

# **PROLOGUE : INTRODUCING JESUS**

**Mark 1:1-13**

## Introductory Comment

In this brief introduction Mark sets the stage carefully. After the opening sentence, which heads the whole gospel and focuses the attention of the reader immediately on Jesus, there are three portraits, each of which creates a perspective that is central to Mark's view of him. Together they prepare the reader for a proper reading of the gospel.

The opening portrait focuses on John the Baptist (1:2-8). Mark places Jesus in the context of the religious experience of Judaism. The Jerusalem Assembly (see Acts 15) acknowledged officially that Christianity was not a branch of Judaism. It was not, therefore, necessary to be a Jew or to follow the Jewish Law to be a disciple of Jesus. One of Paul's central tasks — and Mark would have known this from working with Paul — was to convince the non-Jews to whom he was speaking that Jesus could have meaning for their lives, their history and their culture. A conversion was needed in their lives, certainly, but they did not have to cease being Greeks or Romans and become Jews.

At the same time, the fact is that Jesus was a Jew. He was part of the history of the Jewish people. His early followers were Jews, and it was particularly by reflection on their own sacred literature that they found the words which best expressed their experience and understanding of him. Mark establishes this point in the opening portrait, creating thereby a perspective on Jesus that we are meant to carry with us as we read the whole of the gospel.

The second portrait is of Jesus (1:9-11). Mark concentrates on the intimacy of his religious experience. As we watch Jesus, Mark wants us to see the action of God's Spirit at work in him. As we listen to Jesus' words, Mark wants us to know that we are hearing the word of God.

While Jesus is God's son, he also shares fully in our human condition. Like us, he was born of woman. Like us, he suffered and was tempted. The wonder of his life was that, unlike us, he did not sin, but remained perfectly open and responsive to the Spirit of God. This is established for us in the third and final portrait of the introduction (1:12-13). It, too, sets a perspective within which the whole of the gospel is to be read.

## The Gospel heading

Mark's opening sentence functions as a title for his gospel and a summary of his main purpose in writing. John's gospel has a similar purpose:

that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah [Christ], the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.

– John 20:31

The opening words, 'the beginning' recall the first words of the Bible:

In *the beginning* when God created the heavens and the earth.

– Genesis 1:1

Mark is preparing his readers for something which is a new beginning, a new creation. In calling it 'good news' (gospel), Mark is throwing down the gauntlet to those who were taken in by Roman propaganda in which the word 'gospel' stood for the benefits that came to people when they submitted to the rule of the divine Emperor. No, says Mark. To experience true peace we must look to and listen to Jesus.

Immediately, Mark attributes to Jesus two titles: 'Christ' (Messiah) and 'Son of God'. The gospel itself will gradually reveal the meaning of these titles as applied to Jesus.

The next time we meet the title 'Christ' is at the end of the first half of the gospel (Book One), when Peter declares his faith in Jesus as the Christ (8:29). He can make this declaration because of everything that Jesus has said and done in Galilee up to that point. To understand what Peter means, we have to do what Peter did: we have to watch Jesus and listen to him, as he preaches and lives the good news.

Even then, it will become clear that calling Jesus the Messiah is, for Peter, an act of faith, trust and love. He still has to learn its real meaning. Mark devotes the second half of his gospel (Book Two) to bringing the reader to a proper understanding of how Jesus is the Messiah. He does this by penetrating to the heart of Jesus' religious experience, in order to portray the mysterious depths of his communion with God, and the nature of the mission given him by God.

## The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ

[ Jesus Messiah]

## the Son of God.

The title 'Son of God' in the opening sentence is intended by Mark to make the first title 'Christ' more precise. Jesus is the Messiah precisely by being the Son of God. Mark establishes this from his very first portrait of Jesus (the Baptism). In the first half of the gospel, 'Son of God' is used, mysteriously, only by demons (3:11; 5:7), thus indicating something that transcends human understanding.

Only at the end of Book Two, when 'Son of God' has been explained in terms of Jesus being a suffering 'Son of Man', is a human being, the Roman centurion, ready to acknowledge Jesus as God's Son (15:39). It will become clear that both 'Messiah' and 'Son of God' are to be understood in the light of Mark's understanding of Jesus as the 'Son of Man'.

