

Sermon – Genesis 1.1-5, Mark 1.4-11

The opening of the book of Genesis is more often linked with the opening of John's gospel, than that of Mark, as they both begin with the four words "in the beginning, God...". But Mark's Gospel is also about a beginning – the beginning of Jesus' ministry – and like Genesis speaks of the birth of light.

People who object to the literal, fundamental approach to scripture frequently point out that, according to the account of the creation in Genesis, having light created on the first day makes very little sense when the sun, moon and stars are not created until the fourth day. In fact, it seems odd even to speak in terms of day and night until you have a sun! But that is confusing theology and poetry with science, and it is also taking the concepts of light and of day and night in a very simplistic way. In all my translations of the Genesis passage, the words Day and Night are given capitals, and it is clear we are talking about more than the 24 hour time system that we utilise on earth.

Before God began his work of creation the earth was without form and darkness covered everything – but the Spirit of God was moving over the face of the waters. In the middle of the chaos and darkness God was at work. And where God is at work, he brings light. And where there is chaos, he brings order and purpose. And what he does is good.

In our Gospel passage from Mark we are also presented with a kind of dark wilderness. If someone is needed to prepare the way of the Lord, and to make his paths straight, then they must be currently pretty crooked. And sure enough, we are told that John the Baptist is there to preach a baptism of repentance, to show people that they need forgiveness for their sins. The fact that John sets up his preaching post in the desert, in the wilderness, is symbolic of the fact that sin has destroyed God's world order and brought about the antithesis to the order God established when he created the world. People need God to speak again, as he did at the creation, to bring the light anew.

The difference is that this time God's words do not only take the spoken form. In Genesis God says "Let there be light" and there was light. In Mark God says, "You are my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased." This time the Word of God is not only his verbal command, to bring light in to the world and to make things "good". The Word of God is Jesus himself, God in human form, the Word made flesh. And just as at Creation, God is well pleased with what he has done, because this will be the new beginning the world needs to restore hope and fulfil God's purposes for the world.

Does this sound overly optimistic? After all, things all went downhill quickly after the creation. God's "good" world was quickly spoiled by mankind's disobedience, selfishness and greed. And when we look at the world around us, it can often be hard to believe that the new beginning, which started with Jesus' birth at Christmas and his ministry in the first part of the first century AD, has really made much difference to humanity's capacity for cruelty, sin and self-destruction. Do we really live in a world of light and order, as opposed to one of darkness and chaos?

I would say, once again, that I think this is too simplistic a way to look at things. When we look at things in this way we are focussing on the external events and actions of the world at this time, rather than all that **can** be within the love of God.

When I say that Jesus' coming and ministry brought light into the world, turned Night (with a capital N) into Day (with a capital D) I am talking about the change that is made possible inside **us**. The only way to change the world is by changing the people in it. Understanding the extent to which God loves us, the lengths to which he was willing to go for us, has the power to change us fundamentally. His love alone can drive out our selfishness and fear, our petty jealousies and resentments, our insecurities and sense of inadequacy, and so transform us into the "good" people we were created to be. And that is how Jesus' coming brings light – in and through us. That is a huge responsibility, but it is something we need to act upon. Whether this world is a place of darkness or light, Night or Day, is in part down to each one of **us**.

The light Jesus brought, as John says, is the true light, that the darkness can never overcome or comprehend, and it brings glory. When we look at all the problems that shake our world, many caused by human neglect, carelessness or callousness, but some that seem outside human control, it is easy to see the world as spoiled and chaotic – anything but glorious. But it is a world that is loved by God, so it is valuable, and we are people who are loved by God, so we are infinitely precious. We need to look beyond the externals and see things as they really are: the world is immersed in the light of God's love and in the eternal perspective things **will** be "good". Despite the times of Night through which we may be journeying, we are promised eternal Day and that is the hope we are called to believe in and to share with others, both in our words and in our lives.