

“The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.”

In the Greco-Roman world, from the time of Alexander the Great and on into the Roman Empire and during the time of Jesus, a proclamation of “good news”, (in the Greek, an *εὐαγγέλιον* [*euangelion*], the root from which we get the word *evangelist* for one making such a proclamation), would usually be about some event regarded as history-making and world-shaping. Good news would be reports of political, military, or societal victories. Good news would be events in the life of the emperor – his birthday, his accession to the throne, the birth of an heir. Good news would be events building the cult of the emperor as a divine personage. An example of this kind of usage has been found on an inscription at Priene in modern-day Turkey, on a government building dating from 6BC:

the birthday of [Augustus] has been for the whole world the beginning of the *good news (euangelion)* concerning him.

The most divine Caesar ... we should consider equal to the Beginning of all things ... for when everything was falling (into disorder) and tending toward dissolution, he restored it once more and gave the whole world a new aura; Caesar ... the common good Fortune of all ... The beginning of life and vitality ... All the cities unanimously adopt the birthday of the divine Caesar as the new beginning of the year ... Whereas the Providence which has regulated our whole existence ... has brought our life to the climax of perfection in giving to us (the emperor) Augustus ... who being sent to us and our descendants as Saviour, has put an end to war and has set all things in order; and (whereas,) having become (god) manifest, Caesar has fulfilled all the hopes of earlier times.

Regardless of whether the events were national victories or more personal to the emperor, heralds (messengers) would go throughout the land making the proclamation to the citizens and residents.

But all this makes me wonder at the response the heralds would have received as they went along the way making these kinds of announcements. The immensely vast Roman Empire with its so-called *Pax Romana*, the Roman Peace, was obtained and maintained through brutal force, and involved the subjection of the people of the various nation-states occupied by Rome and under Roman rule. There were some beneficiaries of Roman rule who would have met the good news brought by the heralds with the expected joy. But there must have been many who would have responded differently. I imagine that outright hostility to a herald's proclamation would have been risky; but I can picture a passive-aggressive response and dark muttering under the breath or behind closed doors:

“Good news! The emperor has celebrated his 40th birthday.”

“Huh! So no-one has killed that tyrant yet.”

“Good news! The emperor's wife has been delivered of a son.”

“Whoop-de-do! This awful family will continue into another generation.”

“Good news! The emperor has ordered the building of a new temple dedicated to his father.”

“Good news? That'll mean our taxes going up.”

“Good news! The imperial forces have put down a revolt in Illyricum.”

“Bad news! Another people kept in oppression.”

Into this kind of environment comes the good news of Jesus.

Mark himself is the herald, the evangelist, sharing this good news. And as the whole of his little book will spell out, the nature of this good news of Jesus is radically different to the kinds of so-called good news the people were accustomed to hearing.

But Mark begins his good news with the report of another herald: John the Baptist, the messenger who goes ahead of Jesus. And John too comes with a message that is quite unlike the kind of thing the heralds would usually bring. He comes with a message that would also puzzle and affront his compatriots who would have welcomed a warrior, a hero, someone who would overthrow the Roman oppressors: *that* would have been the kind of good news that would answer to the kind they usually had to endure.

John is sent rather with a message that the people are to repent and to be baptised for the forgiveness of sins. They are to repent of their hopes of finding a new peace through violent rebellion against the Pax Romana. But that is not all they need to repent of: they are also to recognise that their present bondage is a consequence of their rebellion against the living God.

But there is promise here too, because the image of baptism not only symbolises a washing clean, it also symbolises their coming again through the Red Sea waters into the Promised Land – a new Exodus.

It is a powerful image. In Jesus, God will indeed restore them and put the world to rights, but not in the way they expect.

John the Baptist heralds the new way, the way of God which is about to become present in the person of Jesus.

