance and the gift of the Spirit.

Frank Lake is a psychologist who was one of founders of the pastoral counselling movement in the UK; he took this story of Jesus' baptism and His affirmation and assurance and it became starting point for what has become known as the "cycle of grace"; I have shown this to you before, but it is such an important thing that I'll gladly repeat it till we have fully grasped it and are living it out. It is all about the way we see ourselves and that we see ourselves as God sees us; it is printed in the order of service today. There are 4 parts to it:

**Acceptance** – "You are my son" – this is who Jesus is, loved and accepted; this is the starting point for everything else; an unconditional declaration of love; He has done nothing to deserve it; acceptance comes first. God says to us: "You are my child, whom I love; I am your father." This is His declaration to us; this is who we are; this is how God sees us as we are. Grace says that God blesses us in this way before we do anything and without us having to deserve it. "*God demonstrates...*" (*Romans 5:8*)

**Strength** – out of that sense of acceptance, God then gives us the strength to live life and believe; the Spirit is poured out into our hearts to help, guide, lead, bless, equip us for life and faith; the Spirit is God's gift to every Christian to strengthen us.

**Significance** – so we are able to do significant things; but we take our sense of significance from who we are and what God has given us; we do significant things because we are God's children and because God has given us His Spirit.

**Achievement** – we achieve! Jesus at the end of the gospel paints a picture of God saying "*well done, good and faithful servant!*" It would be said to Him! We do things for God! We serve God; we follow Jesus! We love others; we are the right kind of people and the cycle of grace says that we achieve because we are first loved and accepted by God.

We can turn this round the other way and start from the other end: achievement. That is the way in which so many people think about themselves and their lives and even some of us. We have no sense of significance or acceptance because we think we've achieved nothing; our significance and importance and worth are derived from what we have done (or not!) we think that we've done nothing important, so we have no sense of worth! So we are driven to achieve things because that's the way we become significant people; acceptance depends on achieving. The gospel turns that on its head; grace says "first of all, we are loved"; it starts there; this is who we are in Christ; we are God's children whom He loves unconditionally, whom He accepts as we are; into whom He pours His Spirit to strengthen us so that we may do significant things in life and in the world, so that at the end He may say "*Well done, good and faithful servant!*" It all begins here, with grace. This is where Jesus began – "*You are...*" (*1:11*) From there He went on to change the world; He went on to be our Saviour and we will see more of Him next time; but it began in the grace of His Father; faith, self-understanding begins there for us, in God who loves us unconditionally; who says "you are my child whom I love, I am your Father."