

Desert Preacher (The Time Has Come)

Mark 1:1-8

Introduction

A long time ago in a galaxy far, far away ...

It is a period of civil war.
Rebel spaceships, striking
from a hidden base, have won
their first victory against
the evil Galactic Empire.

During the battle, Rebel
spies managed to steal secret
plans to the Empire's
ultimate weapon, the DEATH
STAR, an armored space
station with enough power
to destroy an entire planet.

Pursued by the Empire's
sinister agents, Princess
Leia races home aboard her
starship, custodian of the
stolen plans that can save her
people and restore
freedom to the galaxy....

How much back story do you need to make sense of what is happening in a narrative? For any uneducated Philistines out there who don't know what I was just quoting, that is the opening title sequence from the original *Star Wars* movie. George Lucas decided that that information was sufficient for people to make sense of the story about to be presented.

In some stories the back story is so important that it becomes something of a name or a title for a character and so if I start talking about "The Boy Who Lived", many of you will know that I am referring to Harry Potter and his back story of surviving the dark wizard Voldemort's attempt to murder him as a young child.

This morning we're going to look at the back story which Mark has included in his account of the good news of Jesus and think about its significance.

Jesus' Title Looks Back to God's Promises (Mark 1:1)

First, we notice that as Harry Potter wears the title, "The Boy Who Lived," which points to his back story, so Jesus has a titled which points to his back story, that is, "Messiah" or "Christ". While "Christ" came to be used almost as another name for Jesus later, here it is used as a title. Messiah is the Hebrew word and Christ is the Greek word, with both meaning, "anointed one."

While Jesus is the Saviour of all humanity, he will rescue all people as he fulfils the promises which Yahweh (that is God) made to the people of Israel in days gone by that he would send an anointed one, a Messiah.

There is much which could be said about the word Messiah and I'm not exaggerating when I say that preachers can easily spend a whole sermon on this one word, or even multiple sermons, but you'll be glad to know that I won't. It's enough for me to say here that some of the most important imagery which Messiah carries includes the idea of being Yahweh's agent to rescue Israel and with this idea of rescuing Israel there is also the concept of the Messiah being a king in the line of King David, the greatest of Israel's kings.

And so in this one word, Messiah, every Jewish reader, and even a number of educated non-Jews (that is Gentiles), will pick up on a back story of promises from God of a long-awaited rescuer and a kingly ruler.

Now we're at risk here of really slowing down because also in verse one, in terms of back story, we can consider the meaning of Jesus' name. Jesus is the Hellenised (Greek) version of the Hebrew name Yeshua, which we more commonly know as Joshua. Yeshua / Joshua means "Yahweh saves" and it was Joshua who led the people of Israel into the promised land. Added to the significance of Jesus / Yeshua, there is the title "Son of God" which directed people to Jesus' unique relationship with the Father and his connection all the way back to Adam (cf. Luke 3:38).

Obviously much more can be said about Jesus' name and his title as Son of God, but I want to keep the big picture in mind as to what back story Mark is presenting us with and so I'll keep moving.

The Proclamation, Power and Presentation Of A Prophet (Mark 1:2-6)

For those of you who like alliteration, I have titled this section for verse 2 to 6, "The Proclamation, Power and Presentation Of A Prophet." In these verses John the Baptist is introduced to us and we need to understand how John adds to Jesus' back story.

In terms of proclamation, Mark uses a quote from one of Israel's most famous prophets, Isaiah.

[A]s it is written in Isaiah the prophet:

“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.’”

This prophecy from Isaiah both points to John the Baptist but also to John's task in relation to Jesus.

After the quote from Isaiah we have John introduced and he is obviously presented as the fulfilment of the prophecy because he appeared in the wilderness and he is preparing the way for the Lord. How is John preparing the way? John prepares the way by preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. We know that John was also acting with the power of a prophet because [t]he whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River. People went out to John and submitted to his teaching, repenting of their sins, and were being baptised, because they recognised in him the power of God at work. This power connected John to the prophets of Israel's past.

So here we have John fulfilling the proclamation of a prophecy and also acting with the power of a prophet from long ago, and, if we're still not really sure that John is being presented as a prophet from Israel's Holy Scriptures, we're next told what clothes he wore, “John wore clothing made of camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey.”

When we lived in Indonesia I ate bugs on various occasions and I remember a friend bringing round a container, like we would share around a container of nuts, of “belalang bakar dengan madu” (BBQ grasshoppers with honey). I was thinking to myself at the time, “I just need to put on Alison's camel hair jacket and leather belt and I'll be like John the Baptist.” You do know the difficulty with wearing clothing made of camel hair, don't you? You can never get the lumps out!

Seriously though, why are we told about what John ate and wore? First, John's diet was the normal food of a nomad and so emphasised that John is coming from the wilderness similarly to where the prophets of Israel's history were located. Second, John's

clothing even more firmly places him with the prophets of the past and with one in particular. Listen to 2 Kings 1 verse 7 and 8,

The king asked them, “What kind of man was it who came to meet you and told you this?”

