

MARK 1.1-15: JESUS IS GOOD NEWS!

[Baptismal Service of Kathryn Allan & John Clothier: Chelmsford, 4 December 2011]

1. JESUS IS THE SON OF GOD

Who is this Jesus, whose birth we celebrate this time of the year?

Who is this Jesus by whose birth every other birth is dated?

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”*.

The Gospels declare that Jesus is the Son of God. Listen to the way in which Mark begins his Gospel: **“This is the Good News about Jesus Christ, the Son of God”** (1.1).

Yes, there are many ways in which we can describe Jesus. But his defining essence is that he is the Son of God.

At three key points in Mark’s Gospel we find this term – **the Son of God**

- At the baptism of Jesus a voice came from heaven: **“You are my own dear Son. I am pleased with you”** (Mark 1.11).
- At the ‘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).
- And at the 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.

Suffice it to say, it designates a unique relationship of intimacy with God.

That unique relationship of intimacy was seen 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 word.

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. Yet 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*

And it is precisely because Jesus is able to save, that he is good news
Yes, the good news is that Jesus is not just the Son of God, he is the Saviour of the world!

2. AT HIS BAPTISM GOD CONFIRMED JESUS' IDENTITY

“**This is the Good News about Jesus Christ, the Son of God**”, declared Mark at the beginning of his Gospel. And then – hey presto – he launches into the story of Jesus’ baptism. It is as if the story of Jesus’ baptism in the river Jordan is the key to Jesus being good news.

Do you remember the day you were baptized? I do: it was a November Sunday morning in 1957. I was 13 years old, and at the time I was living in Switzerland. Along with 11 others baptized in Salemskapelle, the main Baptist church in Zurich. I shall never forget the occasion. I was dressed in a white gown which wasn't properly weighted – can you imagine my embarrassment as the robe lifted up in the water? Then after we had changed, we all knelt down at the front and the elders came and laid hands on us and prayed for us. It was quite an experience.

For Jesus too his baptism was quite an experience. Indeed, it was more than an experience - it was a momentous occasion. Mark tells us that "**as soon as Jesus came up out of the water, he saw heaven opening and the Spirit coming down on him like a dove**" (v10). And then there came a voice from heaven: "**You are my own dear Son, the Beloved. I am pleased with you**". It is no exaggeration to say that God broke into his experience in a very special way.

But why did God act in such a special way?
Why was Jesus blessed with the vision and with the voice?
Why do our baptismal experiences pale into insignificance in comparison with the baptism of Jesus?
I believe the uniqueness of Jesus' experience lies in the uniqueness of his baptism.

Have you ever asked yourself why Jesus was baptised?
At first sight it doesn't make sense.
Mark tells us that the John's baptism was "**a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins**" (1.4 NRSV). For to all and sundry John the Baptist declared, "**Turn away from your sins and be baptized, and God will forgive your sins**".
But Jesus had no sin of which to repent.

Every strand of the New Testament affirms that Jesus lived a perfect life.

- The writer to the Hebrews, e.g. declared that Jesus was like us in every respect bar one: he was "**without sin**" (Hebs 4.15).
- Jesus' close friend, Peter, compared him to "**a lamb without defect or flaw**" (1 Pet 1.19).

So why then was he baptised?

There is only one explanation: Jesus' baptism marked the first step to the Cross, when he took upon his shoulders the sin of the world.

Jesus in being baptized by John was identifying himself with us as we really are: in his birth he became one with us in our humanity; but in his baptism he became one with us in our sinfulness. For only so could he take away the sin of the world.

In this sense the baptism of Jesus is good news.

For the baptism of Jesus sets in train events which lead to the salvation of the world.

Here too is found the reason for the vision and for the voice.

God through this extraordinary experience confirmed that Jesus was on the right track.

If you were Jesus, wouldn't you have wanted confirmation that you were indeed doing your heavenly Father's will?

Jesus already knew who he was - already when he was only a 12 year old he knew that he had a special relationship with God. For to his worried parents who came searching for him in Jerusalem he said: "**Didn't you know that I must be in my Father's house?**" (Luke 2.49).

He knew himself to be the Messiah: but how was he to fulfil that messianic role?

What kind of Messiah was he to be? Over the years he must have wrestled with that question.

As in baptism he perhaps somewhat hesitantly took his first step to the Cross, God declared:

"You are my own dear Son. I am pleased with you".

In baptism God confirmed his identity – God confirmed his calling: "**you are my own dear Son**" (1.11).

3. IN BAPTISM WE AFFIRM JESUS' IDENTITY

Immediately following Jesus' baptism and the subsequent 40 days of temptation in the wilderness, Mark tells us that Jesus began to preach "**the Good News from God. 'The right time has come', he said, 'and the Kingdom of God is near! Turn away from your sins and believe the Good News!'**" (Mark 1.14,15)

The good news we are called to believe is that God has come to us in the person of his Son Jesus.

