

# The Service of the Lord's Day

27 May 2018 - Trinity Sunday

[Minister: Rev Dr Barry Brown]

## We Gather to Worship God

WE ACKNOWLEDGE THE WURUNDJERI PEOPLE

WE SING *"Holy, holy, holy! Lord God almighty..."* TiS 132

GREETING and CALL TO WORSHIP

READING FROM HEBREW SCRIPTURES - Isaiah 6:1 – 8

In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple. {2} Seraphs were in attendance above him; each had six wings: with two they covered their faces, and with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew. {3} And one called to another and said:

"Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts;  
the whole earth is full of his glory."

{4} The pivots on the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called, and the house filled with smoke. {5} And I said: "Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!"

{6} Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. {7} The seraph touched my mouth with it and said: "Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out." {8} Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" And I said, "Here am I; send me!"

A PRAYER OF ADORATION and Confession

Commencing – *"Father, we adore you..."* TiS 716

## We Listen to God's Word:

EARLY WORD AND PRAYER WITH THE CHILDREN

INTRODUCTORY COMMENTS ON MARK'S GOSPEL

THE GOSPEL READING: Mark 1:1 – 13 (Prologue)

1The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

2As it is written in the prophet Isaiah,

"See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,  
who will prepare your way;

3 the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight,'"

4 John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. 5 And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. 6 Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. 7 He proclaimed, "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. 8 I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

#### *The Baptism of Jesus*

9 In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. 10 And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. 11 And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

#### *The Temptation of Jesus*

12 And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. 13 He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.

WE SING "*Christ, when you were baptized...*" TiS 250

### PROCLAMATION OF THE WORD

#### **Sermon at St Margaret's Uniting Church**

**Rev Dr Barry T Brown**

**Trinity Sunday – 27 May 2018**

#### **A Brief Introduction to Mark's Gospel**

This morning we will listen to the opening Prologue from Mark's Gospel being read and proclaimed (Mark 1:1 – 13). I have chosen this reading, rather than the Lectionary reading for today, for a particular reason. In the three-year cycle of the Lectionary, we are now following 'The Year of Mark'. However, so far we have only had readings from Mark on six Sundays since the start of December 2017. From next Sunday, apart from a few readings from John, we shall hear from Mark's Gospel over 22 Sundays. So a brief Introduction is appropriate.

Mark's Prologue is an appropriate reading for Trinity Sunday. I draw your attention to the Trinitarian character of the reading, and in particular the key references to the Spirit in each of the three brief narrative paragraphs.

We do not really know who wrote Mark's Gospel. Some scholars suggest it was probably John-Mark, a sometimes companion of Saint Paul, and that it reflects insights that may have come from the Apostle Peter. This earliest of the NT Gospels, it was probably composed around 65-70 CE, during the Roman-Jewish conflicts that culminated in the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE. The way Mark's Gospel story is told reflects a mood of crisis and conflict; and it gives particular attention to the *call to costly discipleship* and '*the way of the cross.*' Scholars suggest it was written for a Christian community living in a large Roman centre, possibly even Rome itself.

Mark's Gospel is like a drama and its character suggests it needs to be *heard as a whole*, rather than read in sections. You might notice the fast-moving nature of the drama; the constant repetitions, summaries, and variations of themes. The cumulative effect of the story as a whole is important. For this reason, at a gathering tonight, we will listen to a large section of Mark's Gospel being read by actor David Suchet (available on YouTube – type: David Suchet Mark Saint Paul's Cathedral). Mark's Gospel has some interesting characteristics. It is in household language (Koine Greek), is fast moving, and Mark often starts sentences with, *And* or *Immediately*. There are *duplicate* stories referring to both Jews and Gentiles, and there are '*sandwich*' passages, in which two stories and sets of characters, are intertwined. And, confusing for many, unlike the other NT Gospels, Mark's conclusion is a very brief and open-ended account of resurrection of Jesus – so much so that there have been several attempts by others to provide a replacement for what was assumed to be a 'lost ending' to Mark's Gospel (see footnotes in most Bibles).

In Mark, there are only two direct references to Jesus as the Son of God. The first is in the opening sentence (1:1); the second is in chapter three (3:11) where it is shouted by an unclean spirit, "*You are the Son of God.*" Jesus preferred to refer to himself as '*the Son of Man*' (14 times); and he seems to deflect reference to himself as Messiah. This leads to a notion of there being a '*messianic secret*' in Mark's Gospel. There is a degree of 'hiddenness' concerning Jesus' identity; and the disciples are frequently shown to be '*blind*' to Jesus' true identity.

