

Mark 1.1-15

God's Kingdom

Christ Church Selly Park

Sunday 18 February 2024

God's Good News

Football

If I said 'I'm going to talk about football,' some of you would definitely groan. Some of you would perk up because you thought I was going to talk about religious or something. But however you react, I imagine most of you would picture 22 people running round a field, kicking a ball.

A few months ago I preached at a small church in the USA. If I said the same thing there – 'I'm going to talk about football' – *they* would picture something very different. It would also involve 22 people, only this time they're wearing body armour and largely throwing a ball.

If I said the same thing – 'I'm going to talk about football' – inside a *rugby* club, they would picture something different again, likely involving 30 people getting very *very* muddy.

Something similar happens when I ask people what they think Christians believe. I wonder what *you* think Christians believe?

For many people it goes something like this:¹



Here's the earth that God made. *Draw the earth.*

Here's me. Or you. Or anyone. *Draw a stick figure on earth.*

This is my life – *draw a wobbly line* – sometimes I do the good stuff God tells me to do, sometimes I do the bad stuff he tells me not to do. It's all a bit wibbly, up and down, until eventually I die.

At that point God shows up and sends me to one of two places. *Draw a fork: heaven (top) hell (bottom).* If I've done mostly good stuff I go to heaven, if I've done mostly bad stuff I go to hell.

Lots of people think Christians believe something like this. Some of you who are Christians are thinking, hang on, *isn't that* what we believe?!

Today here at Christ Church we are starting a new teaching series called God's Good News. Over the next weeks we will be looking at different aspects of what we call 'the gospel' – which means 'good news', specifically the good news about Jesus. It will cover some of the most important things Christians believe.

God's Promise

Let's have a look at what the Bible says the Good News about Jesus is. Handily that's exactly how our reading from the gospel according to Mark begins. Mark chapter 1 verse 1 – page 1002.

The beginning – *look up* here we go, this is what we need – **The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God** (1). That's verse 1. At this point we're expecting verse 2 to say something like *gesture to the drawing* God made the earth – me – wibbly – die – heaven – hell.

Here's what it actually says: **as it is written in Isaiah the prophet, 'I will send a messenger ahead of you...'** (2). Eh?? Why doesn't the Bible say what it's supposed to say about earth, me, heaven, hell? And who's this Isaiah guy?? Isn't this supposed to be **the beginning of the good news about Jesus?**

You see **the beginning of the good news about Jesus isn't the beginning of the story**. In fact that's quite easy to tell from where we're reading in the Bible – one of the reasons I prefer us to read the Bible from a book not an app. There's literally 1000 pages of story before this point.

That true story is about a family, the children of Abraham and Sarah. Their family grew and grew to become a nation. They became enslaved in Egypt, but God sent Moses to rescue them and bring them into the land of Israel. Their life there was a lot like this wibbly line. Sometimes they followed God with all their hearts. Often they rejected him and rebelled against him. So God sent messengers to call them back to him. Sometimes they listened. Often they didn't. They had a load of kings and queens – some good, often not so good. Eventually God's people were exiled to the far away city of Babylon.

While all that was happening this guy called Isaiah prophesied that one day as well as sending messengers **God himself** would come to be his people's King, to rescue them from themselves, to bring his reign of perfect peace. That wasn't wishful thinking, it was a promise: God's promise.

Pause

So his people waited, and they waited – for hundreds of years, they waited. *Pause. Lean forward.*

And then, Jesus came. **The beginning of the good news about Jesus** is the fulfilment of that ancient promise – the promise that one day God *himself* would come to rescue his people.

God's Kingdom

Have any of you visited Buckingham Palace? Or Windsor Castle? I've been to Windsor a couple of times to visit a friend, and once I was walking round the Castle grounds and I noticed the royal flag was flying. That meant Her Majesty the Queen was there! I felt a thrill of excitement. I couldn't see her. I didn't meet her. I was in the main yard with the other tourists being watched by armed security officers. But still, it's the closest I ever came to meeting the Queen.

Now imagine a knock on your door. You answer it. Someone in a *very* fancy uniform says, 'The King is coming to see you – he's coming *here*, he is *near*.'

What would you do? Panic... even if you don't like the royal family I suspect at the very least you'd do a quick tidy and probably put the kettle on to offer him a cup of tea.

Anyone can visit Windsor Castle – but the King coming to visit *you*, in *your* house?? It would be quite the story to tell!

