



Rev Helen Jacobi
#AdventWord
Isaiah 40:1-11
Mark 1:1-8
Year B Advent 2
6 December 2020

I love the gospel of Mark. It is short, fast paced, focused and to the point. No fluff, no wasted words. No birth story – we have to go to Luke and Matthew for that. In the opening 8 verses we read today Mark manages to tell us who Jesus is; who John the Baptist is; how the Hebrew scripture is a foundation for them both and their actions; and what baptism involves. Not bad for 8 lines.

Mark continues in this way all though his gospel – it is as if he wants to get it written, get it out, so the Christian community can have the essential stories to share; so they in turn can pass them on.

It doesn't take long to read Mark if you read it like a novel or a newspaper article. You can scroll through pretty quickly. 19 pages in my Bible of the 250 pages of the NT.

It is always a good thing to do to read though a gospel in one sitting, to get a sense of the writing, the focus and the flow. But I would encourage you, especially with Mark – who we will be reading for the next year – to make a slow reading of it. A phrase or a word at a time.

The #AdventWord programme helps us do this. I know some of you have signed up for the email meditations.¹ #AdventWord takes a word a day from the Advent readings and people post photos and thoughts.

Today's word is #speak.

¹ <https://adventword.org/en/home/>

This week #baptise, #honey and #comfort will appear from today's readings.

We could spend the whole of today thinking about the word #speak. How do I speak to others? How do they speak to me? When should I speak up and when should I remain quiet? How do I speak about my faith? How do I put it into words?

Shortly we are going to speak our faith in the words of the baptism service – we will ask Molly to declare her faith. She will answer with the words handed down to us over 20 centuries “I believe and trust in God the Father, maker and sustainer of all things; and in God the Son my Saviour Jesus Christ; and in God the Holy Spirit, giver of life and truth. This is my faith.”

The words can sound a bit formulaic, a bit packaged. But like the words of our gospels, the words of our liturgy are each a doorway into a much bigger conversation, or a container for our own exploration. We package them for the purposes of a liturgy that is agreed by the whole church, and then we are invited to enter into them and move around with them.

In our Advent Bible study group this week we looked at the word “Saviour” – we were reading the gospel of Luke and the story of the birth of Jesus. We noted that the word savior as a title for Jesus only appears twice in Luke – in the birth stories. (And only once in John (4.42).) And in Luke the word Saviour is there very much as a contrast and a challenge to Caesar Augustus and his title as “saviour” of the Roman world. Paul and other NT writers pick it up as a title for Jesus, they are writing in the same Roman world, challenging the very basis of the Roman system. When we use words like saviour and Lord they feel out of place and a bit arcane. But they are political words; words that claim our lives for God and not for whatever else wants to lay claim to us.

Whatever or whoever “Caesar” is today – a political system, an economic system, or something more personal – an illness or an

anxiety, a fear – whatever seeks to control us – we are speaking against it; or giving ourselves strength to deal with it. When we and Molly say “Blessed be God and Blessed be Jesus” in the baptism service; we are unpacking that “saviour” word, claiming it for ourselves, and speaking up for our faith. #speak.

How else will we speak today?

Our passage from Mark describes a whole lot of speaking. God speaks from the pages of the OT – Mark quotes Isaiah and Malachi who speak of a messenger and a voice that cries out. A messenger who is to go ahead and prepare the way. That messenger is now John the Baptist who himself speaks, calling the people to repent or confess; to leave behind their regrets and inaction and to respond to John’s call to baptism. But then John proclaims – tells the people - that he is just the messenger, preparing the way for another. And he speaks of this one to come – the one who he has named in the title of the gospel “The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God”. Just in case we were in any doubt – and not one to write with any kind of suspense – the title, the first verse spells out who John the Baptist is talking about. “Good news” is another translation of the word we use for gospel – a word we now associate with “the 4 gospels” but back then it was more commonly used for news of a military victory or the triumph of a political leader. We speak this good news which stands in contrast and in opposition to the bad news of oppression, violence and hunger.

So many ways to speak today. So many words – in our scriptures and in our music and in our prayers. These words so often crowded out by the bombardment of words in our culture and media. This Advent choose a word a day – with the #AdventWord programme or in your own reading of the gospel. Choose a word or a phrase and sit with it during your day.

Notice it around you. Notice in what contexts the word comes up. Then at the end of the day look at the word again in context in the reading. And see if it changes your understanding of the verse or reading.

Tomorrow's #AdventWord is #comfort – from our Isaiah reading today “Comfort, o comfort my people, says your God”.

You might notice someone in your life who needs comforting.

You might notice someone comforting you. If you google images for comfort there are lots of mattresses; fabric softener; and whisky.

It is hard to take a picture of comfort – it is more a feeling or an action. Isaiah describes how God is going to comfort the people – promising a better future and gathering the people like a mother sheep gathers her lambs. I wonder what you might discover about #comfort tomorrow.

For today – we speak and we baptize. As we listen now to the Bach chorale, let us prepare ourselves with Molly to speak our faith and to witness her baptism. She stands and we stand in the shadow of our ancestors in the faith and we make ourselves ready to hear once again the good news they passed down to us, the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

And we make ourselves ready to pass on the news of the coming of the Christ child who was the one long awaited and who still waits for us to follow.