Here, at the beginning of our commentary, we can bring together only some introductory ideas that will need to be made more precise as we watch Jesus and listen to him. For our task is not to fit Jesus into preexisting concepts, but to see how these concepts were fulfilled, expanded and transcended by the wonderful person who is the subject of Mark's work.

We begin with the title 'Christ'. Chrism, an oil used for anointing, was the base of various perfumes, including myrrh and nard. Associated especially with festive celebration, it had a special cultic use in the consecration of the king. It was believed that the Spirit of God anointed the king as the chrism flowed down his head and beard. As everything around the king was affected by the perfume spreading out from him, so was he to radiate the glory of God throughout God's Holy Land. He was known as a 'Christ', an anointed one. We read of king David:

The Lord said, 'Rise and anoint him; for this is the one.' Then Samuel took the horn of oil, and anointed him in the presence of his brothers; and the spirit of the Lord came mightily upon David from that day forward.

– 1Samuel 16:12-13

Chrism came to be associated also with the consecration of a priest (Exodus 29:7), and perhaps also of a prophet (Isaiah 61:1; Psalm 105:15). In different ways these, too, were responsible for making the presence of the Spirit of God effectively present in people's lives.

The kings, priests and prophets, however, carried out their divine commission imperfectly. This gave rise to hopes that one day the Spirit would come down and anoint the perfect Christ, who would finally bring about the fulfilment of God's promises (Ezekiel 34:23). Through the Messiah, it was believed, God's reign would finally be achieved. From the beginning of his gospel, Mark is presenting Jesus as the one in whom this ultimate hope has indeed been fulfilled.

How Jesus fulfils the hopes of Israel, indeed the hopes of mankind, is the subject of Mark's 'good news'. Jesus is the Messiah, however, in a totally unexpected way. For this reason we will not find Jesus referring to himself as the Christ.

The title 'Son of God' in the singular occurs only three times in the Old Testament and each time it refers to the king (2Samuel 7:14; Psalm 2:7; Psalm 89:27-28). The language seems to be borrowed from the Egyptian court, but it is made clear that the king is son only by adoption and only from the day of his consecration. It is probable that 'Son of God' was a title used of the Messiah at the time of Jesus. This is the most obvious meaning of the title here in Mark's opening verse, and, in this sense, we find a parallel in Matthew's opening verse where Jesus is introduced as 'the Messiah, the son of David'(1:1).

The title 'Son of God' could be applied, in this sense, to the risen and exalted Christ, ruling as lord from God's 'throne' in heaven. It took on a deeper significance for the disciples of Jesus as they continued their reflections on the special relationship that existed between Jesus and God.

For the moment let us read it as a claim that Jesus is the royal Messiah, the inheritor of the promises made to David, the focus being on the special relationship which he has with God. One of the aims of Mark's gospel is to explore the nature of that relationship.

<sup>2</sup> **As it is written in the prophet Isaiah, ‘See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way; <sup>3</sup> the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: “Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight,”’**

<sup>4</sup> **John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.**

<sup>5</sup> **And people from the whole Judaeen countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.**

<sup>6</sup> **Now John was clothed with camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey.**

<sup>7</sup> **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.**

<sup>8</sup> **I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.’**

compare  
Matthew 3:1-6,11-12  
Luke 3:3-6,16

## **John heralds the promised Messiah**

Mark goes to sacred Scripture to establish the context within which he wishes to introduce John the Baptist. The main text (1:3) is from Isaiah, but firstly comes a quotation from the book of Malachi. The full text is as follows:

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

The messenger, as is clear from a later statement in Malachi (4:5), is the prophet Elijah. This allusion to Elijah is reinforced where Mark refers to John’s clothing (1:6) in words that remind the reader of Elijah (2Kings 1:8).

Elijah was the prophet who stood out boldly against those who would compromise the religion of Israel. He called all to repentance, demanding that they cease worshipping false Gods. This is powerfully narrated in 1Kings 18. John the Baptist has a similar message and he points the way to Jesus as the one who would make fidelity possible.

The blazing fire of Elijah’s inspired words is celebrated in Sirach 48:1. The Baptist’s words too were spoken with divine power and conviction. Even more significantly, as we shall see when commenting on the Transfiguration of Jesus (9:4), for a people who believed that physical death was the end of life, Elijah pointed the way towards a life of communion with God that transcends death.

According to the legends of 2Kings 2:1-18, Elijah had been taken alive to God in a fiery chariot. It was believed that, by a special providence, Elijah was not dead, but alive, and Malachi’s words witness to an expectation among the people that one day God would send Elijah back to usher in the Messianic age.