When Jesus came to fulfil the ancient promise of God coming himself to rescue his people, he called it Good News: not us visiting the King, but the King coming to us.

Verse 14 of our reading goes like this:

After John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God.

Mark 1.14 (NIV)

That John there – who was that? John... the Baptist. When Herod put him in prison, Jesus began his ministry, **proclaiming the good news of God**. And this is what he said – verse 15:

‘The time has come. The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!’

Mark 1.15 (NIV)

In Jesus’ mind, the story of the Bible, who he is and what he’s come to do – all gathered up in this word the ‘gospel’ or the ‘good news’ – is not what we might think. **It’s not about us going somewhere. It’s about God coming here.** *Repeat*

There are so many things wrong with this diagram. *Point to the diagram*. It's full of less-than-half-truths. It's focused on 'me', on 'us'. God only appears at the beginning and end. It's not a good story. Thankfully this is not the story of the Bible; thankfully this is *not* the gospel.

That story – the ultimate true story – is centred on God. *He's* the hero. It's about what *he* is doing. It's about *his* activity and purpose in the world.

According to Jesus, the gospel is not about going to heaven when we die. The good news is that God's kingdom, his reign and his rule have arrived *here on earth* in the person of Jesus. The ancient promise that God would come as King – that's Jesus.

But why? Why does God need to come to earth himself?

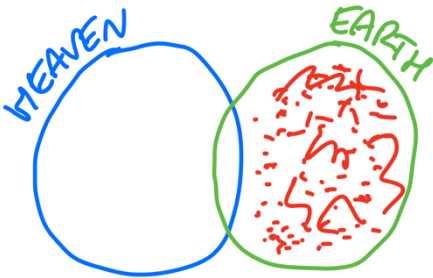
God's Saviour

This is where the story of the Bible – which is Good News – is also a double-edged sword.

Have you ever seen one of those adverts for a vacuum cleaner where there's a mucky floor, and they pull the – whatever the end of a vacuum cleaner is called – let's call it the sucky bit across and leave a clean, pristine stripe on the floor?

I'm very suspicious of adverts like that. The only time I've ever seen my vacuum cleaner work like that is after I've cut my hair or dropped a bag of flour (which I did once – I don't recommend it). One swipe of the vacuum cleaner and there's a lovely stripe of clean floor.

Keep that vacuum cleaner in mind.



The story of the Bible is about how heaven *draw a circle* and earth *draw a partly overlapping circle* got ripped apart. That wasn't what God wanted – something went wrong. That something is us.

Start doing little dots and scribbling inside the 'earth' circle. When we reject God, when we ignore God, when 'you do you' instead of living as he made us to live, when we hurt and are hurt by other people, we spoil God's world. Sometimes those things are huge, like war and destroying rainforests. Most of the time they are the tiny little decisions we make every day.

Think back to the muck on the floor before you vacuum. It's not one massive lump of dirt – it's hundreds, thousands of specks of dust that together spoil the beautiful clean floor.

God hates all that. It doesn't only spoil the earth, it ruins the lives of the people he made in his image – us. He hates what all this does to the human beings he loves – us. His beautiful, good world is distorted and broken. There are still signs and glimpses of good and beauty, but the truth is we are in a very deep pit, a hole we have dug for ourselves. The Bible calls all that 'sin' – not eating too much chocolate, but rebellion against God and his ways.

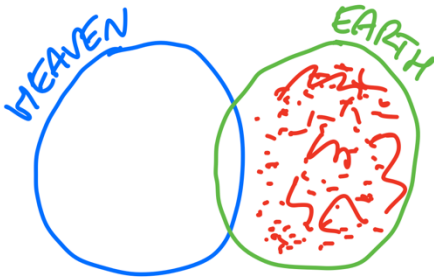
If this *point to original diagram* is the story of the Bible there isn't much hope. If I'm honest, *at best* the good things I do merely cancel out the bad. I could read more or better self-help books. I could try *really hard* to be nicer to people. I could turn to a religion and do everything it tells me to do.

But none of that is going to help me if I am the problem. If the problem is *me*, if the problem is in *my heart*, then no amount of effort is going to make a meaningful difference. If I'm stuck in a deep pit I don't need someone to hurl down advice. I need someone to rescue me, to lift me out! I need a Saviour.

The Good News is not about us going somewhere when we die but God coming to us in Jesus. He rescues us. He lifts us up out of the pit. He is the spiritual vacuum cleaner. He sucks up into himself all the muck, all the stuff we do and don't do that spoils God's good world, that ruins our lives and the lives of others.