As we have noted, Mark's Prologue begins by declaring Jesus Christ to be the *Son of God*. Also in the Prologue, a voice from heaven declared, "*You are my Son, the Beloved.*" Then, in a pivotal passage (the Transfiguration) in Mark 9:11, a voice from the cloud is heard to say, "*This is my Son, listen to him.*" Finally, at the crucifixion, as Jesus died, a Roman centurion is heard to declare, "*Truly this man was God's Son.*"

There are several other important features of Mark's Gospel, and these will be addressed more fully in the Proclamation below.

### **Mark 1:1 – 13 (Prologue)**

<sup>1</sup>The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

<sup>2</sup>*As it is written in the prophet Isaiah,*

*"See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,  
who will prepare your way;*

<sup>3</sup> *the voice of one crying out in the wilderness:*

*'Prepare the way of the Lord,  
make his paths straight,'"*

<sup>4</sup>John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. <sup>5</sup>And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. <sup>6</sup>Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. <sup>7</sup>He proclaimed, "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. <sup>8</sup>I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

## The Baptism of Jesus

<sup>9</sup>In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. <sup>10</sup>And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. <sup>11</sup>And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

## The Temptation of Jesus

<sup>12</sup>And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. <sup>13</sup>He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.

## Proclamation of the Word

*[These notes are in précis form, rather than verbatim. Prepared in advance as ‘notes for preaching’, they may not reflect exactly what was preached. Preaching is peculiar speech, a dynamic form of communication that needs to be open to the leading of God’s Spirit, faithful to the Biblical text, and mindful of the hearer’s attention].*

### Introduction

My wife, Heather, has recently discovered NetFlix. Sometimes when I enter the room part way through a movie, I try to enter into the enjoyment of what is being watched; but soon find I cannot understand what is going on – because I had missed the opening. Playwrights have various ways of introducing a drama and the key characters. And to miss the introduction, or prologue, makes it very difficult to understand the story, the drama.

Mark’s Prologue does exactly that. In order to hear Mark’s Gospel it is helpful to imagine the curtain is about to open and the actors are in place; and the director comes out in front of the curtain and whispers some ‘secrets’ to the audience – things that many of the actors are not aware of. You will, therefore, be able to notice two things when the play begins: The gradual unveiling of the real identity of the main character (Jesus), which you already know; and the surprising ‘blindness’ of the various actors (mainly the disciples) concerning who this Jesus really is – even though it is revealed over and over again, both in words and actions by Jesus.

Mark’s Prologue begins: “***The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.***” It then goes on to quote the Hebrew Bible – referring to Isaiah, but actually quoting a variety of Biblical books. This is followed by an introduction to John the Baptist, then concise accounts of the baptism of Jesus and his temptation in the wilderness. This brief Prologue tells us all we need to know in order to engage with the drama that is to follow – and doing so, to marvel at the blindness of the disciples, and to discover much of their blindness and timidity in ourselves. I will now attend mostly to Mark’s opening verse, but in a way that also reflects Mark’s Gospel as a whole.

At first glance, for those of us already familiar with the New Testament, the opening words of Mark seem simple and matter-of-fact. “***The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.***” However, these words are anything but simple and matter-of-fact. They are provocative and subversive. They directly challenge the dominant powers of Mark’s own context, and the timidity of our way of being Christian disciples today.

### Radical Discipleship

Until about 20 years ago it was possible to talk openly about **Radical Discipleship**. Many of the studies based on Mark’s Gospel used these words as a means of calling

Christians to a more intentional and deeply committed way of discipleship. In many ways 'radical discipleship' was something to aspire to, and to commend to the youth of the church.

Today, however, the term 'radical' has other connotations. It congers up images of violent extremists, often based on misguided religious views, who are out to impose their world view onto others – by force.

Mark's Gospel records Jesus calling would-be followers to engage in a different kind of radical discipleship. It calls people to follow Jesus in costly, non-violent ways – because Jesus embodies the gentle, grace-filled, resilient and demanding power of the just-creator God. It calls for a deep form of Christian discipleship that does not trifle with institutions, structures, parties and allegiances, but in the power, love and truth of the creator God.

