**SERMON 24th January 2021**

*Jonah 3: 1 – 5, 10; Mark 1: 14 - 20*

Repent! Believe in the good news. Now is the time because doing so will bring you close to God. “‘The time is fulfilled,’” said Jesus in our Gospel reading this morning, “’and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.’”[[1]](#footnote-1)

This morning, from this pulpit, in the first weeks of this new year, I want to convince you to repent. I want you to turn full circle, for that is what repent means, to turn right around, and I want to convince you to face away from the bad news to which you are enthralled, and to live with good news. If you do, then you will feel that you are living in a world that is near to the kingdom of God.

“’The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.’”

These are the first words that Jesus speaks in the Gospel of Mark. They are the declaration of his mission, that his life is going to be devoted to convincing you to repent and to believe in the good news.

Then, like the other Gospels of Matthew and Luke, the Gospel writer Mark goes on to describe the life of Jesus; what he said about life, what he taught about morality, whom he healed, what miracles he performed, who followed him and who didn’t, who he cared about and who he argued with.

We might imagine, as a consequence, that all of this together constitutes the good news. If you follow Jesus: listen to him, learn from him, care for those he cared about and confront those he confronted, then your life will change. That is to say, it will face in another direction, and you will feel closer to God.

But, there is a problem with this good news message that you should listen to, and turn to, and let guide you into the kingdom of God. If we read the accounts in the New Testament from the very first churches and the very first believers, the good news is not this life and teaching of Jesus Christ.

In Paul’s letters to those churches that he established, he records almost nothing of what is contained in the Gospels of Jesus’ moral teaching, his concern for the poor, the young and the marginalised, his miracles, or his confrontation with religious authority.

Instead, what Paul is most concerned with is Jesus’ resurrection. For him, the important thing that people needed to believe about Jesus – whoever Jesus was and whatever he said and did – was that he was resurrected. For Paul, the thing that was good news was Jesus’ resurrection.

I suppose that this is understandable. After all, the first followers of Jesus knew him personally, and for those like Paul who didn’t, they knew well those who did. But, as time went on and as people began to hear about Jesus from others who had never known him, it became increasingly important to know something about this man who was resurrected.

After all, it is difficult to imagine, for example, people becoming Christians if they heard that Pontius Pilate had been resurrected. To change your life, to repent, to live in the kingdom of God, it is not enough to believe that just anyone has comeback from the dead. It matters who was resurrected. The resurrection of Pontious Pilate, for example, would have been bad news.

I think that is why the three Gospels, Mark and Matthew and Luke were written. They were written to convince people that Jesus wasn’t just the person who, uniquely, was resurrected, he was the person who brought good news to a world filled with bad news. The resurrection was the sign that in this world the thing that brings new life, that is life-giving, that matters, that fuels our lives positively, that changes us for the better, that raises us up and helps us to imagine and to live in a better world is good news not bad news.

You might think this is obvious. After all, who wants to live in a world full of bad news? Well, most of us, actually. For bad news is all around us. Bad news fills our lives. Bad news is the thing that attracts us, captivates us, fascinates us. We listen to it on the radio, we read about it in newspapers, we watch it on television, we scroll through it on social media. Bad news fills the news.

This isn’t just anecdotal suspicion on my part. It is evidence-based research. The news, according to dozens of studies, is a mental health hazard.[[2]](#footnote-2) Back in the 1990s a psychologist, George Gerbner, coined a term to describe the phenomenon he found: mean world syndrome, the clinical symptoms of which are cynicism, a dislike of humankind and pessimism. People who follow the news are more likely to agree with statements such as, ‘Most people care only about themselves.’ They more often believe that we as individuals are helpless to better the world. They are more likely to be stressed and depressed.

The reason that there is so much bad news around is because the news we listen to, read, watch and scroll through is about things that are exceptional. The more exceptional an event, the bigger is its newsworthiness. That is why we hear lots of bad news at the moment of people breaking lock down rules. Across the country millions upon millions of people are keeping to the rules. But, that’s not exceptional so that doesn’t make the headlines. People breaking the lock down rules is a very exceptional thing, so that makes the news. That’s bad news because when we read news stories about rule breaking, we think everyone is doing it and we become angry, stressed, depressed, and what’s more we are more likely to break the rules ourselves because we think everyone else is doing it.