Mark wants his readers to see John the Baptist as the fulfilment of that hope, for he is the herald sent to proclaim the coming of Jesus, the Messiah, the one who would draw us into a communion with God that could not be broken by death.

The text from Malachi itself draws on a statement from the Book of Exodus:

I am going to send an angel in front of you, to guard you on the way and to bring you to the place that I have prepared.

Exodus 23:20

The main citation (1:3) is taken from Isaiah 40:3. It is from the opening passage of that part of the scroll of Isaiah that comes from an anonymous prophet of the final years of the Babylonian exile (550-539BC). The prophet of the exile, hearing of the victories of Cyrus of Persia over the Babylonian armies, and witnessing the liberation which the conquering king was effecting throughout the crumbling Empire, saw Cyrus as God's instrument in once again liberating his chosen people from slavery. The prophet is preparing the people to relive in their own time the exodus of their ancestors. This will mean a desert journey, but it will mean also a return to the Promised Land.

The language is reminiscent of the Exodus (Exodus 14-15), and recalls God's great act of liberation when, through Moses, he led the escaping slaves out of Egypt, and through the desert to the land of Canaan, the Promised Land (c.1250BC). Mark wants his readers to remember the Exodus, for he wants to present John the Baptist as the herald of Jesus, the new Moses and the ultimate liberator.

The word 'baptism' literally means being overwhelmed by or immersed in water. Naaman is cured of leprosy by being immersed seven times in the waters of the Jordan (2Kings 5:14). Judith immersed herself in purifying waters in preparation for the mission God had for her (Judith 12:7). Metaphorically it can be used for being overwhelmed in other ways as well. In the Greek version of Isaiah we read: 'anarchy baptises [overwhelms] me' (Isaiah 21:4).

John the Baptist challenged the people to go down into the river Jordan and to experience physically what it was like to be overwhelmed ('baptised'), and then to rise from the water to begin a new life. This recalls the creation account. It was from the chaos of the swirling waters that God brought forth the splendour of the heavens and of the earth. We think also of the journey of liberation through the waters of the Red Sea.

It was customary to baptise Gentile proselytes who converted to Judaism. John, however, is baptising Jews, asserting thereby that being a Jew is not enough. A complete purification is needed by all if they are to enjoy the new creation and the new redemption promised by God.

John is calling the people to 'repentance' (1:4), a word which means a change of mind and heart. Jesus' contemporaries were being summoned in every direction by those who promised them salvation. The Sadducees, of whom we will hear more later (12:18), were calling them to fidelity to the cult and to tradition. The Pharisees, of whom also more later (2:16), saw salvation as coming from fidelity to God's will as expressed in meticulous observance of the Law. The Essenes called for a withdrawal from the darkness of the world in preparation for the coming of the Messiah.

## Forgiveness of sins

The Baptist stood out against all these groups. He called for a new way of looking at life, a change of mind and heart, a new vision. We are reminded of the promise of God as expressed by the prophet Ezekiel:

I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh.

– Ezekiel 36:25-26

The call was in view of ‘forgiveness of sins’(1:4). The word ‘sin’ translates the Greek *hamartia*, which literally means ‘missing the mark’. The image is of an archer unable to hit the target. We want to love but find ourselves unable to love well; we want to be truthful but we act in such a way as to avoid the consequences of the truth; we want to share but are too insecure to let anything go.

Whether we are personally responsible for the sin we commit or not, the fact is that we are constantly ‘missing the mark’ and we will never learn to hit it without someone to show us how, and to stay with us while we learn. We will never enjoy what we are called to be unless our sins are ‘forgiven’ - a word that could be more literally translated ‘hurled away’. We need someone to come and unburden us.

John knew that his contemporaries were overwhelmed by all kinds of oppression. He knew that their only hope was to place their trust in God and to prepare, like their ancestors, for the journey on which God would lead them. What was needed for this journey of liberation was ‘the one who is coming’, the ‘powerful one’(1:7). He would overwhelm them, but not simply with water. He would immerse them in the Spirit with which he himself was anointed (1:8).

