

“Comfort, comfort my people, says your God”

Mark’s gospel begins with no genealogy, tracing Jesus by back to David or Abraham. There is no elaborate description of Jesus’ connection to David, such as we might find in Luke’s gospel, where he hear of Jesus being born in Bethlehem of Judea, the city of David.

No, in Mark’s gospel, we have one sentence—“The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.” Or a title, perhaps. And, it’s followed by a variety of scripture references, and then a reference also to John the Baptist. This is “the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.”

The passages of scripture are derived, in part, from Isaiah, including the passage which was read to us earlier—Isaiah 40:1-11—

“...the voice of one crying out in the wilderness:
‘Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight...’”

In the first of those scripture quotations, there is allusion to the book of Malachi (I will try to indicate why I am mentioning all of this). But the first part,

“See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way...”

connects to the book of Malachi; also the book of Exodus of the Old Testament.

In fact, all the passages have to do with some sort of exodus or return from exile. Isaiah 40 begins the whole section of the Book of Isaiah which has to do with the promise of the return of the people from Babylon to Jerusalem. It’s a message, largely, of hope to this people; and so, it begins,

Comfort, O comfort my people,
says your God.
Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,
and cry to her
that she has served her term,
that her penalty is paid,
that she has received from the LORD’s hand
double for all her sins.

That is the way the section of scripture begins which speaks of the promise of the return of the people of Israel from Babylon to Jerusalem.

The reference to Malachi—“I will send my messenger before you...” And then (in Malachi), there is a reference to the Lord coming. In fact, right at the end of the book of Malachi, there is a promise that the prophet Elijah will return before the great and terrible Day of the Lord.

The Exodus allusion has again to do with the coming of the people out of... Egypt. They are in the desert. They have transgressed the commandments of the Lord. They have built for themselves a golden calf and have worshipped that, and said, “Here, O Israel, Here is your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt”—this golden calf. Moses intercedes on behalf of the people. He says to the Lord, “If you will not go with us, do not take us from this place.” And the Lord replies, “See, I am sending my angel (or messenger) ahead of you.”

Well, John the Baptizer comes, and, of course, all of that has to do with either a renewal of the people, a bringing-back from exile of some sort, an exodus from some domain or other, into something new. And what is that new thing? Apparently, it has to do with repentance, forgiveness of sins. All the people of the Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem, we are told, went out to John the Baptist and were baptized by him, as a way of preparing themselves for this new bringing-together of God’s people, this new exodus, this new bringing-back from exile.

There is a quite a description in Mark’s gospel, as there is in the other gospels, of John’s wardrobe and also his diet. We are told that “John was clothed with camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey.” And, I imagine, for people of that day, as for today, that sort of dress, that sort of diet, was strange, to say the least. It set John apart. It also reminded people of another prophet that they had known—namely, Elijah. So here was this figure like Elijah coming to the people and announcing a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

But John the Baptist does more than baptize. He says to the people

“The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down

and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

So, in other words, he saw his activity of baptizing as being in need of completion by the one who was to come after him, the one whom he couldn't even be a slave of. A slave would untie the thong of a person's sandals; but John the Baptist indicated that he would not even be worthy to untie the thong of this great one's sandals. And, furthermore, this one who was coming after him, would baptize with the Holy Spirit, and would, therefore, complete what John the Baptist did, in his own action. Of course, we know the identity of the one coming after John the Baptist—namely, Jesus.

Now, lately, I have been beginning to read works of a Christian philosopher or theologian. His name has likely been mentioned from this pulpit before. His name is Soren Kierkegaard, a Danish philosopher.

He describes human beings as being “spiritual beings”. And he describes what all that means. And this he describes in a book that he entitled, *Sickness unto Death*, which is his way of describing human sinfulness. As he describes it, human beings are in a big rush to free themselves from themselves. We human beings are “sick unto death”, spiritually-speaking. Physically, we may be fine. But, in our relationship with God, something is wrong. As spiritual beings, we have something that needs to be corrected.

Now, fortunately, in what John the Baptist was proposing, and what followed in the One greater than he—namely, Jesus—we have a solution to that problem.

Of course, John the Baptist recognized that the One coming after him was so much greater than he that he wouldn't even untie the thong of this person's sandals. Well, perhaps, for us, in order to receive health—spiritual health—we need, like John the Baptist, to recognize that there is one so much greater for us whom our lives so desperately need, in order to be right with God. “He shall feed his flock...”

Also, like John the Baptist—John the Baptist carried out a certain action of baptizing people, a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins—well, like John the Baptist, we need our lives somehow to be so taken over by this One so much greater than ourselves, that our own actions become symbols of what the Lord Jesus Christ does and can do in human life, in human society.

Of course, in the gospels themselves, especially the gospel of Mark, we see ample sign of what this spiritual healing does when Jesus encounters people. Certainly, there is a leper cleansed; there are people whose spirits are renewed, such that they are no longer dominated by “evil spirits”, as Mark's gospel describes them. There are people who can see, who can understand. They hear Jesus' words and gain greater awareness. They are awakened to this kingdom of God that he is proclaiming.

And also, in the latter part of the gospel, these disciples learn how their own lives may be parables, may be signs, symbols, of the life of Christ, which has come to them. They are to serve their neighbour. They are not to be governed by a competitive spirit, but, rather, follow in the pathway of one who is giving his life as a “ransom for many”.

We could be just as well in the position of these people from the countryside of Judea and Jerusalem. We could be people who sense that we too need this baptism, which is from John the Baptist, a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

But we recognize in Jesus something more than simply signs. We realize, like John the Baptist, and like the apostle Paul, who said “The life I now live, I live by faith in the Son of God, who gave himself for me...” We need to be in those people's position of recognizing the greatness of the One who has come, and calling on that One to so rule our lives that we become his flock, his people, and our own lives exhibiting signs of his life to the world—signs of the spiritual health, the love of God, that he wishes to share with all people.