



LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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A Sermon for the Second Sunday after the Epiphany Romans 12:6-16 & St. Mark 1:1-11 Fr. William Klock

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The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, God's son.

With those words, Mark launches into telling the story of Jesus. It's gospel. It's good news. Good news as in "Ding, dong, the witch is dead!" Good news as in "Aslan is on the move." Good news as in the war is over and now we'll know peace. Good news as in the old tyrant has been run out and a new, good king has taken his place. That's what good news means. Everything has changed because of it and life will never be the same. Good *news* stand in contrast to good *advice*. Try the new burrito place. Go for a walk on the new trail. Buy a Honda. Maybe. Probably. But none of the burrito place, the trail, the Honda won't change your life, let alone the world. Good advice? You can take it or leave it. Good news? Good news can't be ignored.

And this good news, says Mark, isn't any old good news. It's bigger than "the war is over". It's bigger than Caesar has defeated his rivals. This is the good news that in Jesus the promised and long-awaited Messiah has come. And, Mark adds, that he's the son of God. To Jews that meant something different than it does to most of us. To us it sounds like a statement of Jesus divinity. But for Jews—well—"son of God" was Israel's title—one the Lord had given them when he demanded Pharaoh let them go, one that he'd given them again at Mount Sinai. So Mark's announcement is that Jesus has come to represent his people. That's what

king's do. And Jesus is the Messiah—God's anointed King.

So right at the outset Mark tells us that this good news is the story of the Messiah, the King, who has come defeat the enemies of his people and to set everything wrong to right. This good news is that the King has come and so has his kingdom and because of that, everything has changed. And because of *that* both Israel and the gentile nations face a choice: Will they come in faith to the king and give him their allegiance or will they stand as enemies of his kingdom?

Centuries before, the prophet Isaiah declared, "How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of him who brings *good news*, who announces peace...happiness...salvation...who announces..." "Your God reigns." When St. Mark thought of those beautiful feet he thought of John the Baptist. He quotes another passage from Isaiah—one about the Lord sending a messenger to prepare his way. And he quotes the Prophet Micah, too: "A shout goes up in the desert. Make way for the Lord! Prepare the way for him!"

That was John. John had been sent to prepare Israel. The Lord had heard their cries, as he'd heard them crying out from Egypt and from Babylon. And he was coming to visit and to deliver again—this time once and for all. The world was going to change forever. And so, says Mark, John led the people out into the desert, to the banks of the Jordan River, and summoned them to be baptised as an act of repentance and a sign of forgiveness. Picture John, out in the desert, on the banks of the Jordan with all those people. It was a prophetic reenactment of the crossing of the Red Sea. And as so many people do when they're sure the Lord is drawing near, the people confessed their sins. And John baptised them. Because they knew the God of Israel was about to do something amazing. He was about to fulfil his promises.

The new exodus had begun. And lest the people think that it was John who would lead them in this new exodus, he also announced:

After me comes one who is greater than I. I'm not worthy to kneel down to untie his sandals. I've plunged you into the water. He's going to plunge you into the Holy Spirit.

And there it is. That, Brothers and Sisters, changes everything. Picture Israel again in the desert, their tents pitched in neat formation around the tabernacle. Picture the cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night at the centre of the camp. Picture the cloud of his glory resting on the ark in the holy of holies. God in the midst of his people. But now John points to something even greater. Instead of God living in our midst, but living over *there* in the tabernacle—and, more particularly, in the holy of holies where none of us can actually go because we're not holy enough, God is now coming to live not just in our midst, but *inside* us. As St. Peter writes, he's building a new temple for himself and we ourselves are the blocks of stone he's carefully cut and carefully fitted together. In the first Exodus, the Lord took his people through the water, he gave them a law written on stone tablets, and he gave them priests to tell them to do it. And most of the time they weren't particularly good at living out that law. But in this new exodus, Jesus leads us not only through the water, but in doing so he plunges us into his own Holy Spirit. Instead of giving us the law on tablets of stone the Spirit writes God's law on our hearts so that it's not only internal, but so that we'll actually be in love with it and motivated by it and *want* to do it—that's the significance of it being written on our hearts. And so we don't anymore need priests urging us to do it, because we'll have the Lord's Spirit himself in us, making his desires our desires as we steep ourselves in his word.

