4th December 2011

MARK 1:1-8
"TELLING"

Do you know anyone you would describe as eccentric? It might be the way someone dresses, to wear odd clothes, red socks with a green suit, or some other fashion habit; it may be way they speak or behave. Eccentric people, by definition, just don't conform to the norms, whether in behaviour, speech or dress; they just do things differently. They tend to have a different view of life and the world as well; perhaps that's what makes them eccentric. Society tends not to be very good with people who depart from the norms: they divide opinion. With some, they are dismissed as being eccentric and not taken seriously. But the thing about people who are eccentric is that they have a different view of world, they look at life with a different slant and some people see that as very refreshing for society and very necessary at times; they prevent us from being stuck in the rut of just the normal view of things.

John the Baptist was an eccentric by any definition of that word. By the very fact that all of the gospel writers tell us what he wore and what he ate and where he lived, we have to think that he was different from the norm. We're told that he lived in the desert, west of the Jordan river, west of the Dead Sea, west of Jerusalem. We're told that *"John wore…" (1:6)* and by the very fact that we're told these things about him we have to think that not many other people wore these clothes or followed this diet. This eccentric divided opinion as well: for some people he was too much to handle and they didn't like him and stood against him. Others went to hear him preach and responded really positively to his message; they thought he was right and listened avidly to his preaching, they did as he said. Eccentric or not, Christians today have a great deal to learn from John, especially in this season of Advent.

Mark's gospel is the most fast-moving of all the gospels. There is nothing fancy about Mark, he just tells stories to show us what Jesus did. It is a simple story, yet a powerful picture of Jesus' life and ministry. It begins with a very simple opening: *"The beginning…" (1:1)* Here's where the story begins! He leaves it to others to tell the stories of Bethlehem, shepherds, wise men, angels, the star; Mark takes us straight to beginning of Jesus' adult ministry. Right at the beginning of Jesus' ministry stands John the Baptist, this eccentric man, living in the desert, wearing strange clothes, with a very odd diet. He has a distinctive place in the story, the forerunner, the one who prepares the way for the coming of Jesus, for the coming of the King! We see this in what is said about him and in what he himself says.

What is said about him – *"It is…" (1:2f)* Actually this is the coming together of two Old Testament prophecies, one from Malachi and one from Isaiah, both of which tell us that God will send a messenger. This messenger will prepare the way for the coming of the Lord Himself into the world and for a great and glorious day when God will come to His people. Hundreds of years later, John is born to Zechariah and Elizabeth and Zechariah writes a song in which he speaks about his son as a *"prophet of…" (Luke 1:76),* exactly the language of Malachi and Isaiah, fulfilling what was said about the Lord's messenger; John is that messenger. This is the picture of the herald: in the days before wall-to-wall media coverage, people didn't know what their kings and queens looked like; there were no stamps to show the queen's picture. So when the king or queen decided to go on a royal tour of their kingdom, they sent a herald on ahead. There would be nothing more embarrassing for the king on his royal tour for no-one to notice him, nobody to know that the king is here, so the herald was sent on ahead to tell the town or village that "the king

is coming to Juniper Green; get out there to welcome him" and so the herald gathered a crowd at the side of the road to wave and cheer as the King went past, to make him feel good.

In God's carefully planned Christmas strategy, John is sent ahead of Jesus to prepare the way, the messenger, the herald. We saw last week how John's birth was announced by the angel to his father in the temple and how to parents *"well on in years!"* John was born to Elizabeth, some 6 months before Jesus was born to Mary. John is to prepare the way for the coming of the Lord, for the coming of the King to Israel. He is the God-appointed messenger, who is to get the people ready for meeting Jesus. He does that by his preaching; he does it by his baptising, all designed to get hearts and minds ready for the coming of the king, all designed to point people to Jesus. John knows that he is not an end in himself, but that he is there as a messenger. Some people dismiss him; others warmly embrace his message and follow Jesus.

What he himself says – there are two parts to his message. First of all: *"So John…" (1:4)* Elsewhere that ministry is described more fully, but basically his task is to point out to people what needs to be sorted. A silly illustration: our spare room is a bit of a mess at the moment; imagine an important visitor is coming to stay and before they come, an equerry comes to inspect the house, to tell us what is needed. "You need to tidy up the spare room, to get rid of all this clutter so that the room is fit, tidy and respectable for your important visitor." Now what I'm saying about our spare room is what John said about people's lives. He pointed out that things were wrong and that people were living with wrong attitudes, and were behaving in wrong ways. It could be all manner of things, but he pointed out that people were not living in the ways that God wanted and that this needed to be sorted out in order for people to be able to receive Jesus when He came.

