

HEARERS OF THE WORD

Isaiah 40:1-5, 9-11; Psalm 85 (84); 2 Peter 3:8-14; Mark 1:1-8

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

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

2 As 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 baptiser 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 baptised 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 baptised you with water; but he will baptise you with the Holy Spirit.”

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

All beginnings are important and this is true in a special way for the four Gospels, all of which begin in their own particular way. Matthew opens with the genealogy of Jesus, reflecting his interest in the (dis)continuity with Judaism. Luke writes as a historian and offers us the principles and motives behind his research. John makes the most remarkable opening, which echoes the very first words of the Bible (and may be a resumption in a different mode of the start of Mark). In this gospel, the opening sentence functions as a *title*, an *introduction* and a *plan* of the Gospel (which divides into two parts—1-8 exploring *messiah* and 9-16 exploring *Son of God*).

It is also the case that each of the Gospels makes a special effort to locate John the Baptist and his ministry as *preparatory* for the coming of Jesus. The

fact that



throughout the first century you had followers of John the Baptist gave rise to notable anxiety in the Christian movement. It was always possible for the continuing Baptist movement to declare its superiority over Christianity because (a) John had been Jesus’ mentor and (b) John had baptised Jesus. In a word, the “one who has” gives to the “one who has not”! For these reasons, the gospels writers take some trouble to make sure the reader spots the relative inferiority of John the Baptist in relation to Jesus the Messiah. For us today, this is a battle long past but nevertheless it does help explain features of the text as we have it.

KIND OF WRITING

It is an introduction, technically an *exordium*, the function of which is to get the reader’s attention and to invite the reader “in” by anticipating aspects of the story to come.

OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND

(i) Though not so obvious as John 1:1, Mark 1:1 may echo the very start of the Bible as such in Genesis 1:1.

(ii) “Good News” as an expression does occur in the Greek Old Testament but nearly always as *verb* (1 Samuel 31:9; 2 Samuel 1:20; 4:10; 18:19-20, 26, 31; 1 Kings 1:42; 1 Chronicles 10:9; Psalm 39:10; 67:12; 95:2; Wisdom 11:1; Joel

Thought for the day

As Christmas approaches, we could ask ourselves: how can we prepare to celebrate the birthday of our Saviour? The proclamation of John the Baptist points to the preparation that really counts: conversion of heart and life. The deeper meaning of *metanoia* is a change of vision, a radically new outlook, in the light of the Gospel. God is our compassionate father, our Abba, who desires nothing less than our hearts, our whole selves. We are accepted and loved by him, while we are still sinners (Romans 5:8). Receiving his forgiving love means a revolution in values, beliefs and direction in life.

Prayer

Loving God, as we your children prepare to celebrate the birth of Jesus our Saviour, help us to prepare our hearts too. May the coming birth of the Son of David encourage us to true repentance and genuine conversion of heart. Through the same Christ our Lord. Amen.

3:5; Nahum 2:1; Isaiah 40:9; 52:7; 60:6; 61:1; Jeremiah 20:15; the *noun* occurs only in 2 Samuel 4:10, in a disturbing context). Isaiah makes the links between “good news” and the kingdom in this verse:

How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger who announces peace, who brings *good news*, who announces *salvation*, who says to Zion, “Your God *reigns*.” (Isaiah 52:7)

(iii) “Messiah” means anointed (e.g. kings, priests and prophets). There is no clear occurrence of “messiah” meaning a future agent of salvation. For that, we need to turn to the Jewish writings outside the Old Testament, for example the *Dead Sea Scrolls*, the *Psalms of Solomon* or the *Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs*. The New Testament presumes that many people were looking for a deliverer, a messiah.

(iv) Mark says his citation comes from Isaiah, but in reality he has combined

two sources, which are:

See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple. The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight—indeed, he is coming, says the LORD of hosts. (Malachi 3:1)

A voice cries out: “In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. (Isaiah 40:3)

The attentive reader will notice the shift from “me” to “you” in Mal and the change from “A voice cries out: ‘In the wilderness...’” to “A voice cries out in the wilderness: ‘Prepare a way...’”.

