

THE KING IS HERE
MARK 1:1-13

“Hostile to the Church, friendly to Jesus.” These are the opening words of a classic book on Christian faith, written more than 50 years ago; they are the first words of the preface to *Basic Christianity* written by John Stott. He goes on to describe how people were becoming disillusioned with organised religion and Churches as institutions were beginning to struggle for membership. 50 years later, the situation of the Church is no better. Yet, the person of Jesus continues to be hugely attractive; people look at Jesus and are drawn to Him; people listen to His teaching and find it immensely insightful and challenging, life-enhancing and life-shaping; people look at the character of Jesus and see a man whom they admire and in whom they would gladly believe and put their trust; people see the works that He did to heal and help people in need and find in Him an inspirational figure.

Where do you start to sum up Jesus? We are looking at the whole Bible story in eight weeks and it is entirely right to spend two of these eight weeks on Jesus Himself. Today we look at Jesus, who He was, His life and teaching; next week, we look at His death and resurrection and that is particularly appropriate as we celebrate communion together. The story began with creation and all that God made was good; we are uniquely made bearing His image; sin came in to the world and since then we have lived in a world full of tension between good and bad; we saw that in the stories of Genesis; we saw that in the stories of the Kings, the best of times in Israel and the worst of times; last week, we saw God send the prophets to call people back to their love and devotion because they had drifted away and some listened and rediscovered faith, but most simply ignored God; they put Him out of the picture. But God will not stay out of the picture and all the way through the Old Testament, some would say from Genesis 3 itself, God had promised a Saviour, a Messiah, who would come to rescue His people all over again.

There are all kinds of ways in which we could summarise Jesus: we could focus on Jesus the teacher and profitably spend time reflecting on the nature of Jesus' teaching and the value of what He says about values and priorities in life and how that impacts on our attitudes to wealth, to ourselves, to other people, and that would be time well-spent. We could focus on Jesus the healer and tells some of the stories of Jesus healing people who were sick, the blind could see, the lame could walk etc and that would also be time well-spent because we'd see His love and compassion for needy people, we'd see His power at work in the world. We could focus on the debate that has gone on in the Church ever since the days of His ministry, the debate about how we understand Jesus, the man and the Son of God and that would be time well-spent. We're going to do none of these, but the end result of all of this should be that we hold Jesus in higher regard, that our faith in Him is stronger, that our love for Jesus is deeper.

Of the four gospels, the simplest of these is Mark. “Simple, succinct and unadorned” is one way of describing Mark's gospel. You have to look elsewhere for the stories of Jesus' birth that we read at Christmas; you have to look elsewhere for the huge chunks of teaching that Jesus gives. But what Mark does brilliantly is to give us the heart of the gospel, the heart of Jesus' coming and so we're going to look at the very first part of Mark's gospel and there are three big themes here for us; the end result should be same – to hold Jesus in higher regard, to strengthen faith, to love Him more deeply. Jesus stands at the centre of Christian faith; Jesus is the One who is our life and it matters so much that we see Jesus as clearly as we can.

Jesus is the climax of God's plans to bless world: God's plans to bless the world go right back to the beginning of the story: to Abram, God promises that He will bless the whole world through Abram and his family. Ever since Genesis 12, that plan and promise has gone through its ups-and-downs; there have been moments when the promise looked as if it would never come to pass; there were times when the people's faith was undaunted in the hope of a Messiah, a Saviour. Then, finally, that hope of a Saviour, that hope of the Messiah comes to pass. Mark quotes two prophets: "*I will...*" (1:2) That promise that refers to two things: first of all, to the coming of a voice who will prepare the way; secondly, to the coming of the King, the Lord, the One to whom that voice points. John the Baptist is the voice and Jesus is the King; the coming of Jesus is the climax and fulfilment of all of that promise. Someone once asked 'what is the most misleading page in the Bible?' Answer: the blank page between Old and New Testaments; Jesus is a new beginning, but at the same time Jesus is the completion of the process of promise that God began hundreds of years before. All that God has promised, to give hope and grace and peace and blessing to the world, is complete in Jesus.

