

Sermon on Mark 1: 1-8 The Voice on the Edge

Not far from Lockhart in the Riverina, as you drive out into the endless sea of wheat and Canola fields there is a little church protruding up out of the ground at Bidgeemia.

Bidgeemia itself is little more than the meeting of two roads, but at some point in its history the farming families around must have decided it was a good place to get together to worship the Lord.

And so they built a church there.

It's a typical country chapel, white fibro and tin, and it has been weathered quite a bit.

It's really the last thing you expect to see.

It seems to have no place, no purpose, in a spot where there's virtually not a house to be seen in any direction.

These days you would need a specific reason to go there.

It's not exactly the kind of place you might drive through on your way to somewhere else.

It's off the beaten track, as we like to say.

I was there in 2005 at a service which included some of the Lockhart people.

Gathered at this isolated, remote little place of no real consequence, in order to hear the word of the Lord.

You really got the feeling you were on the edge of the Kingdom of God.

Walk too far further, and it's likely you might fall off altogether.

“I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way... a voice of one calling in the wilderness... prepare the way for the Lord... make straight paths for him...”

Mark's Gospel begins with words from the prophetic tradition of Israel.

There will be a voice from the edge, from the desert who will prepare the way for the Lord.

So you better be waiting and listening, closely.

Listening with open, thoughtful, and faithful ears.

Listening for a voice which is going to sound out of the most inhospitable, remote, isolated place on earth.

And yet it will be in that voice from the edge that the heralding of the Messiah will sound forth like a trumpet call across the whole world and for all time.

“After me”, says John the Baptist, “comes one more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I baptise you with water, but he will baptise you with the Holy Spirit.”

Imagine that little church at Bidgeemia, that little out of the way outcrop of the Kingdom, giving voice to the truth that the new age is about to dawn.

That the one who will set all things to right is on the way.

That salvation is about to be revealed.

And this has got something to do with you.

Confess your sins and be baptised, John cried out.

And the people came.

The Lord God had lead the people of Israel through the desert and wilderness and into the promised land, and now it will be out of the desert once more that all people will be shown the way home.

The way into the heart of God and the Kingdom of love.

This home, this place of renewal and rest, of peace and purpose, of love and life, would be found in a person.

The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, Mark begins.

And in Jesus the world would find good news as remote from what it might have imagined as the desert from which John the Baptist preached it.

Seemingly as obscure as a little weatherboard church, at a country crossing, off the beaten track.

John the Baptist, described by Luke as a cousin of Jesus, is that voice from the edge.

The herald from the wilderness.

The pathway in the desert.

Israel had not known a prophet of God for three hundred years.

John comes on the scene, again, with nothing to credential him, nothing to commend him, except that he seems to have a word of the Lord to proclaim.

He has taken a Nazarite vow, lives on wild locusts and honey.

He is as unlikely and remote as the desert in which he preaches, at least to the world's way of thinking.

He is a rough rather than smooth character and later on, as would become the fate of Jesus himself, he was killed for confronting the idolatry and corruption of the upper echelons of the world.

Of course astute readers of the Bible would know that Israel's history is littered with such unlikely messengers.

Abraham and Sarah could not conceive yet they became the parents of the nations.

David is a young shepherd boy of no consequence, yet becomes the greatest King in the history of the people of God.

Isaiah considered himself unworthy to carry the message of the Lord, yet went on to become Israel's most important prophet.

John the Baptist might seem wholly unexpected to the world, yet when the people around heard his message there was an inkling of something deep and authoritative emerging in the desert.

'The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him.', Mark records.

That John was representative of a tradition which eschewed worldly values and commitments only made his 'preparation' for the coming of the Messiah all the more telling.

Like the outline of that little church against the country horizon, John's persona and message pointed to another world and another Kingdom.

And as Mark will go on to show in his story of the 'good news of Jesus', as we hear in the words of Revelation, 'the kingdom of this world is become the kingdom of our Lord and his Messiah. And he shall reign forever, and ever.'

