**Mark 1:1-11**

**Celebrating our Jewish heritage through baptism**

In our baptismal celebration with Illy this morning, we are, in part, celebrating our Jewish heritage of faith - and that’s a theme we will be exploring more throughout October.

And, as we look at this passage from Mark’s gospel, that is clearly something he wants to draw our attention to. Mark starts his Gospel in verse 1 with the phrase, "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God". Now, this is important in the context of our worship this morning, because as soon as he writes this he goes into the story of John the Baptist. For Mark, and for all the early Church, John the Baptist was the start of the Gospel of Jesus Christ and that accentuates the Jewish nature of our faith: that Jesus didn’t just arise out of a vacuum or an empty space but that he was the continuation of what God had already been doing through the Jewish people. The story of God’s interaction with Israel had gone back many centuries and was most recently seen in the ministry of John the Baptist.

So John the Baptist – the story of God’s interaction with the people of Israel – is the beginning of the Good News of Jesus Christ. And the fact that Mark calls Jesus ‘good news’ refers us back to the Old Testament too, because it is a phrase used in the first part of our Bible to describe the breaking in of God’s kingly rule into the world. So Jesus, the Messiah, is the embodiment of God’s kingly rule over the world. In Jesus the Messiah, we see the ultimate victory of God over all that stands against God.

And then, to really drive home our Jewish heritage in verses 2 and 3, he mentions the prophetic ministry of Isaiah in the Old Testament. Mark writes this: "As it is written in the prophet Isaiah, 'See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way; the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight'."

And then we are introduced to John's ministry in verse 4: "John the baptiser appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins".

There’s something interesting in how Mark phrases this because the River Jordan, where Mark was baptising was not actually in the wilderness. But what Mark does here, and throughout his Gospel, is use the idea of the wilderness as a metaphor for something new happening on a spiritual level. Whenever Mark wants to criticise formal, institutionalised religion, he talks about Jerusalem. But whenever Mark wants to talk about a new work of God happening that is emerging from out of the traditional forms of religion, he locates that in the wilderness.

And so Mark says that John was baptising in the wilderness as a way of saying to us that, yes, John was part of the Jewish heritage - but as the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, he was signalling a new spiritual movement at the same time. In John the Baptist, we see the coming together of the heritage faith of the Jews with the new spiritual movement of the Church.

And, of course, it is the coming together of these two things that we are celebrating in Illy’s life this morning. And Illy is part of a movement that is centuries old of people of the Jewish faith recognising Jesus as their Messiah foretold by John the Baptist. And that movement began on the banks of the Jordan, as Mark records in verse 5: "And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptised by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins." People from Jerusalem – the established form of religion - were coming out into the wilderness – to embrace this new spiritual movement that was proclaimed by John the Baptist and embodied in Jesus Christ, the Messiah. Mark, I think, is speaking metaphorically of a movement away from institutionalised faith and towards a new spiritual approach that is the beginning of engagement with the Good News of Jesus Christ.

If we want to engage with Jesus, we must metaphorically leave Jerusalem and head for the wilderness. We must forsake the comfort and predictability of our ritualism and be prepared to meet with a more unpredictable expression of faith in the wilderness, where the wild animals, the beasts live and where, in a few verses time, we will be told that Satan resides. Mark is preparing us here for the call of discipleship as a radical call, a dangerous call to obedience and risk that will never begin in the comfort of religiosity.

It is a radical message, certainly, but we shouldn't be surprised and Mark emphasises this in verse 6: "Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey". The fact that he wears a coat of camel's hair reminds us of Zechariah 13:4, where we are told that this is the normal clothing for a prophet. The leather belt around his waist reminds us of 2 Kings 1:8, where we are told that this is what Elijah wore. The fact that he ate locusts and wild honey draws our minds back to Leviticus 11:21, where these foods are permitted under the Mosaic Law. So Mark draws a very selective pen-portrait of John to make a theological point: he is a prophet in the line of Elijah, standing within the orthodox Jewish traditions.

So, yes, there is risk in leaving our Temple and travelling out to the wilderness to embark on this new spirituality. But it is clearly not a rejection of all we have ever known: and certainly, for Illy, baptism today is not a rejection of her Jewish heritage. It is clearly founded on the true, spiritual tradition of our fathers, even if it is a rejection of the religiosity and ritualism that has grown up around that.