How often we find ourselves struggling to find direction in a ‘wilderness’. Tracks that we once followed now seem to go nowhere, or are swept away, and we find ourselves in a trackless waste. Loves that once sustained us have proved fickle and have gone. Worst of all, our own sins return to haunt us, and we are faced with our powerlessness to find direction and freedom. This happens to us personally. It happens to those we love and to communities that are significant to us.

Mark is inviting us to not lose hope but to realise that the desert can also be the place where a new life can be found and a new creation can begin. The prophet Hosea understood this when he spoke for God saying: ‘I will now allure her [his people, Israel], and bring her into the wilderness, and speak tenderly to her’(2:14). Confessing our sins, like the people of Judah, we too can prepare to encounter the one who is stronger than we are, and the power and gentleness of whose Spirit can speak tenderly to us, calling us to journey with him to a deeper meaning and a fuller freedom.

Jesus was intimately connected with the history and the hopes of his own people. Saint Paul says: 'In him [the Son of God, Jesus Christ] every one of God's promises is a 'Yes' (2Corinthians 1:20). If Jesus is the fulfilment of the promises made to Israel, he is also the fulfilment of the promises made to any and every people. This was Paul's belief and Mark shares it.

What, then, about the promises which God has made to us, personally and through the history of the people from whom we come? One thinks of the promise made us when God imagined us into life with those unique and unrepeatable qualities that are ours; the promises made whenever anyone has responded to God's inspiration by mediating God's love to us; the promises that are made to us as the gift of life opens up for us with every new day.

For all the pain he experienced during the terrible destruction of Jerusalem, the author of the Book of Lamentations could still write:

The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. 'The Lord is my portion,' says my soul, 'therefore I will hope in him.' The Lord is good to those who wait for him, to the soul that seeks him.

– Lamentations 3:22-25

The one to whom we look for forgiveness and healing, the one to whom we look to find direction when we have lost our way, is the one whom our souls recognise. We are made for God and Jesus attracts us because in his person he fills our senses with the perfume (the 'chrism') of God. We can share his life and his grace, and become, as Paul says, 'the aroma of Christ to God' (2Corinthians 2:15); but only when we have allowed Jesus to baptise us with his Spirit.

Are we ready for the change of mind and heart that this will require? Are we ready for the surprising nature of the good news that he will bring to our lives? Do we dare to believe that the news is, indeed, 'good'? Can we dare the desert journey, or will we continue to hunger for the times when self-reliance seemed to work so well? If we are not yet ready for such a journey, let us read on, for Jesus, presented here to us by Mark, may well so attract us that we will find ourselves captivated by him, and unable to resist the grace of companionship which he offers us, however high the cost.

**<sup>9</sup> In those days  
Jesus came from  
Nazareth of Galilee  
and was baptized  
by John in the  
Jordan.**

**<sup>10</sup> And just as he  
was coming up out  
of the water, he saw  
the heavens torn  
apart and the Spirit  
descending like a  
dove on him.**

**<sup>11</sup> And a voice came  
from heaven, 'You  
are my Son, the  
Beloved; with you  
I am well pleased.'**

### **Jesus is God's Son**

In our introduction to the gospels, we stressed the importance of reading the text as poetic drama. This, Mark's first portrait of Jesus, is a perfect example. The picture it gives us of Jesus is one which Mark wishes to remain before our eyes throughout the gospel. Thus we would expect it to be striking, as indeed it is.

The scene begins simply. John's baptism has just been described as a 'baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins'(1:4). From the beginning of his entry into public life we see Jesus mixing with sinners and choosing to identify with them. In seeking baptism, Jesus too must have been looking for a new heart and a new mind: a new vision of how he and his contemporaries might break free from sin. He himself — so those who knew him tell us — was sinless, but he certainly felt the weight of sin all around him, and, as we shall see, he closely identified with those who were its victims.

Jesus must have often experienced the burden of helplessness as he found himself confronted with the despondency, pain and distraction surrounding him and the emptiness of the religious forms that left people in their sin and in their misery. The intimacy of his own experience of God must have led him to believe that there had to be a better way. Hearing of John, he left his home town of Nazareth and joined the pilgrims who listened to John's preaching and accepted his baptism.

This baptism proved to be a turning point in Jesus' life. We know virtually nothing about him prior to this day. After it he became a preacher and a healer and an extraordinary witness to love as he gathered disciples around him and began a movement that was still growing at the time Mark wrote his gospel. To portray the significance of that day, Mark uses language drawn from some of the most powerful passages of the Old Testament.