This was the baptism Israel so desperately needed. And so it was a surprise to John when Jesus came to him and asked to be baptised. Jesus didn't need to repent. But as the King, as the representative of his people, he *did* need to go before his people—to lead where they would follow. And so John agreed and Mark then writes in verses 10-11:

Immediately, as [Jesus] was getting out of the water, he saw the heavens open, and the Spirit coming down like a dove onto him. Then there came a voice, out of the heavens, "You are my son! You are the one I love! I am pleased with you!"

Another epiphany! For Jesus this was divine confirmation that he was who he'd come to believe he was. It confirmed the words of the angel to Mary and to Joseph, it confirmed the song the angels sang to the shepherds, it confirmed the prophetic words of Simeon and Anna, and it confirmed the worship and the gifts of the magi. It was an epiphany for John, too. Jesus really was the Messiah he'd been sent to announce. And it was an epiphany for the crowd, for the people of Israel. In Jesus, the God of Israel was truly visiting his people. As surely as John had plunged them into the water, this Jesus would plunge them into God's Spirit—and when that happened, nothing would ever be the same again.

For that brief moment, Mark says, the heavens were torn open and Jesus, John, and everyone else there had a glimpse of what was to come—of the kingdom, of God's new age, of new creation. It was like getting a glimpse into the closet where your mom had all the Christmas presents stored away—and you catch your breath and you get excited to think of what's to come when the time is right to bring it all out. Like Christmas morning—but Christmas morning is just a dim comparison—this was a glimpse of God's coming kingdom—heaven come to earth—finally!

Brothers and Sisters, consider that the church—redeemed by Jesus and plunged into the Spirit—the church is now—or *it should* be—we are now that vision into heaven, we're now that little pocket of God's new age, his new creation—his future right here in the present. We're God's new age in the midst of the old. That, I think, is why the men who selected our lessons for the Epistles and Gospels put today's Gospel from Mark with our Epistle from Romans 12. Paul doesn't put it quite this way, but what he describes in the Epistle is what it means to be on-earth-as-in-heaven people.

Today's Epistle begins at verse 6, but I want to back up a few verses. (We would have read verses 1-5 last week if we hadn't shifted our observance of the Epiphany to Sunday.) Paul starts out appealing to the Christians in Rome to offer their bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God. Why? Because that kind of worship, he writes, is what line's our minds up with God's. It's a commitment to live as light in the midst of darkness. It's a commitment to live as the people of God's new age in the midst of the old. So he goes on in verse 3: "What's more, don't let yourselves be squeezed into the shape dictated by the present age. Instead, be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you can work out what God's will is—what is good, acceptable, and perfect."

Brothers and Sisters, be the people of heaven who have been plunged into the Holy Spirit. Be the people who embody God's new world in the middle of the old one—because it glorifies God and because it witnesses his goodness and his faithfulness to everyone around us. And what does that look like? It's going to be different in different circumstances. This is something we have to work out for ourselves, but Paul shows us that we're to work it out in light of what Jesus has done for us. The Romans were struggling to be united. Jewish

and Gentile believers were turning away from each other and in doing that they were living like people of the old age, not the new. So Paul writes to them: "As in one body we have many limbs and organs, you see, and all the parts have different functions, so we, many as we are, are one body in the Messiah, and individually we belong to one another." We can't be the church Jesus has called us to be if we don't offer ourselves humbly to each other. Brothers and Sisters, what Jesus has done for us, we do for each other. So, for example, think of the gifts that the Spirit gives us. Paul writes starting in verse 6:

We have gifts that differ in accordance with the grace that has been given to us, and we must use them appropriately. If it is prophecy, we must prophesy according to the pattern of faith. If it is serving, we must work at our serving; if teaching, at our teaching; if exhortation, at our exhortation; if giving, with generosity; if leading, with energy; if doing acts of kindness, with cheerfulness.

The list could go on and on and on, but this is enough for Paul to make his point. The Spirit has worked in us—sometimes working with our natural gifts and abilities and sometimes giving us gifts we don't naturally have—and he's brought us together like a body. Each of us has an essential part to play. Arms and legs, hands and feet, eyes and ears, hearts and voice all working together towards one gospel purpose. Think of Peter's illustration again of the temple not made with hands, a temple with each stone carefully cut by the Spirit for a unique spot, and all of them—all of us—sembled together with Jesus as our cornerstone. If we don't all do the part we've been given and equipped to do, the body can't function, the temple falls apart.

