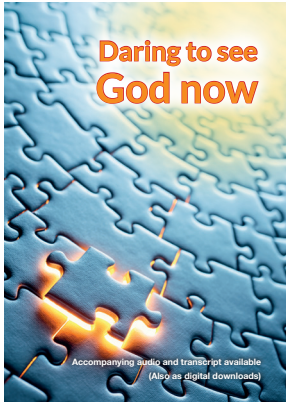


## SESSION 3 *Good news, bad news*



### God is present

Archbishop Justin Welby became a Christian at Cambridge, though only with some reluctance; he understands, absolutely, how preposterous the whole thing sounds to most people, because he felt so too, then; he answered God's call "kicking and screaming".

The world is charged with the grandeur of God.

It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;

*from God's Grandeur by Gerard Manley Hopkins*

In Mark 1.15 Jesus breaks the 'good news' into four elements that build on each other and, yet, don't sound that much like amazingly good news!

- the time is fulfilled
- the kingdom of God has come near
- repent
- believe the good news

This session deals with the second piece of 'good news': the kingdom of God has come near.

Those who first heard this in Galilee may well have thought, 'So the time we have been waiting for is now here. Really? If this *is* the time of our freedom and vindication, then why do we continue to suffer? If it is true that God is among us again – that our being enslaved is over – shouldn't we actually see some difference, some improvement, some resolution of our problems? When will we finally experience the joy, the fullness of life that has been promised? Why are the Romans still here?'

Like the people of God who had been exiled at the time of the Old Testament prophet Isaiah, it can be hard to hear words of 'comfort' and 'forgiveness' while your miseries continue. But Jesus claims God's rule has truly come – to those who can't see how God can be 'here' when 'here' is so compromised.

Clearly, it doesn't take a genius to spot the contradictions in this bold statement. So, we'd better unpack it, in order to understand what Jesus was meaning.

### *Kingdom of God*

The term 'kingdom of God' can be represented also as the 'presence of God' or, as John puts it in his gospel, the 'glory of God'. So, we might ask: what would it look like if God were to be present among us now? What might it look like if we were to spot the glory of God, the character of God lived out, here and now?

The rest of the gospel goes on to answer that question in a remarkable way. We'll listen to the teaching of Jesus, but we'll also see this 'glory' lived out in flesh and blood. When people meet Jesus, what happens to them? When Jesus heals people, who are the ones being healed? What

I don't claim to have any neat solution to what is called 'the problem of evil'; I trust – and occasionally hang on by the skin of my teeth – that the God who came to us and who knows suffering does not turn a blind eye to it ... and that one day he will wipe away all tears from our eyes and will make all things well.

*Gertrude Sollars, Reader*

The man who dies rich,  
dies disgraced.

*Andrew Carnegie,  
millionaire philanthropist  
who gave away around  
90% of his fortune*

Jesus was a feminist: he shocked his peers with the counter-cultural, radical equality that he extended to the women around him. So I feel very comfortable aligning myself with a movement that represents his heartbeat for gender equality.

*Vicky Beeching, theologian*

happens when those who pray hardest, and take their theology most seriously, have that rug pulled from under their feet by the wandering preacher who seems to value people and things differently?

So what we see is that those normally regarded as unclean or as outsiders are welcomed by Jesus. Yet Jesus also goes to parties with the rich and powerful. Not only does he talk about what God looks like, but he embodies it in a way that brings hope to some - and despair to others. The rest of Mark's gospel uses real people, actual flesh and blood, to illustrate what it looks like when God walks among them and transforms not their circumstances, but themselves.

## ***A chapter of examples***

Look at Mark chapter 10, for example. It begins with Jesus being tested on a particular moral issue by lawyers who care less about people than about the rules (verses 1-9). Jesus then astounds his hearers by giving priority to children over the adults, and encouraging the adults to indulge their childlike curiosity: the key to the kingdom of God (verses 13-16). This teaching is followed by the rich young man's famous question: 'What must I do to inherit eternal life?' Jesus takes this with the utmost seriousness and issues to his questioner the hardest challenge: to embrace a poverty that forces him to become interdependent on others (verses 17-27). Jesus then explains to his friends that he will soon be sent to his death; but they fail to 'get' it (verses 32-34).

Now we come to the really interesting bit: verses 35-40. James and John (the Sons of Thunder) come to Jesus and ask for the places of honour when he comes into his kingdom. They've not yet grasped the point that his kingdom is already here. Jesus takes them seriously, and doesn't despise them for not really knowing either what they were talking about, or asking for.

So Jesus is precisely where we see the character of God present and working. Values are questioned, hierarchies overturned. The small become great and the secure become shaken.