

High St Uniting Church Frankston

The prophet of peace

Mark 1: 1 - 8



There is a stream of thought currently that blames the shrinking size of the church on the dominance of individualism in our culture. The argument goes that people aren't willing to join a worshipping community because the culture calls them to be individuals who make up their own minds about matter of belief. Look, they say, service groups, charities, and even political parties are losing members, people don't want to be a part of a collective, they are individuals; is it any wonder people are turning away from the church? I understand the argument because I've been thinking that way for a while. But then, you listen to John preaching at the Jordan, "Don't begin to say, 'We are children of Abraham', God can raise up children of Abraham from these stones. Bear fruits worthy of repentance." Individualism isn't the enemy of faith, we are, each, called to follow Jesus as individuals. The people of Israel in the time of John had fallen into

thinking that being the people of Israel meant that they were the people of God. By race, by circumcision, by shared rituals. The important ministry of John was not just to announce the coming Promised One, but to issue the reminder to the people about each person needing to be, individually, a person of God. The forgiveness of sins was a corporate ritual led by the High Priest on the Day of Atonement, John broke through that understanding by calling each person to repentance and signifying that repentance through the ritual of baptism.

A close reading of the quotation in Mark's interesting opening to his telling of the Jesus story - "As written in the prophet Isaiah" - shows that what Mark is quoting is actually a mix of Isaiah and Malachi and even Moses. He could have written, "As we read in the prophets." And, in a sense, that is a better way to understand what Mark is trying to say. The beginning of the good news of Jesus is way back in the prophecies and promises and directions of the prophets of old. The promise from Moses that God will raise up a new prophet and leader. The urging of the prophets like Elijah to be faithful to God and not be distracted by the world of idols and gods around. The call of the written prophets to justice and faith rather than religious rituals. Even as far back as the Exodus and the covenant. While the words of the covenant are "I will be your God and you will be my people", the wording of the laws and the warnings, particularly in Moses' renewal of the covenant in Deuteronomy, are about each person being faithful to the Law. John stands in the long line of prophets; messengers from God calling the people to faith. The picture of John - clothed in camel's hair with a leather belt and a diet of locusts and wild honey - evokes the prophets of old as well. The good news of God's grace in Jesus Christ is not a new religion; the beginning of the Jesus story is in the thousand-year-old call of God to faith and justice and mercy. And despite the faith of Israel developing into a corporate model of priestly led rituals and worship in the Temple and an identity as the children of Abraham, the prophets

were a continuing reminder that the grace of God calls to each person to find their place with God.

John appeared in the wilderness proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Yelling at people to repent doesn't sound like good news! Are we sure this is where the good news of Jesus begins? And yet, it is good news! Peace with God is possible. For the people gathered around John, it was good news because they spent all their life with a religion of laws and judgement, being told they're not good enough for God. John's proclamation was another way; repentance reconnected you with God, and that meant peace. For the readers of Mark's gospel, it was good news because they knew repentance was the preparation for receiving the grace of God in Jesus. Jesus himself began his preaching and teaching by calling people to repent. And we know it's good news because we know, or should know, that repentance doesn't mean wallowing in guilt and feeling like you are the worst person in the world, it simply means change your mindset, turn your thoughts around, or change direction. Peace with God means walking with God rather than walking your own way. And the wonderful innovation from John was baptism - a ritual to match the change of heart that comes with repentance. Scholars are divided on the origin of John's baptism, and just as divided on the connection between John's baptism and the early church baptism. The origin is not as important as the reality for the people gathered around the Jordan. Here was a physical action, a ritual, not just a statement or a pledge or a vow. More than intellectual agreement, here was the whole body entering into repentance.

Individualism isn't the enemy of faith, quite the reverse. I worry that many people who blame individualism for the decline of the church are thinking like the people of Israel in Jesus day. Salvation, reconciliation, reconnection with God, however you want to describe it, is not via membership of the church. And it's not via your parent's membership of the church. And it's not via belonging to a Christian nation, whatever that means. The story of John calling out, "Prepare the way", appears during Advent every year, not to remind us to decorate the house and buy the presents, but to remind us that Christmas is not just a corporate, church celebration. We each, individually, need to look to how we are walking in our following of Jesus. Are we prepared to look beyond the simple story to the deep meanings of God coming to earth to share our life? Are we prepared to take seriously the call to repentance, not as a one off, membership ritual, but a constant check on our walk with God? And are we prepared, each of us, to seek the peace of reconciliation with God?