

Sermon Sunday 8th March 2015

Rev'd David Coaker

Readings: John 2.13-22; Psalm 19

Address

Mark's gospel begins with Jesus' baptism, the temptation story and then the calling of the disciples.

Matthew begins with Jesus' family tree, his birth and the visit of the wise men, the family fleeing to, and returning from Egypt, John the Baptist's message and then Jesus' baptism, the temptation story and then the calling of the disciples.

Luke starts with a dedication to Theophilus, the person he wrote this gospel for, we have John the Baptist and Jesus' births prophesied, Mary visiting her cousin and singing the Magnificat, John the Baptist being born and Zechariah declaring the Benedictus, Jesus' birth and the visit of the shepherds, the infant Jesus being presented at the Temple and the declarations of Simeon and Anna, the family's return to Nazareth, Jesus' post-Bar Mitzvah visit to the Temple when he was twelve, John the Baptist's message and then Jesus' baptism, and before the temptation story is inserted Jesus' family tree, the beginning of Jesus' ministry with his rejection at Nazareth, a preaching tour and some healing stories, and then the calling of the disciples.

As we moved from Mark to Matthew to Luke, the introductions to the start of Jesus' ministry get progressively longer.

There is nigh universal agreement that Mark's was the first gospel to be written, there is some debate as to whether Matthew or Luke come next, and John is accepted as the last to be written. Personally I go with the order I gave them in. Mark at around 70AD, 40 or so years after Jesus' death. Matthew then takes Mark's structure and expands it, and Luke takes both and prepares his. Then early in the second century John writes.

Mark, Matthew and Luke all follow roughly the same timeline, and as they share this same perspective they are called the synoptic gospels. Synoptic being a fancy word for meaning the 'same point of view'. Notably, when compared to our reading from John this morning, they place Jesus' cleansing of the Temple at the end of their stories. For them Jesus spends most of his ministry away from Jerusalem and their stories climax in Jerusalem at Passover.

John's gospel begins with that beautiful hymn, echoing the opening of Genesis, 'In the beginning was the Word'. We then have John the Baptist's message and a second-hand account of Jesus' baptism, the calling of the disciples, the wedding at Cana, Jesus cleansing the Temple, the secret visit of the Pharisee Nicodemus and the talk of being born again, and then John carries on his gospel.

For Mark, Matthew and Luke Jesus has conflicts along the way with the authorities, but it doesn't come to a head until the period we call Holy Week. For John the conflict begins at the very beginning.

We can tend to have a very sanitised view of Jesus. Hymns like Charles Wesley's 'Gentle Jesus, meek and mild' and images of Jesus cuddling sheep and patting children have let us contain him and his message. I grew up in church with sermons that were basically Jesus is lovely and we should be lovely too. As Christians and as Church we aspire to be nice, considerate, submissive, and try to do all we can to keep everyone content and impassive.

This is in total contrast to this morning's reading. Here Jesus walked into the outer courtyard of the Temple, a space filled with hundreds of people going about the religious practises of their day, he looks around and shouts:

"Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!"

He grabs hold of some cords, ties them together, and uses them as a whip.

He alone manages to clear the courtyard. He must have been screaming and acting like a man possessed as he chased after people and animals. They must have feared for their lives for the money-changers to let him pour out their money and turn over their tables.

This isn't some constrained response. This isn't a scuffle behind the scenes.

This is akin to a man rushing into the Commons chamber during Prime Minister's questions like a dervish, screaming accusations, throwing the mace to the floor, tipping over the Speaker's chair, and chasing everyone out of the chamber.

John then points us forward to Easter and to the context of the community he was writing for. Jesus speaks of the Temple being destroyed and in three days being rebuilt. The disciples remember this after Easter, and realise Jesus was speaking about himself. The miracle of Resurrection that came on the Sunday after Jesus' death on the Friday. It also speaks to John's community living seventy or so years later after the physical Temple had been destroyed by the Romans in 70AD and their spiritual move placing Jesus as central to their faith rather than the Temple.

The same is true for us as Christians, Jesus is central to our faith. Not a building, a book, or a way of doing things. Jesus is the example we are called to follow. Those other things can support and ground our faith, but it is Jesus who has the primacy.

Which it is why it is crucial for us to try to understand the breadth of teaching, actions, and attitudes that the gospel stories give us about Jesus.

Jesus did follow the customs of his day, but he was just as at home coming alongside folk that were disapproved of, healing those excluded, calling people out on their hypocrisy, and declaring the vision of God's kingdom where justice, peace and love were the only criteria for living a good life.

To quote the Christian Advertising Network poster that pictured Jesus as Che Guevara – Jesus, meek and mild? As if!

Our gospel reading today tells us the fury that Jesus was capable of when he entered the most sacred space and saw something he didn't like.

How do you think he would react if he walked in here this morning? Into church meeting, elders meeting, or any of our groups or events during the week? How do you think he would react if he walked into your home, school or workplace?

We may hope he'd sit contentedly with a cup of tea and tell us how wonderful we are, but he didn't do that in the Temple so why would we be let off lightly?

As Christians we are called to follow Jesus' example. To place ourselves before God and try to discern how best to live, encourage and celebrate the kingdom of God. To live, encourage and celebrate justice, peace and love.

We know we all fall short, and that shouldn't paralyse us with guilt, it should inspire us to keep on trying.

We can also take as inspiration the words we heard from Psalm 19. This psalm declares that the universe around us can draw us toward God. The beauty of a star lit sky, the enormity of the sky over a sea or a plain, declares the glory of God.

We hear no words, but what we see places God's word in our hearts and minds.

God's word, that can come to us from experiencing the world around us, from the Bible and from each other, offers us instruction.

And if we truly listen we will find it is perfect and will revive us, it is sure and will inspire us, it is right and our hearts will rejoice, it is clear and will enlighten us, it is pure and timeless, it is true and restores relationship. If we grasp it we will find it is more important than money or the finest food.

God's word, that can come to us from experiencing the world around us, from the Bible and from each other, offers us instruction and warning. It reminds us that we are not perfect, that we can make mistakes, and can cause harm without knowing it. It asks us to place our trust in God, and to strive after the good.

The psalm closes praying that our words and our hearts will be in tune with God's word, will echo the song of the universe, and places our trust in God, God in whom we live and move and have our being, and who always stands waiting to embrace us in love and forgiveness, when we are ready to accept it.

In his life and ministry Jesus lived out Psalm 19. We have his example to encourage and inspire us to search after God's word, to celebrate the beauty and wonder of creation, to discover ways of living in tune with God which will revive, inspire, cause rejoicing, enlighten, be timeless and restore relationships.

To place our trust in God, and to strive after the good. To pray that our words and our hearts will be in tune with God's word, will echo the song of the universe, and place our trust in God, God in whom we live and move and have our being, and who always stands waiting to embrace us in love and forgiveness, when we are ready to accept it.

Let the words of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable to you, O God, our rock and our redeemer. **Amen**