

“The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.” This opening phrase not only announces the start of St. Mark’s Gospel, but serves as a title for the entire Gospel. The author of the Gospel according to Mark does not open with an infancy story. There is something far more urgent in Mark’s Gospel, a book that uses the word “immediately” with more frequency than any of our other scripture. What Mark wants to get to as quickly as possible is how the good news of salvation comes with Jesus that begins at the baptism of the Messiah by John, continues on in Mark’s first century church and is handed on to us with the most abrupt ending of any of the four Gospels.

Mark wrote perhaps as early as the year 50 of the Common Era or as late as somewhere between 65 to 70. Tradition says that Mark was one of Christ's 70 disciples and that he was born in Cyrene, in what is now Libya, North Africa. He traveled with St Barnabas and St Paul on several religious missions, during which he founded the Church of Alexandria, in Egypt. Mark lived in what is now Northern Palestine or Southern Syria, and wrote for an audience suffering under the cruelty of the Emperor Nero.

Mark’s primary theme is the nearness of the kingdom of God, which Jesus brings by his suffering and rising. For Mark, this is not some event that will happen in the distant future, but something that is already present, if not yet in its fullness. After John baptized Jesus in the Jordan, a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

And then the Spirit *immediately* drove Jesus out into the wilderness, where he stayed for 40 days struggling with Satan. In Mark’s Gospel, we don’t get to hear the details of the struggle. All we know is that there is a great conflict and that it is happening well before the end of days. The evidence for the outcome of that conflict begins with the very next words we hear from Jesus upon his return to Galilee, “proclaiming the good news of God, and

saying, 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news'." What happens next is that Jesus calls the first disciples. Then he heals a man with an unclean spirit. Next he goes to Capernaum and heals Simon Peter's mother-in-law who gets up and begins to serve.

That's compelling evidence for the outcome of Jesus' struggle with Satan. The battle is already won and God's kingdom has come near. These first few paragraphs set the tone for the entire Gospel. "See," Mark says, "I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way." He is actually paraphrasing the prophet Malachi through whom God promised that "the prophet will come before the end." And then Mark paraphrases Isaiah, "the voice of one crying out," and what the voice cries out is: "prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight."

Mark evokes these two ancient prophets to point to the promise that God would remake creation. And now, in these opening paragraphs of Mark's high-speed narrative, Jesus Christ, made the Messiah at his baptism, has already stepped into his earthly role in God's re-creation of the human landscape in which life distorted by sin has been offered a corrective.

And therein lies "the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God," to which Mark repeatedly returns. For the remainder of the Gospel, Mark shows us that no matter what demons seem to have hold of us, Jesus has already defeated them and is there to heal us. No matter what distortions have entered the life that God has given us, Jesus takes us by the hand and lift us up, and as we rise and get up to serve others, the kingdom of God comes just a little closer.

A life of faith is nothing more than a life lived as though we believed that what Marks says is true. To repent is simply to reconsider, to rethink. For any life, for any of us and for all of us, the kingdom of God has drawn near. For any life, that's "the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God."