A little later in Mark's Gospel we find Jesus asking his disciples: "**Tell me, who do people say I am?**" "**Some say that you are John the Baptist**", they answered; "**others say that you are Elijah, while others say that you are one of the prophets**". "**But what about you?**" He asked them, "**Who do you say that I am?**" Peter answered: "**You are the Messiah, the son of the Living God**" (Mark 8.27-29).

I believe that Jesus continues to ask us: "**Who do you say that I am?**"

This morning in their baptism Kathryn and John will be affirming their belief that Jesus is indeed the Son of God.

What's more, standing on this side of the Cross and Resurrection, they will be affirming that Jesus is the Son of God, who loved them and gave himself for them.

Yes, in baptism we affirm our faith in Jesus.

When Jesus was baptized, the water was simply a sign of cleansing.

But when the Apostle Paul came to reflect upon baptism, he linked this cleansing with the death and resurrection of Jesus: for him baptism is the moment when we declare our solidarity with Jesus. Baptism is like a drama, in which we affirm our faith in Jesus crucified and risen.

We are baptized into the death and resurrection of Jesus.

As Kathryn and John are baptized, they will be declaring for all to see, yes Jesus you died for me that I may be forgiven; yes Jesus you rose for me, that I may have life.

Baptism is the moment when we affirm Jesus identity – when we declare that Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is indeed good news for all, and not least good news for me.

4. BAPTISM CONFIRMS OUR NEW IDENTITY

But there is more to baptism than this.

Through our faith expressed in baptism we receive a new identity – we become children of God. Listen to Paul writing to Christians in the Roman province of Galatia: **“It is through faith that all of you are God’s children in union with Christ Jesus. You were baptized into union with Christ”** (Gal 3.26). Baptism confirms our identity as children of God

We may hear no voice: and yet as we are baptized God says to us: *"You are my dear son/my dear daughter; my beloved; I am pleased with you"*.

For some Christians their baptism has been sheet-anchor in moments of doubt.

For in those moments when they have been afflicted by doubt & uncertainty, when they have wondered whether they are truly the Lord's, they have been able to look back to that day when they publicly ran the colours of their faith up the mast.

They have been able to say: *"I have been baptized"* - and because I have been baptised, I am the Lord's - I am a child of God, however distant I may just at this moment feel from God"

In this sense baptism confirms our identity: as we seal our faith, God in turn owns us.

He says as it were: *"I claim you, I love you, I am proud of you"*.

I believe this will be true of Kathryn and John.

As in baptism they confess Jesus as their Saviour and their Lord, so God in turn will own them.

God says to John, ‘you are my son’; he says to Kathryn, ‘you are my daughter’ – I am so pleased you are following the way of my Son.

5. BAPTISM CONFIRMS OUR NEW CALLING

For Jesus baptism marked a new beginning

Baptism marked the moment when he turned his back on Nazareth and began three action-packed years of ministry

In baptism Jesus took the first step which was to end in a Cross

In baptism Jesus committed his life to the service of God.

Here there is another similarity between the baptism of Jesus and our baptism
Baptists is not just a one-off spiritual experience unrelated to the rest of life.

In baptism commit ourselves to go the way of the Jesus.

As Kathryn and John go under the water they will declare their intention to die to their old way of living, and as they come up out of the water they will declare their intention to live for Jesus, and to live for Jesus alone.

Baptism is a revolutionary act.

There is far more to baptism than simply getting wet all over
Baptism marks a new beginning – a new beginning of a life lived in service to God.

Baptism is not the end of the road, it is simply the beginning of the road.

This was true for Jesus – this will be true for John and Kathryn.

It is for this reason that after we have baptized them, we will follow the practice of the early church and lay hands on them: i.e. we will ask God to fill them with fresh power for service.

As Christians we have been saved to serve.

The membership roll of the church is in fact the ministry roll of the church. If you are a child of God, then you are a servant of God. The two go hand-in-hand.

Precisely what this form of service will take for Kathryn and John, God alone knows

In the first place, I believe that God will call serve Kathryn to serve him at school – and that he will call John to serve him in his new job in Denham. But I have no doubt that over the years there will be many other ways too in which God would have them serve him.

Well, enough of Kathryn and John

The question I have is: what about you?

Where do you stand with Jesus?

Do you believe that he is the Son of God

Do you believe that he is the Son of God who loved you and gave himself for you?

If so, then baptism is the next step for you

If not, then let me urge you to discover the difference that Jesus can make to your life

Join this new 'Looking for Love' course and discover that Jesus is really good news