Dutch sociologists analysed how aeroplane crashes are reported in the media. Between 1991 and 2005 the number of crashes consistently dropped, they became more exceptional. Consequently, the media attention consistently grew. Over those years, as you might expect, people grew increasingly fearful to fly on those increasingly safe planes.

It is true too that as immigration, crime and terrorism decline, newspapers increase their coverage of them, and people become more fearful of them.

Not all news is like this of course. Much journalism helps us to better understand the world, but reporting on recent, incidental, and sensational events is most common. There is a negative relationship between news and reality. Almost 90% of the facts in a daily newspaper are wrong. It’s about 40% in a weekly newspaper, and 20% in a monthly newspaper. You choose.

Bad news is all around us. It is almost all wrong. It is a mental health hazard. The time has come to repent, to change direction, and to believe in good news.[[3]](#footnote-3)

One of the most life affirming things we did as a family at the start of 2021 was to list all the good and happy things that we did in 2020. The list was so long and uplifting, despite all that 2020 brought, that Sarah made a photo montage as a keepsake to remember 2020 positively.

Do you know of any good news from 2020?

In 1996, 75,000 children were paralysed by wild polio in Africa. In 2020 the World Health Organisation declared that the wild polio virus has now been eradicated in Africa.

It reported also in 2020 that Malaria deaths worldwide have reached the lowest level ever recorded. Over the past 20 years, 7.6 million malaria deaths were averted, and treatments for tuberculosis have averted more than 60 million deaths.

In 2020 Kenya reported that its elephant population has now doubled since 1989. Only 7 elephants were killed by poachers in 2020. The number of lions has increased by 25%. Uganda reported a baby boom amongst gorillas in 2020.

In 2020 the Global Terrorism Index reported that deaths from terrorism fell for the fifth consecutive year; the largest decreases were in Afghanistan and Nigeria.

Just last week, the news reported extensively with lamentation on the execution of a woman in America who was on death row. You may have seen the reports. But, did you hear that in 2020 Kazakhstan became the 88th nation to abolish the death penalty. Another 54 countries have not caried out an execution in over ten years. Worldwide, the number of confirmed executions in 2020 was the lowest on record.

The list of good news events in 2020 goes on and on and on. Saudia Arabia and Palestine banned child marriage in 2020.

The reasons we are so attuned to bad news is because of negativity bias. Back in our hunter gathering days, we were better off being frightened by a snake a hundred times too often than one time too few. We are also burdened by availability bias. If we can recall something easily, we think it must be common. It’s easy to recall the many news reports about a plane crash, a rule breaker, a murder, or a boat full of immigrants making their way across the channel, so we think these things must be common. They aren’t.

In the story of Jonah who went to Nineveh to proclaim bad news, Jonah sulks when the people of Nineveh repent, and God doesn’t carry out his threat to destroy the city. The people repented of their bad deeds, God changed his mind and Jonah sulked because bad news of destruction is so much more worth making the journey for than the boring old good news of people saying sorry, mending their ways, and getting on with life.

That’s the good news Jesus brought. We, other people, and the world around us have more going for us than we think. Give people the opportunity and the encouragement, and they will selflessly love each other rather than behave with selfish greed and hatred. Set people free from oppressive institutions, and they will behave justly towards each other. Give people the resources, and they will fill the future with hope, save lives, protect animals and treat the environment with respect. Encourage people to remember their many positive experiences in life, and they will be filled with joy. Tell them the truth, and they will yearn to live in peace.

The world we live in prioritises none of these things; it relentlessly focuses on bad news. But, believe this, that no matter how often it is suppressed, forgotten about, or killed to make room for bad news, the good news will rise up, it will be resurrected. It will always come back and live on to fill people with hope, to raise a clamour for justice, to lift our hearts with love, to lay down arms in peace, and to raise a smile of joy.

The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news – and believe in its enduring resurrection.

1. Mark 1: 15 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Bregman, R *Humankind*, Bloomsbury, (2019) pp 13 - 15 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. https://bpspsychub.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/bjop.12389 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)