They replied, “He had a garment of hair and had a leather belt around his waist.”

The king said, “That was Elijah the Tishbite.”

Here we have John the Baptist with the presentation, that is the clothes and appearance, of a prophet from Israel’s history and with a particular close affinity with Elijah (something which Jesus will also make reference to later in Mark’s Gospel).

What does it mean for John the Baptist to be operating in the proclamation, the power and presentation of Israel’s prophets and particularly when we have this information right after we’ve been told that this narrative is really about Jesus?

Well, George Lucas told the back story to Star Wars in less than 100 words (that is until he released three pre-quels over 20 years later which left many people thinking that the 100 words was adequate!) but the back story to Jesus takes a lot more than 100 words and is, in fact, the entire history of Israel which has been collected in what we now call the Old Testament. John the Baptist is presented as an embodiment of Israel’s history, focusing on God’s most important spokes-people of that time, the prophets.

I used to have a pastor who would say, “If you have a woolly Old Testament then you will have a woolly gospel.” If we take Jesus out of being a historical figure, grounded in the history of Israel, then we are likely to start thinking about Jesus as a slightly glowing figure with a halo who may be nice and all but not all that relevant to our lives (actually I think I may have just described a good number of the pictures of Jesus I’ve seen).

Let’s pause a moment and remind ourselves what we’ve seen in this passage. First, Jesus has a title, Christ / Messiah, which ties him to Yahweh’s promises to raise up an anointed one who would rescue God’s people and be a king from the line of David. Second, John the Baptist - through proclamation, power, and presentation - is presented as an embodiment of the prophets of Israel from the past. John being the archetypal Old Testament prophet means that Jesus’ back story is to be found through the whole of the Old Testament. We must never reject Jesus’ back story lest we risk rejecting the historical nature and real humanity of Jesus himself.

The Whole Old Testament Looks Ahead (Mark 1:7-8)

Knowing where we are, let's look at these last two verses because there we hear John's message.

And this was his message: "After me comes the one more powerful than I, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

Remember how I mentioned that Jesus being the Messiah / Christ was connected with the idea of a king in the line of David? Well, this quote is using that imagery too. Unfortunately this quote has been parodied and so we can miss the focus of it (if you've read *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* you'll know at least one example of such parodying). In the first part of the quote, "After me comes the one more powerful than I, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie." We need to understand that it was a slave or servant's job to tie up the sandals of his master. John is basically saying, "The one coming after me is such a great and powerful king, I'm not even worthy to be his servant." What makes the one coming after John such a great king? Because while John baptises with water the one coming after will baptise with the Holy Spirit. This expression is most likely pointing to the coming of the Kingdom of God. John's message could thus be summarised as saying, "The great King is coming and he's bringing God's kingdom with him."

Just as John was an embodiment of the prophets of Israel and so prompts us to see the Old Testament as Jesus' back story, so John's message, this looking forward to and preparing the way for the anointed one, the Messiah, was also the message of the Old Testament prophets but from a greater distance in time.

Why is this important for us today? What does it matter if John's message continues a theme which was also in the Old Testament? This is important because it effects the way we view God and his plans. Just as the Old Testament forms the back story to Jesus' life, so Jesus is the fulfilment of the Old Testament. We must never think that God's Plan A was Adam and Eve, and it was only after that failed that he tried Plan B with Able, but after Cain killed his brother God had to go for Plan C, which was Noah and so the list of plans goes on until God finally gets his plan right with Jesus.

All the way back in Genesis 3 God forewarns the snake that a time will come when a child of the woman will crush his head while being injured in the process. Humanity's sin has not taken God by surprise. Knowing that the whole of the Old Testament looks towards Jesus and the gospel should also give us great hope as we come to know our place in

this. The Apostle Paul put it this way in Ephesians 1, “For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he predestined us for adoption to sonship through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will.”

Conclusion

What struggles and difficulties will you face this week? Many of us heard of the tragic fatal accident at Hatton Vale on Thursday morning. Do we hear about such tragedies and want to stay in bed, believing that life is just too painful to face?

In the Old Testament we read of natural disasters, military victories and defeats, moral failure, political intrigue, and the list could go on. And yet, through all the history of Israel, we’re told that God was keeping the focus on sending the Messiah at just the right time. Not only does the Old Testament look forward to Jesus and the gospel but the very grounded nature of the Old Testament, its honesty in recording the good and the bad, reminds us that God is interested in the whole of our lives because that’s the story in which Jesus stands. The Old Testament is Jesus’ back story.

When you’re tempted to think of Jesus, like many people in the world do, which is of innocent but powerless baby Jesus in the manger or helpless and suffering Jesus on the cross then pause and think about how Jesus came as a rescuing king and our rescue in him has been part of God’s plan all along.

[Pray to close]