And so we come to John's proclamation about Jesus Christ, in verse 7 and 8.

First, verse 7: "He proclaimed, 'The one who is mightier than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals'." The fact that he is not worthy to stoop and untie the sandals is a reference to the most menial task that a slave was expected to perform for his Master, so John is here reinforcing the greatness, the might, of Messiah Jesus by stating that he, John, is not even worthy to perform the most menial task for him.

And then finally, in verse 8, we have this comparative verse: "I have baptised you with water; but he will baptise you with the Holy Spirit". Again, given the context, which is John's proclamation of the greatness of Christ, I don't think we are to focus on the comparative differences between John's baptism and Jesus' baptism, between Jewish water rituals and our own baptism rituals. The contrast is not the two forms of baptism but between John as the lesser and Jesus as the greater.

This whole passage is an exposition of who Jesus Christ is as coming out of the great Jewish faith but a precursor to all that is to come through him in his work as Messiah. Jesus is the messenger and the message of Good News. Jesus is the Messiah, the anointed one of God. Jesus is the Son of God. Jesus is greater than the prophets. Jesus is greater than the Mosaic Law. Jesus is the baptiser in the Holy Spirit.

If we want to engage with Jesus, we must metaphorically leave Jerusalem, we must step out of the Temple, with its comfortable rituals and liturgies, we must leave behind the predictability of religion and be prepared to step out into the wilderness and be found by God there. Of course, that demands courage and boldness and there are risks involved but we are left with the ultimate question from this passage: are we content to live out a safe, predictable life of discipleship or will we step out and seek the new spirituality that God has for us?

And, of course, it is worth the risk and all the difficulties of discipleship to follow Jesus. Because this baptism of Jesus, which Mark now turns to, tells us three things about him.

**1. Jesus the Messiah**

Waiting is such a hard thing to do, isn’t it? When we anticipate something wonderful – an event in our lives, the forthcoming birth of a baby or even a well-earned holiday or the excitement of Christmas or whatever: waiting for it can be a hard thing to do. Our patience is tested. Our expectations are challenged. Our mind wonders about what is to come. Waiting for things involves all sorts of emotions: joy, frustration, excitement and despair and a whole host of other feelings.

The whole of the Old Testament, the story of the people of Israel, is a story about waiting. The Israelites had to wait 40 years to get into the Promised Land. The history of Israel is one of waiting for peace. The Psalms often reflect the joys and anguish of a people waiting to be freed from exile in Babylon. But underpinning all this story is a greater sense of waiting; a waiting for the Messiah, a waiting for the one who would eventually lead people to God, a waiting for the man who would signal a new start for God’s Chosen People. There is a 400-year gap between the writing of the last Old Testament book and the writing of the first New Testament book. A 400-year period of waiting and waiting for the one who was to come. And that must have been a very difficult time for Israel.

So when John the Baptist started preaching that the Messiah was coming, we can understand the excitement of the people. They had been waiting so long – and they wanted to be ready. But the Messiah took them by surprise. He wasn’t a regal King who would defeat the Roman Empire. He wasn’t a revolutionary guerrilla with an army of civilian soldiers. He wasn’t a well-known and respected religious leader with the backing of the Temple. In verse 9, we read the simple words: “It was at this time that Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptised in the Jordan by John”.

A humble man from a humble town. A simple carpenter from a backwater village. A man of no repute from an area of no repute. And yet, in this simple disregarded Jew, the hopes of Israel were fulfilled.

Jesus, the Jewish Messiah whom the people had anticipated for so many years, presented a Gospel which would overturn the Roman Empire, displayed a lifestyle which attracted a band of civilian disciples, and challenged the religious *status quo* in such a way that the Temple would be reformed.

Jesus was the fulfillment of the Old Testament prophets: the King of Kings and Lord of Lords, the Prince of Peace, the long-awaited Messiah. Jesus was anointed by God to fulfil his purposes and bring in his kingdom into the hearts and lives of those who believed in him.

And that same Jesus – the Jewish Messiah – the Anointed One - is our Messiah today. It is through Jesus that we can know God as our Father and so we want to give our lives over to him.

