

Weybridge Methodist Church **January 25th 2015**

Adrian Plass tells a story about a dream he had in which he was painting a neighbour's fence. He decided that he would be economical with the paint, and so he was adding paint thinner to make it go further. He finished the fence, but wasn't entirely pleased. The fence didn't look right, you could see the wood showing through, in places, and Adrian had this nagging feeling that by adding paint thinner he had, in fact, cheated his neighbour somehow. He really didn't know what to do, but then decided he would do it all again properly after he had a vision of a man who told him, "repaint, repaint and thin no more"!

Even though I think that sermons on sin, hell and repentance are few and far between, we're not going to be focussing on that this morning. We are going to consider it, briefly, because it is part of the Gospel. But I felt that, today, I wanted us to look for a few moments at the message that Jesus proclaimed in Mark 1:15.

Jesus' baptism was the start of his public ministry. After this came his temptation in the wilderness. But according to Mark, and to Matthew too, these were Jesus' first recorded words at the start of his ministry. Like John the Baptist, Jesus started his ministry by preaching, and in Mark 1:15 we have his first sermon, or message; the time has come, the kingdom of God is at hand, repent and believe the Good News.

The time has come

Although it may not have seemed like it from later events, the Jews, at the time of Jesus' birth, were waiting for their Messiah. His arrival had been forecast by a number of the prophets. Isaiah had spoken of a man who would be the servant of the Lord, Jeremiah had spoken of a time when God would make a NEW covenant with his people, a time when they would know God intimately, when God would put his law IN them, and forgive all their sins. Ezekiel had spoken of a time when God would put his Spirit in his people. You may also remember that when the Magi asked Herod where the king of the Jews was to be born, Herod called the Jewish priests who were able to quote the verse from Isaiah which told him the answer. The Jews were expecting their Messiah to be a warrior king, someone who would lead them into battle against their enemies.

The kingdom of God is at hand.

We live in the United Kingdom, but don't really tend to talk about kingdoms much these days. If we do, we probably think of it as being like a country, with defined borders, laws and so on. But that's not how it was then. In his commentary on Mark, David Pawson tells of a time when he lived in Arabia for 3 years. He says that on a map of Arabia, boundaries are marked with dotted lines, but that when you're there, obviously you can't see them; the land all looks the same. It's impossible to tell where one kingdom, or sheikdom as they are called, finished and another one started. But each area of land was under the rule of a sheik and if you were under the power of a Sheik, you were in his kingdom. If a Sheik could reach you and force you to do something, you were in his kingdom. So a kingdom then was not like it is today; it was not about land, but about the reach of power. Daniel had once prophesied that the Son of Man would rule over an everlasting kingdom, and God had also promised King David that his kingdom would last forever. The Jews were waiting for the Messiah to come and that when he did, he would bring in, or introduce, the kingdom of God. When God's anointed One came, then the rule of God would begin. Jesus says here that the time they had been waiting for was here, it was now, and the kingdom of God was here also. Jesus taught about the Kingdom of God throughout his ministry; it was something which was small, and would be almost unnoticeable, just as small as a mustard seed or tiny amount of yeast, but that it would grow. Jesus once told the Pharisees that if he cast out demons by the power of God, then it showed that the kingdom of God had come and was among them. Jesus showed God's power – what his kingdom was like – by healing people, forgiving their sins, caring for them, even raising people from the dead.

Though no one recognised it at the time, Jesus was God come to earth; God was now among them. So wherever a life was touched by the power of God that is where the kingdom of God

was. And this is true for us too. Abraham had been called by God to leave everything behind and move to another country; Moses had led the people of Israel out of Egypt and into a Promised Land. But now it's not necessary to move house, move country or move church in order to be in God's kingdom. All of us are, or can be, in the kingdom of God, under the power of God right now, right this minute. If we have asked God into our lives, acknowledge that he is king and that he rules, not us, if we take Jesus at his word and allow his power to work in us and change us, then we are in the kingdom of God. It's true that when Jesus called his 12 disciples, some of them had to give up their jobs and leave their families behind; our Gospel reading tells us of how two brothers were fishing with their father, Zebedee. It may well have been a family business that Zebedee wanted to pass on to these sons; yet when Jesus called, they left it behind to follow him. God is calling each of us to serve him, too, and I can't promise that this won't involve making sacrifices or leaving things behind. But although we might move house, or country, to do what God wants us to do and go where he is leading, we don't have to move house in order to find God, acknowledge him as king and live in his kingdom. That is possible for us here and now. The kingdom of God is, or can be, in Weybridge, England, India, in schools, in prisons, hospitals, offices or wherever there are Christians bringing God's light and love.

Repent.

Jesus' next word for them was one of repentance. This is the bad news. We are all used to hearing people say that the Gospel is Good News; it is. But there is bad news too, and we need to understand and accept the bad before we can understand and embrace the Good. The bad news is that we are sinners – we have broken God's laws and disobeyed him. We tend to grade our sins in terms of wickedness or if they have hurt or killed another person; we don't put lying, for example, on a par with murder. The bad news is that God doesn't. There are no big and little sins with God; sin is sin.

The bad news is that sin cuts us off from God's presence. Adam and Eve were told they would die if they ate the fruit from a certain tree. They did die that day – spiritually. The perfect relationship that they had had with God was broken and they were turned out of the Garden of Eden. From that day on, people had to offer sacrifices if they wanted to approach God and be forgiven for their sins. And if WE want to be with God forever, in heaven, we need to be reconciled to him and receive his forgiveness.

The bad news is that we can't have our Frank Sinatra moment and do it our way. We can't negotiate with God and offer good deeds in exchange for forgiveness. God is the one who has been sinned against, and it is for him to say if, or how, we can be forgiven. We can't earn God's love and forgiveness.

The bad news, basically, is that mankind is going to hell because of our rebellion against God and there is nothing we can do about it.

Believe the Good News

EXCEPT, we can believe in Jesus. We can take him at his word when he said that he came to bring forgiveness and eternal life, and put our faith in him.

Because the Good news is that we have a loving, merciful and gracious heavenly Father, who saw the mess we were in, knew that we would never be able to do anything about it and chose to do something to get us out of the fine mess we had got ourselves into.

The Good News is that Jesus died for sinners, and does not expect us to be good enough to earn his love or forgiveness.

The Good News is that if we are willing to admit that we have sinned and cannot save ourselves from the effects of sin; if we are willing to repent and turn from a life lived without God, then not only will God forgive us, but he forgets our sins, he regards us as if we had never sinned at all, makes us clean and gives us a fresh start.

The Good News is that we can have eternal life, be children of God now, and be with him for eternity in heaven.

Jesus didn't spell this Good News out in detail at the start of his ministry. People would come to understand it later; some of it after the cross and resurrection. But Jesus came to show us what life in God's kingdom would look like. Not a kingdom which was about material blessings

and benefits, as the Jews thought, but a kingdom in which we have every spiritual blessing in Christ. A kingdom which can never be shaken or overthrown. And once we are in the kingdom we can have the amazing privilege of serving our Creator and Saviour and furthering his kingdom by introducing other people to the king, and by showing the kingdom values of truth, love, justice, mercy and forgiveness to the world.

Jesus still tells us that the time to believe is now, that the kingdom of God is among us and available to us. He calls us to repent, to believe the Good News and to BE that Good News for others. How will we respond to his call?

Amen.

Gill Taggart