Jesus' experience at his baptism marked the beginning of the new creation, and he who stepped out of the river was, as Saint Paul tells us, the new Adam (Romans 5:12-21; 1Corinthians 15:22,45). Mark demonstrates this truth by recalling, in a few brief phrases, the swirling chaos of the primeval waters, the Spirit of God hovering over the waters, and the creating word of God that broke the silence (Genesis 1:3).

compare  
Matthew 3:13-17  
Luke 3:21-22

Mark speaks of the heavens being torn apart — a word used for the dividing of the Red Sea (Exodus 14:21), and for the splitting of the rock as water gushed forth to quench the thirst of God's people during their desert wanderings (Isaiah 48:21). God is breaking through the heavens, and speaking the word that is to bring about the redemption of the world.

For a long time the Jews felt the lack of prophets to speak God's word to them as in times past (Daniel 3:28). Nowhere is this more poignantly expressed than in the cry of those who, spurred on by the promise of returning to the Promised Land from exile in Babylon, had given up everything, only to find themselves living among a people who had largely lost faith. Their cry is included in the scroll of Isaiah:

O that you would tear open the heavens and come down ...  
 From ages past no one has heard, no ear has perceived,  
 no eye has seen any God besides you,  
 who works for those who wait for him ...  
 We have all become like one who is unclean,  
 and all our righteous deeds are like a filthy cloth.  
 We all fade like a leaf,  
 and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away.  
 There is no one who calls on your name,  
 or attempts to take hold of you;  
 for you have hidden your face from us,  
 and have delivered us into the hand of our iniquity.  
 Yet, O Lord, you are our Father;  
 we are the clay, and you are our potter;  
 we are all the work of your hand.  
 Do not be exceedingly angry, O Lord,  
 and do not remember iniquity forever.  
 Now consider, we are all your people.  
 Your holy cities have become a wilderness . . .  
 and all our pleasant places have become ruins.  
 After all this, will you restrain yourself, O Lord?  
 Will you keep silent, and punish us so severely? (Isaiah 64:1-12)

God's answer to that cry was to send the fullness of his creative Spirit down upon Jesus and to consecrate him as his Messiah. But what kind of Spirit was it that Jesus had so abundantly? A reading of the prophecies of the Old Testament might have led us to expect the Spirit of the Messiah to be that of a warrior, who would forcibly rid the world of sinners. We might have expected it to be compared to a roaring lion, or to a fire scorching a forest, or as coming in judgment like an axe laid to the root of a tree!

But such was not the Spirit that characterised Jesus. We are told that it was 'like a dove' (1:10). One thinks of Noah's ark and the dove that brought the first signs of new growth on a world that had succumbed to the deluge (Genesis 8:11). One might think also of the following ode from the Song of Solomon:

## Jesus' Baptism

My beloved speaks and says to me:  
'Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away;  
for now the winter is past, the rain is over and gone.  
The flowers appear on the earth;  
the time of singing has come,  
and the voice of the turtledove is heard in our land.  
The fig tree puts forth its figs, and the vines are in blossom;  
they give forth fragrance.  
Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away.  
O my dove, in the clefts of the rock, in the covert of the cliff,  
let me see your face, let me hear your voice;  
for your voice is sweet, and your face is lovely.'

– Song of Solomon 2:10-14

In spite of the image of God so often presented by many of the religious leaders of his day, Jesus knew that God's voice was 'sweet'. He knew that the face of God was 'lovely'. His prayer to hear that voice and to see that face was heard in a remarkable way at his baptism. Jesus' questions were answered and he experienced himself being driven to begin his public ministry. At the same time, it was an answer that confirmed in him that spirit of gentleness and peace that people found so attractive and so convincing.

To capture for his readers the essence of Jesus' experience, Mark drew on the thirty and more years of prayerful reflection of those, especially Peter himself, who had watched Jesus closely and had come to know him intimately. We can assume that Jesus had known a special intimacy in his prayer from his childhood. His practice, even as an adult, of calling God 'Abba', a word he would have used as a child for his father, Joseph, would seem to indicate that. On the day of his baptism, however, he was to experience this intimacy in such a way that it caused him to choose not to return home, but rather to go out to share with others what he had come to know.