The Baptism of Jesus revealed him as the Messiah for whom the Jews had been waiting.

**2. Jesus the Son of God**

A few years back, when the world was kinder, and we were all a bit more naïve…I used to go hitchhiking. Actually, I used to have hitchhiking races around the country with my friends, usually in fancy dress and raising money for charity. We had great fun!

And one time, I needed to get to Bristol from Nottingham for one leg of the race. And a lorry driver picked me up and we got talking and it turned out that he went to church as well. We talked for half an hour or so and we had a lot in common - but something was niggling at me: something didn’t seem quite right. Eventually, I asked him which church he went to and it turned out that he was a Jehovah’s Witness. And then our conversation took on a whole new meaning. Because no matter how close we were in some matters of faith, there was one major division between us that could not be overcome. The lorry driver just could not accept that Jesus was God made Man, the Son of God.

And in that one issue lies the uniqueness of the Christian faith; that we believe Jesus to be the Incarnate Son of God. The importance of this is made explicit in the Baptism of Jesus – verse 10: “As he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens breaking open and the spirit descend on him like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: ‘You are my beloved Son; in you I take delight’”.

The fact that Jesus is the Son of God is the cornerstone of his ministry because, unless he were the Son of God, our faith would be worthless. Who but the Son of God could heal the sick and receive sinners the way that Jesus did? Who but the Son of God could turn a meaningless and shameful death into a moment of ultimate triumph? Who but the Son of God could be buried for three days and then be raised from the dead?

The fact that Jesus is the Son of God is the cornerstone of our faith is the rock on which we build. And the Baptism of Jesus testifies to the reality of that fact. The Son of God became Man and dwelt among us. As God, he has the power to transform our lives and lead us to the Father. As Man, he has the ability to identify with our weaknesses and strengthen us in our times of need. And in the Baptism of Jesus, we see Jesus Christ, the Son of God, God and Man perfectly and powerfully revealed. The Father declared his Sonship to the world but the very fact that he was baptised at all shows Jesus identifying with humanity.

Firstly, then, Jesus is the Messiah.

Secondly, Jesus is the Son of God.

**3. Jesus is the Saviour of the World**

The New Testament records tell us of many people being baptized and, since the beginning of the church, baptism has always played a central part in our expression of faith. But what is it about Baptism that is so powerfully symbolic? What is it that Illy has done today – and all of us who are baptized – have done in the past that is so powerful and ultimately life-changing?

I think Paul gives us the answer in Romans 6:3 & 4, where he writes this: “Have you forgotten that when we were baptised in to union with Jesus, we were baptised into his death? By that baptism into his death we were buried with him, in order that, as Christ was raised from the dead by the glorious power of the Father, so also we might set out on a new life.”

Baptism, quite simply, symbolises new life in Christ. But the only way to experience new life as a Christian is to die first. To die to self. To die to our passions for this world. To die to our selfish desires.

And that death is symbolised in the very act of baptism, which is one reason why it was so important for Jesus to be baptized. Because the baptism of Jesus symbolised the way in which his ministry would go. Because three years later, Jesus would be crucified and would die on the cross and yet, three days later, Jesus would be raised to new life by the power of God. And in his death and resurrection, we find for ourselves the power for new life. Because as Paul says in that passage from Romans, if we believe in Christ and trust in him, we too are participating in his death and can experience new life in God through him.

And, as we come to participate in the Eucharist in a few minutes, that is the great symbol of our participation in the life and death of Christ. That is the promise of God to all who believe in him = that we can know his salvation through the death and resurrection of Jesus; an act of salvation which was prophecied in the Baptism of Jesus and made real for us each week in the Eucharist.

So, this act of Baptism tells us three things about Jesus:

He is the Messiah – the Anointed One of God, the Messiah for whom we have been waiting to bring us to God.

He is the Son of God - the One who, as God, transforms our lives yet, as man, identifies with our weaknesses.

He is the Saviour - through whose death and resurrection we can know God and experience new life in him.

As we reflect on that Baptism story, and celebrate Illy’s baptism this morning, let’s make it our prayer that we can re-commit ourselves afresh to Jesus Christ. The Messiah. The Son of God. Our Saviour.