

Sermon on Mark 1: 14-20

The Good News Under Pressure

Focus Sentence: The good news of Jesus ushers forth under the pressure of the world's circumstances, but meets its power with the greater power of God's love which breaks 'like dawn upon the darkness' (John Vannorsdall). This is the way into which Jesus calls us to follow.

Everything is pressurised these days.

The world is a pressured place.

Nuclear posturing, veiled diplomatic threats, mutual suspicion between nations, 24 hour news cycles, social media campaigns, and just the general daily requirements of keeping life and limb together mean we all feel like we're under pressure a lot of the time.

This is not to mention personal pressures like family expectations, inner insecurities, peer dynamics.

It all mounts up.

Sometimes it feels like we're being squeezed from every angle, and there's no respite.

The education department now puts serious resources - counsellors, student aids, hotlines and the like - into helping teenagers deal with the pressure of their HSC exams.

We live a pressured existence and the world seemingly keeps spinning a little bit faster, wanting a little bit more of us.

Tom Hanks' character in the movie *Cast Away*, a FedEx manager in the parcel delivery business, begins the movie by giving his workers a pep talk with the strapline, 'We must never ever allow ourselves the sin of losing track of time.'

When did I need it? Well, yesterday of course.

We can only imagine what pressures are faced by people in other parts of the world, those who face war, famine, poverty, economic hardship.

Dire pressures are for such communities, sadly, a way of life.

The mainline church is under pressure these days too of course.

We were well before the terrible revelations of the Royal Commission, but that has certainly ratcheted things up.

More generally the church is often seen as a vestige of a bygone era at best, or a dangerous mass hallucinogen at worst.

The idea that we might be a community bearing an eternal good news of a loving God to the world is sadly out of mind for many.

All our internal bickering, among other things, doesn't help how we're perceived.

It was the philosopher Nietzsche who once remarked, 'I might believe in the Redeemer if his followers looked more redeemed.' Ouch.

Declining numbers and influence coupled with an often unspoken suspicion of our right to have any voice in the public square at all, brings a powerful pressure to bear which, if we're honest, we all feel.

---- example ----

A few years ago I went to a high school reunion... I'll leave you to guess what anniversary it was... and I was talking to an old friend I hadn't seen for a while and he asked me what I did.

'Well, I'm a minister.', I said.

A mix of surprise and horror came over his face as if I was his doctor telling him he had an incurable disease.

'Oh really?', he hesitated, not knowing what he was supposed to say.

'Yes, that's right.' There was an awkward pause.

'I'm sorry', he said apologetically, 'I just never knew you were religious.' Sigh.

The conversation then took on the stilted tone it often does once this kind of terrible revelation has emerged.

So it could well be imagined that amid all this pressure, the good news of Jesus might run out of space.

No room at the inn, no room in our world or in our hearts.

It might be squeezed out.

There's too much else going on, too many more pressing issues, and the voice of a dying Galilean prophet is surely expendable amid this heaving throng.

It doesn't exactly meet the requirements of *realpolitik* in the 21st century after all.

(Jesus has no twitter account to begin with).

No weapons, no army, no political backing, no institutional support.

The prospects are dim.

If you were going to run a popular campaign this is hardly the way to go about it.

Let alone when he calls people to repent, leave everything, deny themselves, and follow him.

It doesn't even sound like good news.

Love? Forgiveness? Grace? Beauty? Repentance? Community?

Sand in the wind, the world wants to say, it'll be blown away in the stiffening winds of other more powerful attractions.

Now, I'm late for another appointment. Better get going.

But our Gospel text for today tells us something a little unexpected.

Jesus was under pressure right from the beginning.

Right from the start of his earthly ministry.

In Mark's Gospel, likely the first written, Jesus is baptised by John and then immediately driven out into the wilderness to be tempted.

Talk about pressure.

Tested by Satan for 40 days and 40 nights, just as the people of Israel were tested in the desert for 40 years.

After surviving this ordeal the next thing we learn is that he begins to preach, which is not exactly what we'd imagine was the obvious response to near spiritual and physical exhaustion.

Going on, Mark frames Jesus' first sermon with a further little detail, that it was 'after John was put in prison'.

John, like Jesus, preached a message of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, and this landed him in jail.

He was seen as a threat and removed.

So as if the period of testing was not enough pressure, Jesus is already in danger of arrest and imprisonment as he echoes John's words, 'Repent and believe the good news.'

If you remember what John the Baptist's eventual fate was, it's no empty pressure.

There were real consequences in the air.

This pressure has teeth, just as it does today for Christians in openly hostile parts of the world.

The call out of the ways of the world to a life of self giving and mercy has for some reason always created enemies.

But Jesus is undeterred.

He won't be pressured out of his purpose.

The Kingdom of God has come near.

Now is the time.

Repent and believe the good news.