This experience is captured by Mark in words taken from the sacred Scriptures (1:11). When the king was consecrated the assembly proclaimed the words: 'You are my son; today have I begotten you' (Psalm 2:7). This cry had not been heard since the consecration of the young king Jeconiah during the siege of Jerusalem in 598BC. Now it is God who declares that this Jesus is his Messiah, his son (Mark 1:1). But what kind of a Messiah is he to be? This will begin to emerge in the following scene, but is already indicated in the words which follow. They remind us of the words God spoke to Abraham when he seemed to be calling for the sacrifice of his only son, Isaac: 'Your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love' (Genesis 22:2).

The words used here by Mark to describe the intimacy of Jesus' communion with God are taken from the opening words of the first song of the Servant of the Lord, a servant through whose suffering the people would find redemption. The song is worth quoting at length, for it captures the essence of Jesus' baptismal experience as understood by Mark:

Here is my servant, whom I uphold,  
 my chosen, in whom my soul delights;  
 I have put my spirit upon him;  
 he will bring forth justice [‘a just verdict’] to the nations.  
 He will not cry or lift up his voice, or make it heard in the street;  
 a bruised reed he will not break,  
 and a dimly burning wick he will not quench;  
 he will faithfully bring forth justice [‘a just verdict’].  
 He will not grow faint or be crushed  
 until he has established justice [‘a just verdict’] in the earth;  
 and the coastlands wait for his teaching.  
 Thus says God, the Lord,  
 who created the heavens and stretched them out,  
 who spread out the earth and what comes from it,  
 who gives breath to the people upon it  
 and spirit to those who walk in it:  
 I am the Lord, I have called you in righteousness,  
 I have taken you by the hand and kept you;  
 I have given you as a covenant to the people,  
 a light to the nations, to open the eyes that are blind,  
 to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon,  
 from the prison those who sit in darkness.  
 I am the Lord, that is my name;  
 my glory I give to no other, nor my praise to idols.  
 See, the former things have come to pass,  
 and new things I now declare;  
 before they spring forth, I tell you of them.

– Isaiah 42:1-9

This ancient song expresses an essential dimension of Jesus’ mission in the years between his baptism and his death, as he gave himself to open people’s eyes to the wonder of God, and to liberate them from the darkness and captivity that is the lot of those who fail to make connection with God and, therefore, with themselves and with the world.

Human ignorance, pride, insecurity and fear had distorted religion. Jesus set about declaring God’s ‘just verdict’ on humankind, a surprising verdict, and one welcomed by Jesus’ disciples as ‘good news’. It is expressed in the opening words of the above poem, transformed by Mark into the even more intimate ‘You are my son, the one I love. In you I take delight’(1:11).

The intimacy experienced by Jesus during his Nazareth years was the intimacy of one whom God was ‘taking by the hand and forming’. Only now, in his early thirties, was he ready for his mission to preach, teach and heal. Only now was he ready to challenge his contemporaries and to take the side of the poor against their oppressors.

He had been waiting on God; or rather God had been waiting on him: waiting for the moment when his heart was broken enough, open enough, to receive the fullness of the Spirit that his Father was wanting to pour out upon him.

## Jesus' Baptism

The moment came at the Jordan river when Jesus was overwhelmed by an experience of being in a special way the Son of the God whom he had come to address as 'my Father' ('Abba'). He knew that he was loved and delighted in by the Transcendent One for whom he yearned.

That the song from Isaiah expresses the essence of Jesus' mission will become obvious from the remainder of the gospel. What is important to note here is that Jesus recognised that his experience was not simply meant for himself. Yes, he was the beloved Son of God and God did delight in him. But it will become clear from the following scenes that Jesus realised that this experience was one that was meant for everyone. The 'just verdict' passed by God on the people of this broken and discouraged world was that each and every person is a son or daughter of God, and that the God who creates us does, indeed, delight in us. The idea is not new. We find it in the psalms:

The Lord takes pleasure in his people.

– Psalm 149:4

What is new is the intimacy of this delight as seen in the life of Jesus, and the way in which Jesus drew others into this intimacy. True, the delight does depend on our response. Taking delight means enjoying companionship that is offered and accepted.

God's delight is in being with us. If we choose to reject God's offer, God does not and cannot force his love. Hence the call for faith: we must believe in God's love. Hence the call for repentance: we must turn to God and open our hearts to receive his love. As the author of the Letter to Hebrews says, quoting from Habakkuk 2:4:

My righteous one will live by faith.

My soul takes no pleasure in anyone who shrinks back.

