

Mark 1.1: MARK CALLS US TO BELIEVE IN JESUS, THE SON OF GOD
(Central Baptist Church, Chelmsford: Christmas Eve 2006)

Who is Jesus whose birth the world celebrates this weekend?
Who is Jesus by whose birth every other birth is dated?
Who is Jesus who outlasts all other men?

According to Mikhail Gorbachov, the former Soviet premier: “*Jesus was the first socialist, the first to seek a better life for mankind*”

According to Martin Luther King, the American civil rights leader, “*Jesus Christ was an extremist for love, truth and goodness*”

Prince Philip is on record as saying: “*He might be described as an underprivileged, working-class victim of political and religious persecution*”.

This morning, however, I want us to look at what Mark has to say about Jesus in the very first verse of his Gospel: “**This is the Good News about Jesus Christ, the Son of God**” (1.1).

Throughout this autumn we have been preaching our way through Mark’s Gospel, and looking at the call of Jesus.

- We began the session by looking at the call of Jesus to catch people (Mark 1.17)
- Within the context of a dedication service, we looked at the call of Jesus to be like children (Mark 10.14,15)
- We moved on to see how Jesus calls us to experience forgiveness (Mark 2.1-12)
- On Harvest Sunday we focussed on the call of Jesus care for others (Mark 1.40-45)
- And so it has gone on: Jesus calls us to lose our lives (Mark 8,.34-38)
- Jesus calls us to believe in the God of resurrection (Mark 12)
- Jesus calls us to put God first (Mark 3.35)
- Jesus calls us to know peace of mind (Mark 5.1-20)
- Jesus calls us to reach out in faith (Mark 5.25-34)
- Last Sunday: Jesus calls us to be servants (Mark 10.35-45)

Today on this 3rd Sunday in Advent: ***Jesus calls us to believe in Jesus, the Son of God.*** Surely, no topic could be relevant to Christmas than this.

The Good News of Christmas is not that a baby was born – the birth of a baby is normally just of interest to the immediate family and circle of friends.

No, the Good News of Christmas, is that Jesus Christ, the Son of God, has come into our world. This is why Mark prefaces his Gospel with the words: “**This is the Good News about Jesus Christ, the Son of God**”

1. There is Good News to share

The first thing I want to draw your attention to is that Mark was in the business of sharing Good News about Jesus.

Contrary to popular opinion, Mark was not in the business of writing a biography. Had he been writing a life of Jesus, then he would have devoted at least a couple of chapters to the home from which Jesus came, and to the kind of school he attended.

But as it is, Mark tells us nothing about the home from which Jesus came – he tells us nothing about Jesus’ parents; similarly he tells us nothing about the circumstances of Jesus’ birth; he tells us nothing about Jesus’ early years.

In fact, at the start of Mark’s Gospel Jesus is already 30 years old.

Mark only tells us about the last three years of Jesus’ life, and even then his interest is really just focussed on the last week of Jesus’ life. It has been said, for instance, that Mark’s Gospel is a passion narrative with a prologue. Although this may be a slight over-statement, nonetheless from chapter 8 onwards, Mark’s Gospel is focussed on the death of Jesus.

The fact is Mark was not in the business of writing a biography of Jesus. Rather Mark was concerned to tell others “**the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God**”.

Basically his Gospel can be described as ‘preaching in print’.

Mark, like the other gospel writers, was an ‘evangelist’ with good news to share.

And what was true about Mark is surely true of us. We have good news to share.

Good news which centres on “**Jesus Christ, the Son of God**”.

Hence all the special services of the last two weeks.

And although all the special Christmas services will be over within the next 25 hours, it is still not too late to invite friends and relations to the three remaining Christmas services: the Christingle service, the Midnight service, and the Christmas Day celebration itself.

2. *Jesus alone is Good News*

In the Old Testament as also in Greek literature the term “**good news**” was commonly used to report a victory from the battlefield.

E.g. we read that when the Philistines defeated the troops of Saul on Mount Gilboa, they “**sent messengers... to tell the good news... to their people**” (1 Sam 31.9).

Seen in this perspective, the good news of Jesus is that there on the Cross and in his resurrection Jesus has defeated the powers of sin and death – Jesus is Victor! Jesus is Lord!

However, at this Christmas time, I want to point you to another significant use of the expression “**good news**”. For at the time of Jesus this term “**good news**” was used of the birthday and subsequent enthronement of Emperor Augustus.

So, in a famous 9 BC inscription from Priene in Asia Minor we find these words about Emperor Augustus: “*Providence has ordered our life in a divine way.. the Emperor through his epiphany has exceeded the hopes of former good news, surpassing not only the benefactors who came before him, but also leaving no hope that anyone in the future will surpass him.. the birthday of the god has marked the beginning of good news for the world*”.

When August assumed the throne of the empire, people were tremendously excited.

After all the bloodshed that had followed the assassination of Julius Caesar, they believed that a new age of peace was about to begin.

The Greek cities of Asia Minor called Augustus ‘the Saviour of the world’ and they adopted his birthday as the first day of the new year.