The prophet must prophesy and the teacher must teach. The server must serve and the exhorter must exhort.

The leader must lead, the giver must give, and the doer must do—with cheerfulness and everything according to the pattern of faith. In other words, remember that it's all gospel work rooted in Jesus and the Spirit and the amazing, loving, gracious, and merciful work he has done in us. Sometimes we forget the gospel as we work and the work becomes a chore and a burden. There are all sorts of things in ministry that can be discouraging and we can be tempted to give up. And so Paul reminds us to keep our eyes on the gospel—on the good news that the king has come, that he has made us part of his kingdom, and that we have the joyful privilege of being his stewards and heralds.

But there's more to life together than spiritual gifts. Elsewhere Paul writes about the fruit that the Spirit causes to grow in us. In other places he talks about being conformed to the mind of the Messiah. There are lots of ways we can describe the Christian life as we live it out together, but ultimately what we need to recognise is that being in Jesus and the Spirit *changes* us and living as changed people is part of being kingdom people. Think again about being a little kid and getting a glimpse into the closet where the presents are stored until Christmas morning. When the world looks at us—as individual Christians but even more important, as the church, as a group of Christians living together—it should be like seeing that closet full of Christmas presents. Except in our case, it's not a bunch of nicely wrapped packages; it's a glimpse of God's new creation—of his world set to rights. Seeing the church ought to make people eager to be part of God's new age. Seeing us should make them long for Jesus and the Spirit too. So Paul goes on in verse 9:

Love must be real. Hate what is evil; stick fast to what is good. Be truly affectionate in showing love for one another; compete with each other in giving mutual respect. Don't get tired of working hard. Be

on fire with the Spirit. Work as slaves for the Lord. Celebrate your hope; be patient in suffering; give constant energy to prayer; contribute to the needs of God's people; make sure you are hospitable to strangers.

Bless those who persecute you; bless them, don't curse them. Celebrate with those who are celebrating; Mourn with the mourners. Come to the same mind with one another. Don't give yourselves airs, but associate with the humble. Don't be wise in your own sight.

We don't have time to cover each of these in detail, but again think of them in terms of giving the world a glimpse of Jesus and the kingdom. We've seen real love in Jesus. In him we've seen what it looks like to abhor evil and hold fast to good. In him we get a sense of what it looks like to show honour to others rather than grabbing it all for ourselves. We see in him what humility and lowliness toward others look like. We—especially Gentile believers—have seen what Jesus' hospitality looks like as he welcomes us in to Abraham's family. In Jesus we've seen the greatest example ever of what it looks like to bless those who persecute us. And Paul ends this list in verse 21, writing, "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good."

Brothers and Sisters, this is what it looks like to be faithful stewards of the grace of God and heralds of the gospel. This is what it looks like to live the life Jesus has given us. This is what it looks like to be people who have been plunged into the Holy Spirit. This is what it looks like to be the new Israel, rescued from our bondage to sin and death and given hope for a new life. We love each other as Jesus has loved us and as he specially equipped us to love, and as we do so we show our love for him, because in loving each other we are loving the people whom Jesus loves. But it's not just the Church we love.

Jesus was sent to redeem because "God so loved the world". We witness what love looks like as we love each other, but we also witness the love of God as we give ourselves for the sake of the world, as we give ourselves to be light in the darkness—even when the darkness is hostile and seeks to snuff us out. In Jesus, God overcame evil with good and we are called to be his witnesses by doing the same. And so let us proclaim the good news: Repent, for the kingdom of God has come. But let's also show the world that this is good news, not just good advice. Let's ourselves live in light of the knowledge that Jesus and the Spirit have changed everything. Let us be heaven-on-earth people so that when the world looks at the church, it sees heaven torn open, so that it has a glimpse of God's new creation. May the life of the church, redeemed by Jesus and filled with the Spirit, cause everyone around us to give glory to God.

Let us pray: Heavenly Father, in the baptism of Jesus you revealed him to be your Son and you anointed him with the Holy Spirit. May we who are born again of that same water and Spirit, we ask, be faithful to our calling as your children by grace, living and manifesting in our lives the love and mercy you have shown to us as we proclaim your kingdom. We ask this through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.