– Hebrews 10:38

When we shrink back from communion with God, God's heart is clouded with sorrow at the harm we cause ourselves and others. God wants to delight in us as a father or mother delights, and he continues to offer his love unconditionally to us. Jesus came to realise that the reason for much of the sin in the world and so much of the despondency that he witnessed was that people did not know how deeply loved they were. It was his determination to tell them so, and his conviction that God was sending him to demonstrate love to them, that provided the energy behind his public ministry. Jesus wanted others to know what he came to realise so powerfully that day at the Baptism. He wanted, as John has already promised, to baptise them, as he had been baptised, with the Holy Spirit (1:8).

If we have been baptised, the grace offered Jesus at the Jordan has been offered to us. For some, this came as a result of a personal commitment resulting from a journey of faith. For others, baptised as infants, it happened because of the love of parents and the welcome of the Christian community. In every case, baptism is a gift, coming from God's gracious love and not as a result of anything we have done.

Baptism is something God does in overwhelming us with his love, pouring out his Spirit upon us, and entrusting us to the community which believes in his Son, Jesus. We are born innocent but, like fish in a polluted river, we are born into a world of sin. Obviously, baptism does not free us from being affected by the oppression caused by sin any more than it freed Jesus. It does, however, make it possible for us to do as Jesus did: to say No to sin and Yes to the love offered us by God. It does so by welcoming us into the community of faith which keeps alive for us the memory of Jesus and mediates to us his redeeming love.

In baptism God pours out upon us that Spirit which was enjoyed by his Son, Jesus. It is God's pledge to us of his enduring love. Adult baptism highlights the necessity of our personal acceptance of the gift. Infant baptism highlights the fact that what we are receiving is sheer grace and not anything we can earn of ourselves. At some time, all of us, whether gradually or suddenly, need to make this gift our own and respond to God in personal gratitude for the wonder of the delight he has in us. The recognition of this will bring about in us what it brought about in Jesus: a wholehearted response to God's call for us to go out to others in a mission of love directed and energised by God's Spirit.

Those of us who have not been baptised may experience the desire to know what Jesus knew on the day of his baptism, and to join with that community of people who, while constantly struggling with sin, know that there is forgiveness, and believe that God does indeed delight in us. The following call, found in the Isaiah scroll, can be read as a call to follow the attraction of our heart in drawing close to Jesus.

Everyone who thirsts, come to the waters;  
 and you that have no money, come, buy and eat!  
 Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price.  
 Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread,  
 and your labour for that which does not satisfy?  
 Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good,  
 and delight yourselves in rich food.  
 Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live.  
 I will make with you an everlasting covenant.

– Isaiah 55:1-3

<sup>12</sup> **And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness.**

<sup>13</sup> **He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.**

### The testing of Jesus

The Spirit of God, which has just come down upon Jesus, thrusts him immediately out into the desert into conflict with evil. Adam and Eve were driven out of the garden of paradise (Genesis 3:24). Jesus must go into the dark world where we live out our lives, and, as the light, conquer the darkness.

While the translation we are using has ‘drove’, Mark actually uses the present tense: ‘And the Spirit immediately *drives* him out into the wilderness’. Mark often switches unexpectedly into the present tense. Is this a dramatic way of inviting the reader right into the scene? Or is it a way of reminding his readers that Jesus is sharing their experience as they are themselves suffering persecution and having their faith tested by the evil rampant in their world? In any case what Jesus is experiencing here is part of the everyday experience of those who are his disciples. The Spirit is guiding us as well, and God’s angels are protecting us, just as they protected Jesus.

In this portrait Mark is ensuring that we do not misunderstand what it meant for Jesus to be the beloved Son of God. Jesus was totally immersed in our human condition and was challenged to face squarely the evil that he encountered there. When we are tempted by evil, so often we fail the test. He remained sinless, refusing to be distracted from the obedience which, as a beloved Son, he willingly gave to his Father.

We have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin.

– Hebrews 4:15; see also 2:17-18

The ‘wilderness’ with its lack of order, was inhabited by ‘wild beasts’. It was thought of as the dwelling place of demons. The people of Israel were tested there for forty years (Numbers 32:13). Jesus’ ‘forty days’ is symbolic of those years. Whereas they failed to trust God, and so failed to enter the Promised Land, he remains faithful, demonstrating how a son should live.