The nearest parallel we in the UK have to this phenomenon was the return of Labour to power in 1996 after so many years of being in opposition.

We were excited about Tony Blair, were we not? Many of us voted for him believing that a new era had arrived. At that time great hopes were invested in Tony Blair and his government.

Sadly, those hopes in the difference that Tony Blair would make have been dashed – as indeed the hopes surrounding Augustus were eventually dashed

I think it not unlikely that Mark in speaking of Jesus as “**good news**” was consciously setting Jesus over against the great Emperor Augustus. “**This is the (true) Good News, and it is about Jesus Christ, the Son of God**” (1.1).

Jesus, and Jesus alone, is Good News. Jesus, and Jesus alone, is to be trusted.

Jesus, and Jesus alone, will never let us down.

This is the good news we have to share. Jesus alone is our true hope.

3. *The Good News is about Jesus Christ, the Son of God*

Here we have three names: **Jesus, Christ, and Son of God.**

Each of these names has significance:

- **Jesus** is a name with great significance. Matthew tells us that the angel said to Joseph: “**You will name him Jesus - because he will save his people from their sins**” (1.21). Jesus means “*God saves*”. It is the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew ‘*Joshua*’. It was a popular name for a Jewish boy. The Jewish historian Josephus records a host of other Jesus’. Ironically, Jesus was Barabbas first name.. But whereas Barabbas appears to have been a Jewish terrorist who sought to lead a campaign for political salvation, Jesus came to save us from the power of sin. Yes, Jesus is a great name. But Mark in his Gospel makes nothing of the name
- **Christ** is also a name with great significance. It is the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew ‘*Messiah*’. Literally, it means God’s ‘*anointed one*’. In the period between the end of the Old Testament and the birth of Jesus there was a good deal of speculation about a warrior messiah. To quote one document of that period: “*He shall destroy the pride of the sinner as a potter’s vessel. With a rod of iron he shall break in pieces all their substance, he shall destroy the godless nation with the word of his mouth; at his rebuke nations shall fall before him*” (Psalms of Solomon). But Jesus proved to be a very different kind of Messiah. Instead of inflicting suffering on others, he suffered for others. Instead of dominating others, he served others. In the words of a modern song, Jesus was “the Servant King”. But again, although Mark was familiar with this understanding of Jesus, here the term “**Christ**” appears to be just another name.
- No, the name that does have significance for Mark is the phrase “**the Son of God**”. It is no exaggeration to say that this is Mark’s key title for Jesus. Or as James Edwards puts it: it “*is Mark’s blue chip title for Jesus, the chief artery of the Gospel*”.

The term Son of God appears at a number of significant points in Mark's story of Jesus.

1. At the baptism of Jesus Mark records that a voice came from heaven: "**You are my own dear Son. I am pleased with you**" (Mark 1.11).
2. At the mysterious event we call 'The Transfiguration', when the disciples saw Moses and Elijah talking with Jesus, when even the very clothes of Jesus emanated an other-worldly appearance, a voice is heard coming from heaven: "**This is my own dear Son – listen to him**" (Mark 9.7).
3. And at end, after seeing how Jesus died, the Roman officer standing in front of the cross, said: "**The man was really the Son of God**" (Mark 15.39).

Much ink has been spilt on defining what this term 'Son of God' really means. The simplest way of defining it is to say that it designates a unique relationship of intimacy with God.

In Mark's Gospel that unique relationship of intimacy is found in the way in which Jesus addressed God – for Jesus dared to call God '**Abba, Father**'.

Nobody before him had so addressed God with such an intimate family world.

The Jews were accustomed to praying to God as our Father (*Abhinu*) when they sought God's mercy and forgiveness. But they never used the intimate Abba.

But Jesus did. There in the Garden of Gethsemane Mark records that Jesus prayed: "**Abba, Father! All things are possible for you. Take this cup of suffering away from me. Yet not what I want, but what you want**" (Mark 14.36)

It is precisely because Jesus Christ is the Son of God that he is able to save. In the words of the great Good Friday hymn:

*There was no other good enough
To pay the price of sin;
He only could unlock the gate
Of heaven and let us in*

4. Believe the Good News

This leads me to my final point – we need to believe the good news Or in the words of my sermon title, Mark calls us to believe in Jesus, the Son of God.

At the very moment that I typed out these words of my sermon, Ursula came into my office with a card from Chris Norrish and put it onto my window ledge: "*For unto YOU is born a Saviour which is Christ the Lord*". Let me emphasise the "YOU". Yes, Jesus is good news for all – but he can be good news for YOU! But it all depends on you – and on your willingness to believe the good news.

According to Mark, when Jesus began to preach the Good News, he expected a response: "**Turn away from your sins and believe the Good News!**" (1.15)

Jesus asks us to make the same response today.

For if we do not believe, then, frankly, he might as well have not come into our world – his birth, death, and resurrection would all have been in vain.

Believe the Good News and discover the wonderful difference that Jesus can make to life.