Start sticking 'J' stickers on top of the 'earth' circle full of scribbles.

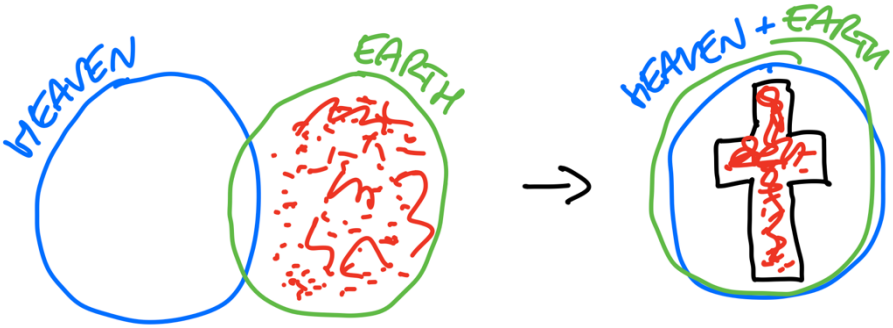
He did that by healing many sick people. Casting out demons. Forgiving people's sin. Accepting people and challenging them to turn away from sin and back to God.



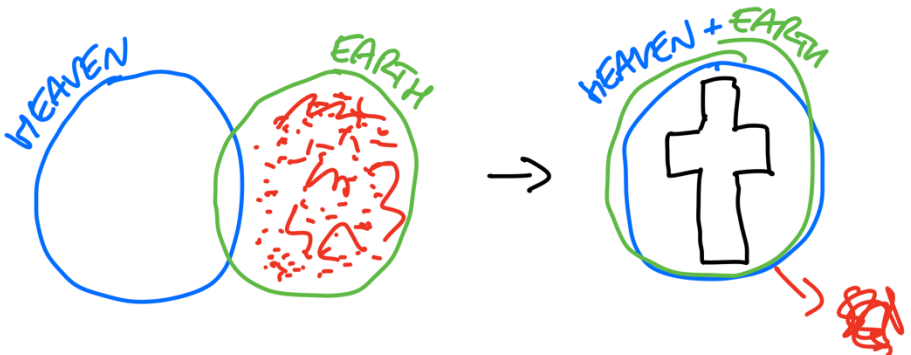
Ultimately Jesus allowed all that sin to overwhelm and overpower him as he died *draw a cross* on a Roman cross. He died the death we deserve – he didn't do all that, we did. All that evil from all the big things and all the tiny things we humans do to hurt and spoil – all that sin spent and exhausted itself on Jesus as he died.

Scribble inside the cross. Pause. Lean forward.

But it didn't win. Jesus' life could not be suffocated even by all that death. His love could not be undone even by all that hate.



Draw two overlapping circles – around the cross. The Good News is not about us going to heaven when we die. The Good News is God's kingdom – heaven – is coming here. The Good News is Jesus takes our mess, our brokenness, our shame and our pain – he takes it all and dies in our place, getting rid of it *draw arrow to squiggle outside circles*, so we can live the life God always intended.



God's Offer

This *point to second diagram* is the story of the Bible. This is the promise Isaiah made, that God himself would rescue his people. This is the kingdom Jesus proclaimed. He is the Saviour we need.

Do you want in?

This is God's offer of a Saviour. **It is for everyone, but isn't forced on anyone.** God respects our choice – and we have to take the consequences. But I don't want you to end up outside God's kingdom. *Point to the ball of scribble.* So: do you want in?

Jesus tells us how to respond to the Good News that he has come to fulfil God's promise, that God's kingdom is near:

Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. 'The time has come,' he said. 'The kingdom of God has come near. **Repent and believe the good news!**'

Mark 1.14-15 (NIV)

Repent – the word means turn: to turn away from sin and towards God. It means saying sorry – and meaning it. *Ball a fist.* It means letting go *open hands* of 'me' and 'my desires' so we are ready to receive *turn hands palm up* the life God offers to us all.

Believe – the word means trust: to trust that God’s got this, that Jesus is who he said he is, that Jesus really did die so we might live. It means trusting that God – the author of life – knows the best way to live the life he gives.

This Good News is for everyone but isn’t forced on anyone.

So the question is: do you want in?

¹ For the following diagrams and (some of the) content see ‘The Kingdom of God’, Tim Mackie: <https://bridgetown.church/teachings/gospel-of-matthew/the-kingdom-of-god>.