The beginning of Mark's announcement of good news is that this Jesus, heralded by John, fulfils the great promises of Isaiah and Malachi. For centuries Israel had clung to the promise that when God finally made the Exodus story happen again, liberating his people once and for all, it would also be the time when God would come and live personally with his people. It was a promise that Israel had held dearly too in all the years they spent in exile, captive in Babylon. And while, by the time John the Baptist and Jesus came along, Israel was once again established back in their native land, the Promised Land, the nation was still under foreign power – Rome by this time. Politically and spiritually it was still in a kind of exile. In the time of John and Jesus, many still clung to the hope that God would act to liberate them and would come to live personally with them. In the first Exodus story, God's presence had dwelt with Israel in the pillar of fire and cloud. John's announces that in this new Exodus the mighty, honoured, one coming after him will give them the Holy Spirit of God – the presence of God dwelling with them, *within* them, like the air they breathe and the fire in their hearts.

But what might news of the coming of the Lord God mean? How might these messages of the heralds be heard and received?

How do *you* respond to the message of the coming among humankind of God, our creator and king, redeemer and judge?

Do you meet the news with joy or with fear?

Each of our three readings today contains an announcement of the coming of the Lord God into the world:

- Through Isaiah, those exiled in Babylon, far away from their home, hear startling good news for their bereft capital, Jerusalem: “Look! Your God comes!”
- As I’ve said, Mark announces the good news of Jesus the Messiah, and in his book goes on to describe how, in this Jesus, God has come among humankind and is at work to redeem and restore.
- And after Jesus’ dying and rising again, Peter heralds the coming again of God, in what he describes as “the day of the Lord” or “the day of God.” Neither Peter nor we know when this will be, but we look forward to it still.

When we think of what response we might make to the news that God is coming to dwell among us, I think it is important that we pay attention to the other things that are going on in each of these three readings.

Each of them expresses something of judgement, or correction, or refining:

- In Isaiah we find a people who by means of forced exile are undergoing the punishment, the consequences, for their failure to follow the ways of God.
- In Mark the people are challenged to repent, to change their ways, and to seek forgiveness of sins.
- In 2nd Peter we find that the coming of the Lord will involve all our behaviour being made apparent.

And this may make us really uncomfortable. Is this good news of the coming of the Lord not so good after all?

Well, of course, it depends on what we hope for, and where we see ourselves with God.

Today we have lit the Advent candle of peace. It is easy for us to think of peace as merely an “absence of conflict” (as important as that is). But actually the biblical concept of peace, denoted by the Hebrew word “shalom”, is much broader. It refers to wholeness and equilibrium of relationships: first of all with God; and then within oneself, with one another, and with the rest of creation. It reflects the kind of relationships that existed in the perfection of creation, before the Fall distorted all these relationships. To sort out the mess that has resulted requires judging between right and wrong, cleansing, refining. It requires the transformative work of God among us. God appears to be slow in coming because God is patient. If God were to come already, would God have found us ready; would we have repented, would our lives have been transformed, would the world have come to its senses?

This is God’s work; but it also requires that we do all we can to join in. Peace, especially when we think of its fullness as in *shalom*, does not come easily. It can involve the hard work of correction, of building understanding, of repentance and forgiveness, of submitting ourselves to the scrutiny and judgement of our good and merciful God. This is hard work. But it is necessary work if we want a world that is put right: this is the kind of work that we must be open to being done in us, and this is the kind of work to which we commit ourselves for the sake of others.

We do all we can to join in with this work of God. This is not a striving *so that* we can be saved; this is an effort which should be the natural *outworking* of our salvation.

The heralds Mark, John the Baptist, Isaiah, and Peter announce “Look! Your Lord comes.” And the Lord’s coming brings, not the Pax Romana, but the eternal shalom of God as he comes to make all things new.

This is the message for us, in this time when we need to receive comfort in the midst of trauma, in these uncertain times when we may wonder where God is. God is here among us already, in the person of his Holy Spirit; and God is coming again as King.

We too are heralds of the coming King. We too are entrusted with this message of peace, a message we are to proclaim to the world, which is in desperate need of

genuine peace. This is the message we are entrusted to proclaim also to our families, friends, and neighbours who too are in need of *shalom*.

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