

Thursday 11th June 2020

“The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God, as 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.’ ”

And so John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.”

Mark 1:1-4

Where an author chooses to start his narrative can tell you a lot about what is important to him.

Matthew’s gospel begins with the genealogy of *“Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham”* (Matt. 1:1) and depicts Jesus as an heir to the throne of Israel, selected and anointed by God.

Luke, who repeatedly draws attention to those situations where Jesus aligned himself with outcasts and the marginalised members of society, begins with a very human tale – two in fact – as first the aged, childless Elizabeth (Luke 1:14) and then the young Mary (Luke 1:31) both conceive. The conceptions are miraculous but the focus is very much on the two women and their emotions.

John, by way of contrast, concentrates on a more spiritual and theological aspect of the incarnation describing Jesus as the pre-existent Word of God now made flesh. *“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.”* (John 1:1).

Mark, however, starts by showing us Jesus following the path prepared by the John the Baptist who had been preaching repentance in the wilderness. We are barely ten verses into the first chapter when Jesus is baptised in the Jordan and *“he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove.”* (Mark 1:10). There is no description of Jesus’ birth. For Mark, this is the beginning of the real story: the anointing of Jesus by God and the start of a mission calling on all who will listen to repent.

But what is repentance? To some extent, the selection of the words “repent” and “repentance” by the authors of the King James Version and their subsequent use in later translations can be confusing to a 21st Century reader. Modern dictionaries frequently define “repentance” in terms of feeling sorrow or regret or remorse. But “metanoia”, the Greek word used by Mark (and repeatedly by Matthew) means something very different.

“Meta-“ denotes change (as in metamorphosis) and “-noia” is from the word “nous” meaning mind or spirit. So “metanoia” really means “a change of mind”, “a change of outlook”, even “a different purpose”. Whereas “repentance” can sound backwards-looking, regretting what we have done, “metanoia” is emphatically forward-looking. The Good News Bible uses “turn away from your sins” and the ultra-modern Message translation uses phrases such as “turning your old life in for a kingdom life.” It is all about a change of perspective, starting to look at things not through the world’s eyes but through God’s eyes. It is about having your heart no longer set on material things but rather on everlasting things. It is not about looking back in anguish at what we have done in the past, but all about fixing our eyes on future glory and, just as much, on a changed life here on earth.

So the next time you read (Matt. 4:17) *“Repent, for the Kingdom of God is at hand”*, try instead the Message translation, which really gets to the heart of the matter: *“Change your life! God’s kingdom is here!”*