(v) It was expected that the end would be ushered in by the appearance of two figures, a prophet like Moses (Deut 18:15) and the return of Elijah (Malachi 4:5). Mark identifies John as “Elijah” by echoing another Old Testament text: “They answered him, ‘A hairy man, with a leather belt around his waist.’ He said, ‘It is Elijah the Tishbite.’” (2 Kings 1:8)

NEW TESTAMENT FOREGROUND

(i) This is preparatory to the baptism of Jesus by John. The baptism one of the surest facts in early Christianity because it uncomfortable for the writers and so they would not have made it up. Jesus was a follower of the Baptist, took baptism from him (Mk 1:9-11) and started his own proclamation when his mentor has been imprisoned and effectively silenced (Mark 1:14).

(ii) The first half of this Gospel is marked by attempts to grasp the identity of Jesus and comes to a first conclusion in the confession of Peter at Caesarea Philippi (Mk 8:27-30).

(iii) The proclamation of the gospel, the good news of the kingdom, is fundamental to the story being proclaimed (Mark 1:1, 14-15; 4:11, 26, 30; 9:1, 47; 10:14-15, 23-25, 29; 12:34; 13:10; 14:9, 25; 15:43; 16:15, 20). The opening proclamation says it all:

“Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.”” (Mark 1:14-15)

(iv) John is later beheaded (Mk 6:17-29) and in 11:27-30 Mark gives us Jesus’ own estimate of John.

ST PAUL

But how are they to call on one in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him? And how are they to proclaim him unless they are sent? As it is written, “How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!” (Romans 10:14-15)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Much of the comment is already present in the remarks above.

Verse 1 “Beginning” has three functions: the start of the book, the start of the ministry, the start of the coming of the kingdom.

Verses 2-3 Mark seems to be the first to come up with these citations to help recognised the role of John. The success of this innovation can be seen in John 1:22-23, where the Baptist himself cites Isaiah!

Verse 4 Thus John aligns himself with those unhappy with the Temple and its cult. Repentance is better rendered conversion and corresponds to the OT to turn or to return to God.

Verse 5 The popular response to John helps account for the need to kill him.

Verse 6 John is the expected Elijah.

Verse 7-8 The historical John may have contrasted water with wind / fire, which in the Gospels becomes the Holy Spirit.

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. John the Baptist is presented as a messenger to prepare the way for Jesus.

Who have been messengers to you, preparing the way for the Lord? To whom have you been such a messenger?

2. The voice cries in “the desert” or wilderness...a reminder to us that when we feel that we are in a desert place in our lives, we should not give up hope. It may be that God’s grace will come to us at any moment. Have you had an experience of God’s grace coming to you when you were in a desert place?

3. John calls the people to repentance (= a change of heart), as a way to a new life. Can you recall times when you had a change of heart, and the change led to new life for you?

4. John baptised people with water as a gesture to mark their change of heart. Sometimes we perform an action to symbolise our change of heart - write a letter, throw away our last cigarettes, etc. Can you remember a symbolic gesture with which you marked a change of heart?

5. John did not claim to be greater than he was and freely acknowledged the greater role that Jesus would play. When have you seen yourself, or others, act with that kind of humility, freely acknowledging the place of God and of others in what is happening? What difference does it make to you when you are comfortable with your own important, but limited, worth?

PRAYER

With tender comfort and transforming power you come into our midst, O God of mercy and might.

Make ready a way in the wilderness, clear a straight path in our hearts, and form us into a repentant people, that the advent of your Son may find us watchful and eager for the glory he reveals.

We ask this through him whose coming is certain, whose day draws near: your Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, God forever and ever. Amen.

Advent Readings				Themes	
Advent 1	Is 63:16-17; 64:1, 3-8	Ps 80 (79)	1 Cor 1:3-9	Mk 13:33-37	End of Time
Advent 2	Is 40:1-5, 9-11	Ps 85 (84)	2 Pet 3:8-14	Mk 1:1-8	John the Baptist
Advent 3	Is 61:1-2, 10-11	Magnificat	1 Thess 5:16-24	Jn 1:6-8, 19-28	John the Baptist
Advent 4	2 Samuel 7:1-5, 8-11, 16	Ps 89 (88)	Rom 16:25-27	Lk 1:26-38	Mary

One day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day

2 Pet 3:8 But do not ignore this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day. 9 The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance. 10 But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a loud noise, and the elements will be dissolved with fire, and the earth and everything that is done on it will be disclosed.