This is not a very attractive message; it can be a painful message. We don't like to be told that there are things about us that are wrong. We don't like to be told that we need to change. But that was John's first message: "You need to change your ways; the way you think, the way you speak, the way you behave." To their credit *"the whole…" (1:5)* people responded; they listened to John and something inside them recognised that he was right, that his message was true. So they came, minded to change their ways; the Bible calls this 'repentance' – being willing to admit our faults and mistakes and ready to change! As an outward symbolic action to mark this spirit of repentance, John baptised them in the Jordan river, so as they washed in the water, they symbolically washed away their sins, preparing for the coming of Jesus, having hearts ready to receive the grace of God in the gift of His Son.

The second part of John's message was this: *"after me…" (1:7f)* Someone is coming who is much greater than John; someone is coming and John sees himself as not fit even to tie his shoelaces! This is Jesus! Elsewhere we read about John: *"He came…" (John 1:7ff)* He is a witness to tell the world about Jesus, to tell us how great He is. Later: *"Look…" (Jn 1:29)* Quite literally, he pointed Jesus out to people; "there He is; that's the One whom God has sent to be the Saviour of the world; there's the light of the world!" Again people listened to John and believed what he said and went to follow Jesus. John knew that Jesus was greater; John knew that his job was to point people to Jesus, to the greater One, to the Saviour and he did it and people believed him and found life and light in Jesus. The Spirit of God is at work to persuade people that John is right and that Jesus is the One in whom to put their faith, the Messiah, the Saviour.

The challenge for us is to be a Church in the footsteps of John! We are to be a messenger to the world, telling the world about Jesus. This is an all-year round task, but perhaps even more so at Christmas. We tell the world that Christmas is about the coming of Jesus to be the light of world and the Saviour. The Church is not an end in itself; success for our ministry as Church in this community must never be measured by how big the church is or how wealthy; the number of people on seats must never be a mark of anything for the Church. The Church exists for the glory of God and the sake of other people; our task as Church is faithfulness, to be a messenger in our community, telling people about Jesus. We do that by the Christmas card that will go into every home in our parish, telling people something of Jesus: who knows what impact that has on people! We know that some of you have come to Church as a result of this card, but we can't see what impact it makes on other hearts and minds. The challenge for us as individuals is to confident to be a messenger to our family and friends, to the people we work beside and live beside, to the people we meet in all kinds of places! Be a messenger. Sometimes this is a hard message – "things need to change; we need to change; society is on the wrong track". Sometimes we need to warn that there is spiritual danger ahead and this is not a popular message, but we need to hear and tell that message too at times. This too is the Church and our messengering ministry.

We are to be a messenger about Jesus. There are so many other voices about Christmas: Christmas is about presents and there are all kinds of TV and newspaper ads designed with the message that Christmas is about spending money on presents. Christmas about food and again all the supermarkets will encourage you to spend your money in their store and that you need all kinds of extras. Christmas is about rushing around being busy; Christmas is about … all kinds of voices telling us all kinds of things. Christmas is about Jesus! That is the message we need to share and to do it in the best and most positive way we can; Jesus and His coming is to add value to life, light to take away the darkness, brining forgiveness, peace, hope and all kinds of other good qualities and gifts Jesus brings with Him. Christmas is more than Jesus the baby in the stable, surrounded by shepherds and wise men; Jesus who came to transform the world forever is here. We need to challenge people's perceptions of Christmas and Jesus in order to get to real picture, and the Church is a messenger who points the world to Jesus this Christmas. It is not about us as Christians showing how good we are, but telling world how good and great Jesus is; we are not worthy to tie His shoelaces. He has come to change the world, He has come to change us, He has come to love and grace us and bless us. Sometimes we feel the need to have that message all neatly tied & packaged, to have answers to all of the questions, as if we have to defend Jesus. CH Spurgeon said of the Bible "Scripture is like a lion; who ever heard of defending a lion; it can defend itself." I'd say the same about Jesus; He is big enough to defend Himself; our task is to let Jesus loose in the community by telling the stories and letting people encounter Jesus for themselves.

It is the season for sneezes and coughs! Someone suggested that we can "sneeze the gospel", passing it on to other people. "If it is a particularly compelling idea, we pass it on to other people. In some way that is exactly the way we all got caught up into the gospel…" (Alan Hirsch *The Forgotten Ways* p.210) Jesus is the most compelling "idea" on the planet. He is the Light of the world; He brings forgiveness and freedom; He brings hope and peace; He brings life in all its fullness – gifts that our world needs in 2011! Do we find Jesus compelling? Attractive? Great? Life-enhancing? Is it time to share what we find compelling about Jesus with someone else? John found Jesus compelling! He knew how great Jesus would be; he knew that Jesus would be the saviour of the world and

that John was there to prepare the way and be the messenger. Hearts were prepared; minds opened by Johns' messenger ministry of preaching and baptising, so that when Jesus came people believed. The Church is a messenger in our world; we are a messenger in our community; Light of world has come! Let hearts and minds be opened by our messenger ministry. Silence is not an option.