Jesus is God's Son: the first event that Mark tells us of Jesus' life is His baptism. "*At that...*" (1:9f) Here is Jesus setting out on ministry; Jesus is committing Himself to serve God in the world; God is equipping Jesus for that ministry by the outpouring of the Spirit on Jesus. By being baptised, Jesus is identifying with us as sinners. At His baptism, we hear this great affirmation of Jesus from heaven: "*You are...*" (1:11) Here is one of the great declarations of Christian faith about Jesus, that He is the Son of God. Everything that we read in the New Testament comes together to emphasise the Sonship of Jesus: the Christmas stories tell us that Jesus is the Son of God; Hebrews chapter 1 takes us deeper and tells us that "*In these...*" (Heb 1:2,3) and that takes us further and further into some of the bigness of Jesus. The world admires Jesus the man; other religions even admire Jesus the teacher, but the whole picture of Jesus is here, that He is the Son of God made human for us. C.S. Lewis in one of his Narnia books has one of the characters say this: "in our world too a stable once had something inside it that was bigger than our whole world." (*The Last Battle* p.128) Until we grasp something of that, then we won't have a sense of the whole picture of Jesus.

Jesus shares our life in this good/bad world: it is extraordinary to see what happens next: "*At once...*" (1:12f) Going from the great high experience that was His baptism with that divine affirmation of Jesus as the Son of God, He goes into the wilderness. Jesus spent 40 days in the wilderness, the place where He was tempted and tested by the devil. The other gospels tell us the substance of that testing time. Here is Jesus putting Himself in the way of our human experience. He agonised and suffered in the desert; He put Himself through these experiences because He was fully one of us. Again the whole tenor of the gospels is of Jesus being at one with us in our humanity. He was hungry, tired, thirsty, sad, happy; He rejoiced, He mourned, He loved, He became angry – every human emotion is there in Jesus and unless He is playing some elaborate game with us, what we see is Jesus the man, the real human being. He doesn't spend His days in some cocooned version of reality, untouched by the real world, but He shares it and as we'll see next week, that would lead to His suffering and His death on the cross.

The Church has always found these two truths hard to put together. How could Jesus be fully God and fully human at the same time? Surely if He is one, He can't be the other? There has to be some mixture that somehow makes Him less of one or less of the other. The Bible has no such qualms: the Bible doesn't try to explain this great coming together, but simply affirms both side by side; Jesus is the Son of God; Jesus is one of us, a real human being. Somehow this is part of the glory of His coming,

that though he is declared to be the Son of God He doesn't come to world to live some ivory tower existence, but He does get His hands dirty, He does have dirty feet and by being amongst real people in a real suffering world, He is able to help, heal and save us from our sin and suffering.

This sermon is titled "The King is here!" Now the reason why: "*After John...*" (1:14f) 'Kingdom' is a theme of Jesus' preaching and teaching; many of His parables begin "The Kingdom of God is like..." and then go on to paint a picture from which we can take a powerful lesson; the whole of the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew chapters 5-7 is about what life should be like when God is king. Jesus teaches with authority and people listen to Him. The Kingdom of God is not to be found on any map; it is not piece of territory like the UK; the kingdom of God is in the hearts and minds of people who listen to, love and obey Jesus. This is the way in which Jesus is King; Jesus came to win over the hearts and the minds of the people so that they could learn to love God all over again. In this good world/bad world in which we live, the battle is for hearts and minds, for hearts and minds to love God. Towards the end of the Old Testament and the times of the Kings, that battle was lost; the prophets tried to win it back, but often to no avail. God sent His Son; people will listen to Him! They crucified Him!

The crucial faith question is this: what is our attitude to Jesus? It is a question crucial for all of us; you might say 'I've been a Christians for many years and so I've answered that question', but there are all sorts of levels at which this question is crucial. We can admire Jesus from a distance, as so many people do today; see the quote at the start where we see people "friendly to Jesus" but that is all it is; it is arm's length admiration that never translates into faith. We can trust Jesus to be our Saviour and take from Him all that He has to offer and life will be truly blessed by Him for your faith; some have gone through a very definite conversion experience and can tell you the time and the date when they believed; for others, faith has been a growing process, developing over long period of years and somewhere along the way they have come to the point where they can say "I know whom I have believed!" We can obey Jesus as King of our lives and put into practice the values and principles Jesus teaches. This third doesn't come automatically as part of faith; it bothers me sometimes how poorly even mature Christians process the values and principles Jesus teaches; things they will say give away fact that they don't understand Jesus values and priorities; He is not yet King of their lives, but something else rules their hearts and minds; or churches will do things that show they've never understood Him. Our best attitude to Jesus – to trust Him as saviour and honour Him as King.

God promised a Messiah who would come to save; He kept that promise when Jesus came. He was even better than the expectations: the Messiah is also the Son, God Himself made a real person, God come into our real world. This is the climax of God's plans to bless the world; He Himself came into the world; He came to share our good world/bad world. Hold Jesus in higher regard today by this; strengthen your faith in Him; let your love and devotion be deeper. The King is here – stand in awe of Him, love Him with all your heart, trust Him totally, honour and obey Him with all your being.