When we come to listen for the voice of God we do well to incline our ears to the edges, for so often it is from there that God speaks.

From the desert, the wilderness, the unlikely prophet with a leather belt tied around the waist shouting at the wind and through the dust.

'The church is always renewed from the edges.', Rowan Williams says.

What is true for the church is true for the entire world, so it seems.

A little backwater town called Nazareth, of so little consequence that another Gospel records a conversation where someone asks, disbelieving, 'Can anything good come from Nazareth?'

This is the place from which the Saviour of the world emerges?

Nazareth, as obscure as Bidgeemia.

John the Baptist preparing the way in the desert?

These are the people and the places in which we are to listen for the word of the Lord?

This is how we ourselves are to prepare for Jesus' birth?

For the first 300 years or so of its existence the church learnt what it was to be a voice in the desert, a voice on the edge.

It was persecuted, harassed, mocked, opposed, just as Jesus had been.

It was as early as the second century that the church Father Tertullian famously said that, the blood of the martyrs was, 'the seed of the church.'

Those willing to give their life, in the way of Christ, sacrificially, would be the foundation stones of the people of Jesus.

But then in the fourth century the Emperor Constantine had a vision and over the next few decades Christianity moved from the edge to the center.

It became the official religion of the Roman Empire in the late fourth century.

For 1700 years this is how it remained in different forms – in the centre of things.

Last century the cord was finally cut and the church was once more decentred from power and authority and finds itself today once more on the edge.

It's quite incredible, for instance, how many people sit in my office looking to get married or preparing a funeral and describe different denominations as different 'religions'.

The church is back on the edge and maybe this isn't such a bad thing.

Maybe this is really the way it should be.

And maybe it is exactly this circumstance that will help the church relocate its distinctive voice and the power therein of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Maybe now, like John the Baptist, the church might play its part in the world to prepare the way for the Lord?

Of course we do well to remember that before this can happen, the church must listen for the word of the Lord itself in order to be renewed.

It must listen for the voice from the edge before it can speak it, like all good prophets.

If we want to share the good news, we must be transformed by it first.

We must go to the desert and wait, and listen, exactly what we are called to in Advent time.

We must be like that little church in Bidgeemia which sits and waits, not inactive or inattentive, but rather expectant and imagining when next the word of the Lord will call us out to share some good news.

To be, even in our outline against the horizon, a sign ourselves pointing towards the coming salvation of God.

All this talk of the desert and the wilderness might itself seem somewhat remote here in Bowral where we've had rain and hail every day for about the last week.

I don't know about yours, but my lawn at the moment is less like a desert and more like a jungle.

Of course the task of listening and being attentive to where God is calling us, is as pressing here as anywhere.

John the Baptist's austere lifestyle might not suit us all in its final form but we can surely agree that we've gotten very good at cluttering up our lives with all sorts of things.

And perhaps our society's approach to Christmas is sadly indicative.

Did I hear the treasurer the other day encouraging people to 'spend up big' for Christmas?

We see Christmas as mundane and routine and another burden we must bear when the expectations for gifts, functions, and eating crowd in around us.

Where is the voice of the church amid all this crying out in the wilderness that the good news we bear is not about more things, but more love?

That John preached from the desert and the people went out to hear him.

That Jesus was born in the most obscure and remote place we could imagine, and yet saved the entire world.

We ourselves are the very first people who need to heed this lesson.

We need to hear, in order to be, the voice from the edge.

I don't know if I'll ever get out to that little church at Bidgeemia again.

It's a long way away!

It's off the beaten track.

It's in the wilderness. I'm not even sure if they still hold worship services there.

Perhaps, though, it is still speaking, like many other country churches around this land in other places.

Perhaps it is still a voice in the wilderness we should be listening to.

Go to the desert, it says.

Listen for the word of the Lord and be ready, for the Advent of God is nearly upon you once more.

And when you ask yourselves what this Advent consists of... what its content is, what it reveals, hear the words of the evangelist which contain the hope of all people, all time, and all the earth and the heavens – the beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah.

Amen.