2 Pet 3:11 Since all these things are to be dissolved in this way, what sort of persons ought you to be in leading lives of holiness and godliness, 12 waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be set ablaze and dissolved, and the elements will melt with fire? 13 But, in accordance with his promise, we wait for new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home.

2 Pet 3:14 Therefore, beloved, while you are waiting for these things, strive to be found by him at peace, without spot or blemish; 15 *and regard the patience of our Lord as salvation.*

So also our beloved brother Paul wrote to you according to the wisdom given him, 16 speaking of this as he does in all his letters. There are some things in them hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other scriptures.

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

The reading fits in with the other readings for the second Sunday of Advent and it can be read in a straightforward way for its exhortation.

At the same time, it must be confessed that the apocalyptic imagery is something of a block today. A contextualised reading, however, should permit a richer interpretation.

KIND OF WRITING

2 Peter combines two kinds of writing, the letter and the testament. By the time it was written, the letter had become the standard format for Christian instruction. However, within that format we find also testamentary passages.

The question of its relationship to Jude is enlivened by the great number of par-

allels between these two documents. Because of its references, it looks as if it was written after the collection and circulation of Paul's letters (see v. 15), and after 1 Peter and Jude. Some scholars point to a date as late as 120-150 for the approximate time of writing.

As for the context, the opponents seem to be an extreme evolution / distortion of Paul's doctrine of grace. This has led to licentiousness (cf. 1 Corinthians 6:12; 10:23) on the moral level and a complete abandonment of eschatology on the spiritual level. The tension between the "already" and the "not yet" has been decided comprehensively in favour of the former. Hence, the insistence in the passage selected in the lectionary.

1:1-2 Greeting
1:3-11 God's blessing
1:12-3:16 Testament
3:17-18a: Closing exhortation
3:18b Doxology

The testament itself:

1:12-15 A personal reflection
1:16-21 Insistence
2:1-22 Attacking false teachers
3:1-16 *The Second Coming*

It would be good to read all of ch. 3.

ORIGIN OF THE READING

The context of writing cannot be separated from the question of authorship. Almost unanimously, critical scholars regard 2 Peter as one of the very latest Christian documents, written in the *name* of Peter but not actually by the apostle. Dating: AD 120-200.

RELATED READINGS

For a thousand years in your sight are like yesterday when it is past, or like a watch in the night. (Psalms 90:4)

Have I any pleasure in the death of the wicked, says the Lord GOD, and not rather that they should turn from their ways and live? (Ezekiel 18:23)

Then the LORD said, "You are concerned about the bush, for which you did not labour and which you did not grow; it came into being in a night and perished in a night. And should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a

hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also many animals?" (Jonah 4:10-11)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 8 This is the very thing which the false teachers ignore. They ignore God's word (see vv. 5-7), God's time (v. 8) and the patience of God (vv. 9 and 15).

Verse 9 Many passages of scripture are alluded to (see above).

Verse 10 Cf. Matthew 24:43; Luke 19:36; 1 Thessalonians 5:2, 4; Revelation 3:3; 16:15.

Verses 11-12 The language reflects the outlook of apocalyptic and at the same time the early Pauline metaphor of a new creation (2 Corinthians 5:17; Galatians 6:15).

Verse 13 Believers are to match God's patience with their own. Good moral living will bring forward the end.

Verse 14 It is not that the day will *never* come; rather in the meantime how should we live? Spot or blemish: cf. Ephesians 1:4; Colossians 1:22; 1 Thessalonians 3:13. To be "found" is positive in the New Testament. For the suddenness of salvation cf. Matthew 23:43-44; 1 Thessalonians 5:12; Revelation 3:3.

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. As Christians even today we live between the "already" and the "not yet," sure of God's presence and yet hoping and yearning for its fulfilment. Can you identify with this in your own life?

2. Words like holiness and godliness seem to come from another time and yet conversion is never "done." How do I see my faith evolving over the next few years?

3. It is possible to be money rich and time poor, in the contemporary idiom. What is your experience of the quality and use of time in your life? Can we regard time as a gift of the Lord's patience, as he waits for us to continue on the path of true discipleship?

PRAYER

Timeless God, we come to you through your gift of time, fleeting and yet real and grace-filled. Help us to use the time we have well and to recognise the times of your coming to us. We make our prayer through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Get you up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good tidings

Isa 40:1 Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. 2 Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid, that she has received from the LORD's hand double for all her sins.