In spite of the disobedience of the people, God remained faithful to them, and the forty years was remembered also as a time of special intimacy with God:

For forty years the Lord God has been with you; you have lacked nothing.

– Deuteronomy 2:7; see Exodus 16:35; Amos 2:10

compare  
Matthew 4:1-11  
Luke 4:1-13

The prophet Hosea highlights this aspect of the desert:

I will allure her and bring her into the wilderness and speak tenderly to her.

– Hosea 2:14

Moses was caught up in prayer with God for ‘forty days’ (Exodus 24:18), and when Elijah longed for a similar encounter, he journeyed forty days through the desert to God’s holy mountain (1Kings 19:8).

Jesus is to encounter evil, but, from the beginning, we are reminded that it is the Holy Spirit who is leading him into the wilderness. Not everything that happens to us in the desert is willed by God. A good deal of it is the consequence of sin, our own and that of others. But we are assured that we are not alone there and that God’s Spirit is guiding us so that our response to what happens to us in the desert will draw us more fully and more deeply into life. God does not leave Jesus alone, but sends his angels to care for him (1:11).

Throughout his life’s journey (the basic meaning of the symbolic number forty), Jesus remembered the words he heard in prayer that day by the Jordan. He took to heart God’s words of love, and pondered the meaning of his mission. In this love he found the nourishment to sustain him on his journey and he recognised in it the answer to the depression and religious distortions of his contemporaries.

The goal of Jesus’ conflict with the powers of darkness was to bring about that harmony which was God’s intention in creating the world — a harmony threatened by sin. As Paul expresses it:

In Christ God was reconciling the world to himself.

– 2Corinthians 5:19

As a symbol of this reconciliation, Mark portrays Jesus as being ‘with the wild beasts’(1:13). We find this same theme in Hosea:

Therefore, I will now allure her, and bring her into the wilderness, and speak tenderly to her. From there I will give her her vineyards, and make the Valley of Achor a door of hope. There she shall respond as in the days of her youth, as at the time when she came out of the land of Egypt. On that day, says the Lord, you will call me, ‘My husband’. I will make for you a covenant on that day *with the wild animals* ... and I will make you lie down in safety.

– Hosea 2:14-18

People in New Testament times were very conscious of the spirit world — those forces of good and evil that lie beyond our control and influence our human existence. This is still true of many cultures today. If some of us imagine these forces in ways other than as angels and devils, it remains true that God’s grace is mediated to us in many mysterious ways, and that we, too, find ourselves influenced towards good and towards evil in ways that lie beyond our comprehension.

## In the wilderness

The key message for us in this passage is that Jesus' mission was to defeat evil in all its manifestations, by the power of the Spirit of love that graced him so convincingly at his baptism. This conflict and Jesus' victory is a theme which permeates the whole of Mark's gospel.

So much of our life is spent in a desert. We are made for God, and, as Saint Augustine prays: 'Our hearts are restless till they rest in You' (Confessions 1.1). Yet God remains transcendent, beyond our direct grasp. Everything is graced, for the God who loves us is always inspiring us to respond in love, and giving us his Spirit to enable us to do so. But how difficult it is to keep believing this, and to avoid the distractions that promise us a more immediate fulfilment of our longings!

In our desperation we want to be out of the desert, and we are tempted to build oases for ourselves that give us some respite from the journey. However, that is all they can do, and they do so at the cost of our failing to move on.

So it is that the Spirit of God keeps driving us, too, into the desert, so that we will come to know ourselves as we really are, in coming to know the power of God's love that nourishes us with the bread from heaven (Exodus 16), and quenches our thirst from the only spring that can satisfy us (Exodus 17). The great sin is the sin of self-reliance, for it leaves us depending on ourselves and so unable to grow to enjoy our heart's desire. Jeremiah saw this when he gave expression to God's complaint:

My people have committed two evils:  
they have forsaken me, the fountain of living water,  
and dug out cisterns for themselves,  
cracked cisterns that can hold no water'.

– Jeremiah 2:13

Our longings are infinite, our capacity without measure. We are made in God's likeness, and are capable of being transformed by God into 'the image of his Son' (Romans 8:29). Let us face the reality of the desert, and dare the journey, believing that it is God's Spirit that is driving us into it. Like Jesus, we will experience whatever comfort God knows we need, and if all is dark, there will be nothing to distract us from seeing the true light when it shines in the darkness guiding us to our goal.