

Mark 2

Can I show you one of the presents I got for Christmas? It's a beautiful travel book that my friend, Nerida, gave me. I sat down with her young daughter, Phoebe, & looked through it at all the places - like this one – the bridge in Mostar in Bosnia. It was great to share a good book & talk about all the adventures you can have in the world.

Ten years ago Nerida & I travelled together & visited that bridge in Bosnia. It was a crazy trip - we went to a country whose name is disputed (Macedonia), we visited a country that is disputed (Kosovo) & for some strange reason we caught a bus in over 40o heat just so that we could say that we'd been to Bosnia – for an hour.

Looking at this travel book is good. But it doesn't compare with the experience of visiting a place. We savoured all the senses of being there – including dripping in sweat & paying a fortune for a cold drink.

Travel surprises you. You don't necessarily know when you're going to land on something that takes your breath away or makes you laugh, catches you off guard or causes you to relate to people living in a different place. It can be hard & exhausting; often more gritty or uncomfortable than you expect, yet also more transformational & inspiring.

Mark ch.2 tells us about four moments from early on in Jesus' ministry. Jesus' way - the Kingdom of God - was both superior & surprising to what the religious Jews thought it would be. They knew the OT prophets & were prepared for a Messiah who fit with their expectations. They expected the Messiah would overthrow the Romans; they'd been waiting for 400 yrs – since the end of the OT. They not only had the Torah but also the Mishnah & Talmud, books written by Rabbis so that you could know that you were fulfilling every letter of every law & count yourself as righteous.

Just as the experience of travel is far superior & surprising than that of looking through a travel book, so Jesus is bringing a kingdom that is more gritty & more surprising & it's full of grace than you could ever have expected.

Last week we looked at Mark 1 which began with John the Baptist saying, "Get ready. The Lord is coming." Well, He's here alright as we're about to discover in each of the four parts of Mark 2.

Scene 1 v. 1-12 Jesus Heals a Paralytic

Now, I have questions about what happened to the people below the roof when the hole was dug – & also about how the owner of the house handled a hole in his roof with no insurance – but they aren't considered the important details here. Look at v.5-7:

“When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, “Son, your sins are forgiven.” Now some teachers of the law were sitting there, thinking to themselves, “Why does this fellow talk like that? He’s blaspheming! Who can forgive sins but God alone?”

You can imagine how incensed the religious leaders were; who the heck does this guy think He is? This is serious. Jesus is claiming to be God! & declaring Himself to have the very authority of God.

And then Jesus outrages them even further by saying:

“But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins ...” He said to the paralytic, “I tell you, get up, take your mat & go home”. He got up, took his mat & walked out in full view of them all.

The religious Jewish teachers knew the prophecies of Isaiah – that the Messiah would heal. Healing was a sign that God is here – but this Jesus was forgiving sins?! It’s not what they expected & then He goes & heals the paralytic, showing that He really did have God’s authority.

The Kingdom of God is more gritty, more surprising & more full of grace than you ever imagined.

Scene 2 v.13-17 The Calling of Levi

I asked one friend this week what she thought was the main message of Mark 2. Her reply – “Jesus sticks it to the establishment”.

Jesus is really making it clear to the Pharisees that His mission is different to what they expect. Let me read v.16-17 again:

“When the teachers of the Law who were the Pharisees saw him eating with the ‘sinners’ and tax collectors, they asked his disciples, “Why does he eat with tax collectors & ‘sinners’?” On hearing this, Jesus said to them, “It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.”

Jesus is all about bringing good news to sinners – those who acknowledge their sin – their brokenness & independence. They are the ones he seeks, in order to bring healing & restoration. Because the Pharisees think they are righteous, they can’t get it.

Often the boundaries of our love & forgiveness are very different than those of God’s. Philip Yancey says that grace is easy towards those you agree with. Are there people you think are irredeemable? Or who make you feel uncomfortable because their social or moral rules are different to yours? How do you forgive someone who makes dumb decisions that tragically affect so many others? Jesus challenges us in Mark 2. He comes searching for those we may not expect.

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Scene 3 v.18-22 Jesus Questioned About Fasting

In scene 3, Jesus says He isn't doing His mission through or even with the Pharisees.

Fasting was a common act of piety amongst many Jews. The Pharisees fasted. The disciples of John the Baptist fasted. But Jesus' disciples didn't fast; why not?

Jesus' response (in v.19) is stunning: "How can the guests of the bridegroom fast while He is with them? They cannot so long as they have him with them. But the time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them, & on that day, that will fast."

Here is Jesus, who understands that the fitting response to his immediate presence is joy. The kingdom was dawning; the king was already present; the day of promised blessings was breaking out. This was not a time for mourning & fasting. Those days would come. We'll get to ch.15 in a few weeks.

Jesus says that with the dawning of his kingdom, the traditional religious structures and forms of piety would change. It would be inappropriate to graft the new onto the old, as if the old were the supporting the structure – in precisely the same way that it is inappropriate to repair a large rip in an old pair of jeans by using new unshrunk cloth, or use old & brittle wineskins to contain new wine still fermenting, whose gases will explode the old skin. The old does not support the new; it points to it; prepares for it, & then gives way to it.

The Pharisees represent the old wineskins of Judaism. Jesus says He's not bringing His Kingdom through them & the old structures of the law. In what ways are we like the pharisees - where we keep God in a neat box with a set of rules so we can feel righteous & in control?

The new wine is about the kindness of God that brought forgiveness of sins. That grace transforms people from the heart & re-makes their imagination & inclinations.

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Scene 4 v.23-28 Lord of the Sabbath

When the Pharisees questioned why Jesus wasn't following the religious law about the Sabbath, He claims to be at least as important as David who had also broken that law. It was not what the Pharisees expected.

Then he adds the clincher & says, in effect, 'I was at creation. I made the days & time to rest for the benefit of creation. I am the Lord of the Sabbath &, actually, I am Lord of all creation.'

The simplicity of Jesus as a Saviour can miss the fullness of the new Heavens & new earth. The beauty of our Saviour means much more than our sins being forgiven as the paralytic man in scene 1 could attest. There's an all-encompassing wholeness to Jesus' rescue of us & all of creation.

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Conclusion

Jesus is ushering in a new Kingdom & we're starting to get a picture of what that kingdom looks like - Grace instead of law. It's about the heart, not outward appearances.

It's for those who recognise their spiritual sickness, not the healthy righteous.

It's a whole new way, not built on the old. It's about all of creation, not just the spiritual.

The Kingdom of God is far superior. And it's also surprising compared to what the Jewish people expected.

It's a new & better way of being right with God. It's not dependent on our achievement & striving but on understanding & thanking God for his kindness.

When things are different to our expectations, that can be exhilarating. Or disappointing. It can lead to shock or offence.

As you think about what you might make in Tinkering Time this year or if you'll ask Maria to teach you how to crochet, why not also spend some time thinking about willing you are to engage with Jesus who turns our lives upside down?

How do we let the surprising aspects of his kingdom break into our lives?

Your life in God's kingdom is not good because it is easy or predictable, but because the Lord has invaded your existence by his grace.

Jesus extends the same invitation to you that He gave to Levi, the tax collector – "Follow me". It's a good way to start 2022 - to acknowledge that Jesus has the authority of God Himself & to follow him.

For the Kingdom of God is more gritty, more surprising & it's full of more grace than you ever imagined. Thanks be to God.