Isa 40:3 A voice cries out: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. 4 Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. 5 Then the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken."

Isa 40:9 Get you up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good tidings; lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings, lift it up, do not fear; say to the cities of Judah, "Here is your God!" 10 See, the Lord GOD comes with might, and his arm rules for him; his reward is with him, and his recompense before him.

11 He will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep.

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

To use a modern cliché, this is the iconic reading for Advent. It is, of course, a wonderful reading, full of hope and vision, as familiar to us from the opening of Handel's Messiah, as from the Bible itself. V. 3 is used in Mark's gospel to introduce and "locate" John the Baptist.

KIND OF WRITING

This passage is a very fine example of biblical poetry. Almost every two lines illustrate poetic parallelism. You might notice that the second line is not simply a repetition in other words but actually brings forward the thought. Robert Alter speaks of the "uneasy synonymity" of biblical poetry. For example:

...that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins.

Three systems of metaphors are intertwined: forensic (sin and punishment, reward and recompense), construction

(roads and highways, hills and mountains), pastoral (shepherding). The language of shepherding echoes at the end words of compassion and tenderness at the start.

ORIGIN OF THE READING

As noted regularly, the book of Isaiah seems to have been produced in three distinct phases. Our reading today opens the section (chs. 40-55) proclaimed and written down during the Babylonian Exile (587-539 BC). That exile was experienced and remembered as the greatest calamity to fall upon the people of Israel.

The tragedy triggered an intense questioning and eventually a massive renewal of faith at all levels. So much is this the case that it is often said they went out *Israelites* and came back *Jews*. This is not only because only one of the twelve tribes seems to have survived—the Judeans / the Jews—but because in Exile they took up the distinctive marks of Judaism as we know it up to today. These include synagogue, the dietary laws, Sabbath observance, and, perhaps, moving circumcision from puberty to birth.

RELATED READINGS

Shepherding language is found widely, starting with the call of David (1 Sam 16:6-13) and, famously, in Psalm 23, *The Lord is my shepherd*. Ezekiel 34 is especially intense, as a few verses will illustrate.

I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will make them lie down, says the Lord GOD. I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, but the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them with justice. (Ezekiel 34:15-16)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 1 "My people" and "your God" are measures of intimacy.

Verse 2 Behind lies the idea that the Exile was a kind of punishment or at least had to be treated as an opportunity for purification.

Verse 3 Whose voice? The herald who will bring the news to Zion. Notice it is

not a highway *to* our God but *for* our God. This implies God was with them all long in exile.

Verse 4 The topography (used in metaphor) does really reflect the return from Babylon but echoes the Exodus. I.e. the return is seen as a new Exodus.

Verse 5 God's glory is God's saving presence.

Verse 9 The herald is to speak from places significant in Jewish memory: Zion and Jerusalem.

Verse 10 God's arm symbolises God's power—but exercised like a shepherd.

Verse 11 A great biblical theme—God as shepherd of his people—is used again to give new hope to those in Exile. It is a detailed, very tender description.

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. Can I remember difficult experiences in my life, which in retrospect turned out to be moments of grace? What about my life and challenges at present?

2. In the life of prayer, it often seems God is absent, especially in difficult times. How do I become aware of this hidden presence of God?

3. Often there are "things" in my life which make it difficult for me to open my whole self to God. What are my mountains and valleys? How do I make a straight highway for my God.

4. A great and constant message in the bible is encapsulated in two phrases: "do not fear" and "here is your God". We all need that deep reassurance.

5. We are carried through life by others, their love and concern, and by God who comes to those "who know their need of God", the poor in spirit. Acknowledgement of the times God has borne me through shadows and dark valleys.

PRAYER

God of love, speak to us your word of comfort that we may encouraged to lift our voices and acknowledge, "here is our God."

As you have cared for us like a shepherd, may we too care for all among whom we minister, that your Gospel may not only be heard in words but also seen in deeds.

We make our prayer through Christ our Lord. Amen.

THE LITURGY

Isaiah 40:1-5, 9-11; Psalm 85 (84); 2 Peter 3:8-14; Mark 1:1-8

READINGS 1 AND 3

The citation in Mark 1:2-3, attributed to Isaiah alone, actually comes from two passages: Malachi 3:1 and Isaiah 40:3.