In the first 15 verses of Mark the Gospel writer speaks of 'good news' three times, initially in the very first verse, as if to underline what his story is all about.

The coming of Jesus, the coming of the Kingdom of God, of God's love in the flesh, is good news, it's Gospel, for a world and a people under pressure.

We see it all through Jesus' ministry in healing, in teaching, in the lifting up of the oppressed and suffering, in the overcoming of prejudices and hatreds.

Until it finally bursts through the greatest pressure of all, the wall of death itself, what Paul calls the final enemy, and knocks it down like a wrecking ball as Jesus is raised to new life for us.

The resurrection of God's own Son.

The death of death, the divine triumph over the final tyranny.

And this new life is given as a gift to all, and we are called to receive it by faith.

This life, this hope is ours as we repent, believe the good news and follow him.

The good news.

Set into a world of pressure and turmoil to bring redemption.

Do we believe that even under the weight of the pressure of our lives that the good news can still break through?

That transformation can occur?

It's actually even better than that, as the Gospel shows us the greater the pressure, the stronger the good news ushers forth.

The more weight that is brought to bear on it the more powerfully it shines through.

It's in the contexts of greatest need and want that the Gospel goes to work in its most powerful ways.

We shouldn't be surprised.

This is how it has been since the beginning when God brought order out of chaos and said, 'Let there be light.'

---- example ----

Shane Claiborne, American Christian activist and writer, tells the story of a time in India. He was doing some work with families in the slums of Mumbai and had grown particularly close to one little boy. A boy off the street. The boy's birthday was coming up and Claiborne was wondering what to get him. At over 100 degrees fh and with not much around Claiborne decided that an ice cream would be the way to go. So he got an ice cream and gave it to him. The boy was overwhelmed with this precious and amazing gift. He ran around all the other kids, Claiborne says, screaming 'We've got ice cream!' In fact, he was so overwhelmed that he decided that all the children needed to

have a lick. 'Everybody gets a lick!' This was too good a gift to keep to himself. So he started going around to them all giving them a lick of his ice cream. Eventually he came back to Claiborne himself and held out the now well licked ice cream. 'You get a lick too.' The gift that had been offered, in the hands of this little boy who had nothing, became a gift for all, and finally came around full circle to become a gift to its original giver. What wondrous love. God is good, all the time.

Can we believe in this good news?

Can we turn from our errant ways, from our mixed motives, from our disbelief that with God all things are possible?

From our internal bickering and sniping?

To be the people we have been called to be?

Even that we may be bearers of the good news we have received out to the world in faith, which, like the little boy, is actually how we give it back to its original giver?

This is the call of the church and it began way back on the beach of the Galilean lake.

Come follow me and I will make you fishers of men, women, children, all.

It will be hard, there will be pressure from many angles, but the good news of the Kingdom will prevail.

So take heart.

And it will dwell in your heart if you'll let it and all will be made new.

Jesus calls the first disciples from their boats, their families, and their livelihoods, talk about pressure.

But they hear it and they go and they started the movement we still stand in today.

They somehow recognise who is calling, what he is about, and why they must follow.

'Live lives worthy of the calling you have received.', St Paul writes in Ephesians.

'Be humble and gentle, patient, bearing with one another in love.'

Being the church is not easy today.

There is pressure from all sides.

And the church needs to believe the good news that its Lord has never left it, even when it has fallen away.

He keeps calling it back to its core message, the core good news it has to share, which is also the core message it needs to constantly be itself transformed.

The rhythms and patterns of prayer and worship, service and hospitality that have always sustained the church help create a kind of shared intelligence, a shared wisdom when we live out our calling faithfully.

It helps us live lives worthy of the calling we have received over a lifetime, over generations.

‘A long obedience in the same direction’, as the German theologian and martyr Bonhoeffer put it.

It means we become more and more attuned to seeing the good news of Jesus breaking through in the ordinary experiences of life, ‘like dawn upon the darkness’, as John Vanorsdall put it.

And more and more attuned to what it means to follow amid the pressures of the world.

The church has existed in many different forms, but each playing a part in the glorious diversity of the people of God.

It has fed, educated, housed, healed, clothed, visited, and simply loved people from all walks of life in order to say there is hope beyond the pressure.

Beyond fear. Beyond struggle and suffering.

There is hope for you whomever you may be wherever you’ve come from.

And it begins as you hear the call of a crucified and risen carpenter from Nazareth, to repent, believe the good news, and follow.

When the good news is put under pressure is when it really lights up.

When it really gets going.

Can this be our witness too?

It will be costly to follow.

Costly to bear the good news of love and forgiveness, of justice and mercy to a pressurised world.

But as with the disciples, as it has been with the church for generations, Jesus is always with us, and we can do all things through him who strengthens us.

Let us pray for our sake, for the church's sake, and for the sake of the entire world, it may be so.

In Jesus' name.

Amen.