Over a century ago archaeologists began uncovering the ruins scattered around the regional centres of the ancient Roman Empire. Some of these ruins included inscriptions chiselled into the stone arches of buildings and market places. On one stone arch, in a market city in modern-day Turkey, was found an inscription marking the birthday of Caesar Augustus. The **Priene Calendar Inscription (c 9 BCE)** translated, reads:

And since the Emperor through his epiphany has exceeded the hopes of the former **good news**, surpassing not only the benefactors that came before him but also leaving no hope that anyone in the future will surpass him, and since the birthday of the god was for the world **the beginning of his good news** may be decreed ...

If we read the first verse of Mark's Gospel in the light such understandings of the role and divinity of the Roman Caesar, we can quickly glimpse something of the radical, subversive and provocative nature of Mark's 'good news' concerning Jesus in a world dominated by Rome. And if we read the word Jesus CHRIST, not as a second name, but meaning the long-awaited Jewish Messiah (as his readers/hearers would have done), we can start to grasp that these words at the start of Mark's Gospel are not simply a benign set of words like, 'Once upon a time'. Instead, they are a call to radical discipleship, and potentially life-threatening allegiance to Jesus – to Christian discipleship that is both life-threatening and life-giving.

Some of you will be aware that in recent times I have been reading and writing about two Christian martyrs. In the March edition of **The Link**, I briefly mentioned that in April this year many would remember the assassination of Dr Martin Luther King Jr, who was shot dead in the USA 50 years ago, on 4<sup>th</sup> April 1968. Heather and I remember this date as it was the same day our daughter, Debra, was born. Dr King was one of the Ten Twentieth-Century Christian Martyrs commemorated in 1998 when ten statues were unveiled above the main entrance to Westminster Abbey. The statue beside Dr King's is that of Elizabeth of Russia, who was martyred in July 1918, 100 years ago. I have been attending to her story for several months and have written several short articles. One will appear in **The Link** next month. Without going into detail, it is useful to give a brief account of her life and death. Elizabeth was raised as a German princess, and the granddaughter of the UK's Queen Victoria. At the age of 19, Ella married her cousin Sergei, the son of her maternal uncle, the Russian Tsar, Alexander II. She entered into the wealth and splendor of the Romanov Dynasty – until the assassination of her politically hardline husband. Elizabeth then turned intentionally to religion, and the care of the poor and sick in Moscow, and disposed of her wealthy possessions to finance the work. She started up a diaconal order, the Sisters of Saints Marth and Mary and, throughout the

Russian Revolution and First World War, gave courageous leadership in the care of the sick, wounded and the poor. Twice her German cousin, Kaiser Wilhelm, offered her escape to safety; but both times she refused it, well knowing her life was at risk. In July 1918, the day after Tsar Nicolas II and his family were brutally killed, Elizabeth and one of her religious sisters were among another group to be murdered by the Bolsheviks. Martyr's like Dr King and Elizabeth of Russia remind us that Christian discipleship can, indeed, be costly. I suspect Elizabeth knew well the story in Mark's Gospel of the rich ruler whom Jesus challenged, "...go, set all you own, and give your money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me" (Mark 10: 21).

### **Confronting the boundaries**

In Mark's Prologue the focus is upon Jesus, the Christ, Son of God. Yet interestingly, we hear nothing from Jesus. Each of the brief sections clearly indicate who Jesus is in relation to God – he is '*My Son, the Beloved.*' And in each of the brief passages the presence and work of the Holy Spirit is made clear. Jesus, the beloved Son, is about to engage in ministry, empowered by the Spirit.

Mark's account of the Temptation in the Wilderness is very short and has none of the detail to be found later in Matthew and Luke. What it does emphasize, however, is that Jesus will confront evil itself, and the evils that exist in the rigidity of the religious, cultural and social boundaries that impede rule of God – both in individuals and in the communities in which they live. Let me give some brief examples, each from the first half of Mark's Gospel, which will be heard over the next few months.

The first encounter is in the synagogue at Capernaum. It was here that Jesus confronts the unclean spirit that controlled the life of a man. Jesus confronts the unclean spirit, rebukes it and expels it: "*Be silent, and come out of him.*" Mark 1:25. Further into the same chapter (v40ff) Jesus is met by a leper, and chooses to respond to the leper's request to make him clean. This Jesus does, and in so doing confronts the taboo of dealing with lepers. It is from this point that, in spite of telling the man to stay quiet about his healing, that word began to spread about Jesus' power over disease as well as the unclean spirits.

