

## **“Life in the desert”**

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The Gospel of Mark was written at a time of crisis, just during the time of the great Jewish uprising against the Roman Empire, which ended with the destruction of Jerusalem and its Temple. These circumstances shaped the content of Marcos. In fact, it is very likely that the evangelist believed that he was living in the end times, and from here would come the sense of urgency that is appreciated throughout the entire gospel.

That is why the evangelist does not beat around the bush. If the end is near and it is urgent to tell the story of Jesus, it must be done directly and without preamble. When the evangelist announces the arrival of good news, he also wants to make it clear that this news comes from Jesus, the expected messiah and the true son of God. Hence, the first gospel story is the baptism of Jesus, the crucial moment in which Jesus is adopted as the son of God, that is, as the expected messiah.

Let's look at the details of the story: a man, dressed strangely, is in the desert calling the people to repentance and proclaiming a baptism of forgiveness of sins. All the people of Jerusalem and the surrounding area come to him to confess his sins and be baptized in the Jordan River. Apparently this message reaches other regions as well, as Jesus, a man from Nazareth in Galilee (60 miles north of Jerusalem), goes down to the Jordan to where John is to be baptized. When Jesus comes out of the water the sky is torn, the Spirit descends on him in the form of a dove and a voice announces that Jesus is the beloved son of God. Jesus is the Messiah that God has chosen.

Baptism was not unknown to the Jewish people of the time of Jesus. There is no doubt that most of those present waiting to be baptized had a clear idea of what baptism meant in their own context. The importance of immersion in water as part of the exercise of faith was well known and familiar.

The fact that baptism, preached by John, had aspects of it that were familiar to the people probably helped them a great deal in making the transition from an expiatory ritual to a life-changing act of expression of faith. This baptism presented by John, based on confession and repentance of sins, revealed to the world a new way of approaching God.

Given the Roman occupation, it is not unusual to see John in the desert, outside of Jerusalem and far from the Temple, calling the people to repentance. The Temple had lost its purity and sanctity with the presence of priests imposed by the empire. The interesting thing is to notice how thirsty people were for a change and a renewal.

On the other hand, the desolation of the desert had several aspects of relevance to the people of God in Judea. Of two of these important aspects, the first is the desert as a representative of difficulties, emptiness and temptation. But not every representation of the desert is negative. The desert was also associated with choice and calling. God called Israel out of Egypt into the desert before going to the promised land.

What stands out in this story is that the Messiah is recognized and called through a spiritual practice that occurs outside of traditional religious channels. Outside the Temple and the official priesthood, the sky has been torn apart and a new space and a new era have been inaugurated. The Messiah is anointed with the Holy Spirit, and from now on the Spirit will be available to anyone who seeks to be baptized by the Messiah.

The story of this strange man who calls his people to repentance and renewal is a challenge to our comfort and routine. The call to renew the church or our faith does not always come through traditional channels. Today, after all that we have lived, all that we have seen and heard; It is time to stop and think about our personal faith commitment and the work that we as a church are doing in the world.

In the last century such a strange man as John said: "I like your Christ ... I don't like your Christians. Your Christians are so different from your Christ." His name: Mahatma Gandhi. Christians do often get it wrong, but not just Christians that get it wrong, Hindus

and Muslims and people of every adherent to every religion at times get it wrong. And, it's not just religious people, it's atheist and agnostics too. The issue is much deeper, it's a human problem.

The problem winds its way throughout human history. It is found in every human heart. It is the perennial battle between good and evil, light and darkness, love and hate.

Our political and cultural reality is challenging us to renew our presence and work in the world. Social changes demand that the practice of our faith be transformed to respond more effectively to the needs of a world that lives without light and without hope. Perhaps the ways of being church have become obsolete and do not respond to the spiritual needs of the new generations and new circumstances. Since the good news of the gospel always offers a life alternative that challenges the good news of the empire, what are we doing to announce and practice that good news?

Let me finish by quoting the words our Bishop Hee-Soo Jung addressed to us last week:

“Now is a time for prayer. Now is a time for witness. Now is a time for advocacy and service. Together we must say no to violence, no to brutality, no to terrorism. Together we must stand against evil, but more importantly we must stand for good. Do no harm is the first General Rule, but do all the good we can is the second General Rule. As Christian witnesses we should work together to make sure nothing like what happened today can ever happen again in our country. Violence is never the answer. Attack and destruction and threat of physical harm is never the answer. Love is the answer (and God is love). Pray for peace, but also commit to work for peace. Be a peace maker, a peace builder, a peacekeeper. Pray for our country, pray for our leaders, pray for our people. Pray that we never again see anything like the travesty we witnessed today”.