The link is to an expectation that a prophet like Elijah would introduce the Messiah to Israel.

THE RESPONSORIAL PSALM

Psalm 85 (84) is a prayer for the restoration of Israel and it mirrors closely the sentiments of the first reading. The lectionary doesn't use the whole psalm, but the chosen opening lines do express something very similar to Isaiah 40.

SUNDAY INTRODUCTIONS

First reading

Isaiah 40:1-5, 9-11

This really beautiful reading was written at a time of tremendous pressure and disillusionment, the time of the great exile in Babylon. In the midst of disaster, a very resourceful prophet challenges them to think thoughts of hope. The images are especially powerful.

Second reading

2 Peter 3:8-14

The original hearers were bothered that the world had not yet ended. Even though that's a very different context to ours, this can still speak to us, because the short reading faces a simple question: how can we live so that we don't sleepwalk through life?

Gospel

Mark 1:1-8

If you ever tried to write a story, you will know that the beginning matters hugely. The same is true of Gospels and today Mark opens the story of Jesus simply but deeply.

WEEKDAY INTRODUCTIONS

Monday 7 December

St Ambrose, bishop and doctor.

Isaiah 35:1-10

Transformation is the message today, first in images (the desert in bloom), then

in physical cures (the blind shall see etc.) and finally in the human heart (everlasting joy on their faces).

Luke 5:17-26

The effort of the friend is very impressive in this story...and their efforts meet with a double response, healing and forgiveness. On a spiritual level, we can be "paralysed" too and in need of a word of mercy.

Tuesday 8 December

The Immaculate Conception of the BVM

Genesis 3:9-15, 20

The early stories in Genesis explore common human experiences, including sin, shame and the "outsourcing" of blame! All very human, of course. The serpent symbolises something more sinister—the power of sin, against which we need the grace of God.

Ephesians 1:3-6, 11-12

The great hymn from Ephesians explores God's grace in Christ, thus inviting us to engagement gratitude.

Luke 1:26-38

Mary's yes is in contrast to the "no" of Adam and Eve...and all the rest of us of course! It is great to hear again that "nothing is impossible for God."

Wednesday 9 December

Saint Juan Diego Cuauhtlatotzin

Isaiah 40:25-31

Our reading today is really a meditation on God and in particular on the "beyond-ness" of God (his transcendence). The fact that God is so other in this reflection is a source of hope and renewed energy.

Matthew 11:28-30

"Yoke" was a term used by the rabbis to refer to the guidance of Torah, by which we plough straight furrows in life. Jesus himself is now our Law and his guidance is light.

Thursday 10 December

Our Lady of Loreto

Isaiah 41:13-20

The opening line of this poem give the key to the rest: Do not be afraid. The

reading goes on to explore such deep trust using several metaphors: harvesting, drought and barrenness.

Matthew 11:11-15

So, who really was John the Baptist? In Jesus' estimation, John was the greatest of the old dispensation. In orthodox tradition he is called the forerunner, the *prodromos*. Yet even he falls into the second rank compared with the least in the kingdom of heaven!

Friday 11 December

St Damasus, bishop of Rome

Isaiah 48:17-19

There is a great promise in this reading, but also one big "if": if only you had been alert to my commandments. Isaiah can tell us the rest!

Matthew 11:16-19

There's no pleasing some people seems to be the message of this passage.

Brief technical note

The very last line, puzzling to us, calls for special comment. The passage comes from the Q community, who produced the *Sayings Source* (Q), behind Matthew and Luke. In the view of that community, John, Jesus and their members were all children of transcendent wisdom. Originally, the last verse read: *But Wisdom was vindicated by her children.* (Q 7:35 = Luke 7:35.) For Matthew, Jesus himself is our Wisdom and so he alters the text and continues his portrait to Jesus as wisdom in Matthew 11:25-30.

Saturday 16 December

Our Lady of Guadalupe

Ecclesiasticus 48:1-4, 9-12

Elijah remained a figure of fascination long after his death, as we hear in this reflection. An Elijah-type figure was expected to usher in the Messiah. The blessedness of this is caught in the very unusual beatitude which closes the reading.

Matthew 17:10-13

As noted above, the expected Elijah-type figure was based on Mal 3:1. By identifying John as Elijah, Jesus affirms the significance of the present moment and his own ministry.