At the beginning of his public ministry Jesus had called four fishermen to be his disciples. In the next chapter (2:13ff) we see Jesus calling Levi, a despised Jewish tax collector (for the Romans). Not only does Jesus call Levi to discipleship, he is soon to be found having dinner in Levi's home with some of his tax-collector friends – and other 'sinners.' And this attracted the anger and criticism of the religious leaders.

Immediately following this a debate occurred between Jesus and the religious authorities concerning Jesus' and his disciples ignoring certain fasting rites. Jesus and his disciples did fast at times, but he clearly turned his back on some of the religious rites he considered to be unnecessary.

In chapter 5, in a passage that will be heard on July 1<sup>st</sup>, there is one of those 'sandwich' stories I mentioned earlier. Jesus has been approached by Jairus, the leader of a local synagogue. Jairus had asked Jesus to come to his house where his daughter was at death's door. Jesus is making his way to the home when he is 'touched' by a woman suffering with haemorrhages. Taboo! Here we see Jesus breaking taboo and honouring the woman's 'touch' and her faith.

The final example is from chapter 7 (24ff). Here Jesus is in the region of Tyre – largely Gentile territory! His solitude was interrupted by a Gentile, Syrophenician (mixed blood), woman who found out where he was and approached him. She asked Jesus to heal her little daughter. An exchange takes place, and Jesus seems

to be hesitant. He even refers to “throwing scraps to the dogs”. This insult to Gentiles was seemingly well known to the woman, who had a quick response to it. But Jesus spoke the word of authority, and the woman returned home to find her daughter well, as Jesus had ordered.

Now these stories are very familiar to us. We have heard them before; and we will hear them again over the coming weeks. But familiarity has its shortcomings. We can often become so familiar with such stories that we simply pass over the scandal they entail. And sometimes we even miss both the wonder of these stories, and the degree to which they represent Jesus’ willingness to confront the religious, cultural and social boundaries – when they stood in the way of the mercy and grace of God’s rule, which he had come both to proclaim and enact.

### **Close**

On some previous occasion (perhaps more than once), I have mentioned that Walter Brueggemann is one of my favourite Biblical commentators. He is an Old Testament scholar and preacher, and is an ordained minister of the United Church of Christ (Congregational) in the USA. I have about ten of his works, including his Collected Sermons. On Wednesday night, just before going to bed, I received an email from Marj Hookey informing me that the MediaCom organization (from which we purchase some of our worship and education resources) was advertising Brueggemann’s latest book, ***A Gospel of Hope***. Before going to bed I had ordered a copy, and it arrived on Friday morning. I have not yet read the whole book; but I have scanned its pages, and like what I have read so far. The book is a collection, by Richard Floyd, of Brueggemann’s memorable passages, from his many writings. I close by reading one of the many ‘quotable passages.’ It concerns the ‘*Kingdom of God*’, or the ‘*Rule of God*’, which is at the heart of the Gospel according to Mark:

***We have made Jesus too pious, too nice, too patient, too polite. He was none of these. He was a dangerous alternative kind of power that was prepared to name names and call a spade a spade, to describe social relations exactly as they were, who counted on the fact that in the end, all the raw, abusive power in the world could not prevail. His honesty is grounded in his confidence about the rule of God.***

(*A Gospel of Hope*, Walter Brueggemann, Hodder and Stoughton, London, 2018, p50)

## **We Respond to God's Word:**

WE SING “*Brother, sister let me serve you...*” TiS 650

Please stand from verse 5 – “*When we sing to God*”

THE OFFERING, PRAYER and ‘JOURNEY SONG’

***Holy Spirit, come renew us,  
come yourself to make us live:  
holy, through your loving presence,  
holy, through the gifts you give.***

CONGREGATIONAL LIFE

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE and THE LORD'S PRAYER

***Our Father in heaven, [ELLC]  
hallowed be your name,  
your kingdom come,  
your will be done,  
on earth as in heaven.  
Give us today our daily bread.  
Forgive us our sins  
as we forgive those who sin against us.  
Save us from the time of trial  
and deliver us from evil.  
For the kingdom, the power, and the glory  
are yours now and for ever. Amen.***

THE CHILDREN 'SHOW & TELL'

## **The Sending Forth of The People Of God**

WORDS OF MISSION, BLESSING AND DISMISSAL

Go in peace to love and serve the Lord:

***In the name of Christ. Amen.***

WE SING "*God sends us his Spirit...*"

TiS 412

POSTLUDE