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FIRST THING FIRST

Today's Text: Mark Chap. 1

Extracts:

The beginning of *the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God*...It came to pass in those days that Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee, and was baptized by John in the Jordan.... *Immediately* the Spirit drove Him into the wilderness. ...Now after John was put in prison, Jesus came to Galilee, preaching the gospel of the kingdom of God, and saying, “*The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel.*” ... Then they were all amazed, so that they questioned among themselves, saying ...“*What new doctrine is this? For with authority He commands even unclean spirits, and they obey Him.*” And immediately, His fame spread throughout all the region around Galilee [Mk 1: 1, 9, 12-15, 27-28]

On Thursday, 11 March 2010, the US Senate Majority Leader, Harry Reid, was on Capitol Hill (the legislative district of Washington, DC) attending a crucial meeting with top White House officials and House Speaker Nancy Pelosi to find a way out of the Democrats' stalemate with the Republicans over passing a new comprehensive health bill¹ As he became fully engrossed in the work, he received bad news that his wife's car had been hit from behind and crushed by a fully loaded tractor-trailer while driving in heavy traffic on Interstate 95 in Fairfax County, Virginia. His wife and daughter were seriously injured and had been rushed to hospital. Reid rushed to the hospital. As soon as he had ascertained that the accident was not life-threatening, he rushed back to Capitol Hill to continue with the meeting. It was only later in the evening that he went back to the hospital.

Senator Reid was confronted with a choice between his national responsibilities and a family emergency. Which one should he give priority? Many people may agree with how he handled the situation while many others may disagree. We all face similar circumstances each day and we have no choice but to draw a line in the sand. You want an optimal outcome, that is, the best balance among your competing choices. So, how do you determine what is first (most important) and what comes first (most urgent)? This week's study of Chapter 1 of Mark's Gospel gives us a very useful guide on the matter.

¹ Based on the following sources: Josh White and Shailagh Murray, “Reid's wife and daughter sent to hospital after car accident,” <http://www.ireport.com/docs/DOC-419199?ref=feeds/latest> , Mar. 11, 2010; and Laurie Kellman, “Reid's Wife, Daughter Hospitalized After Car Accident,” http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2010/03/11/reids-wife-daughter-hospital_495692.html , 03/11/10

1. Background: Mark simply cut the cheese!

In recent times, there have been multiple natural and man-made disasters. For example, we recently heard of devastating earthquakes in Haiti, Chile and Turkey, mud slides in Uganda, floods in Kenya, and ethnic/religious violence in Nigeria. In each of such places, we saw television pictures of people running away for their safety. Did you pay attention to what they were carrying away? There was no logic behind it because some carried nothing, some little bags and so on. But one thing that everyone badly wanted to save was life. They all wanted to stay alive. They knew that whoever remained alive would one day make up for material losses. As king Hezekiah prayed, the dead cannot praise God; only the living do [Is. 38: 18-19]. First thing first, they all seemed to be reminding us.

The Gospel according to Mark was the first to be written of the four Gospels [Matthew, Mark, Luke and John], and it came out barely thirty years after the ascension of Jesus into heaven. Mark, also called John [Acts 13: 5, 13], was the cousin of Barnabas [Col. 4: 10] and the son of Mary, a disciple of Jesus whose house Peter went to after God had sent an angel to deliver him from Herod's prison [Acts 12: 12]. He was close to Peter who called him "Mark my son" [1 Pet. 5: 13] and church tradition has it that Mark's Gospel was based on what he heard from Peter. However, since only his gospel carried the story of a young man with "a linen cloth thrown around his naked body" who fled naked when they tried to seize him on the night Jesus was arrested [Mk 14: 51-52], we can say that he was the young man or was there to have had firsthand knowledge of some aspects of his narrative. Finally, we also know that Mark was a companion of Paul during his first missionary journey until Paul and Barnabas quarreled over him and parted ways [Acts 15: 37]

Mark knew that he had a compelling story to tell about Jesus but what should he emphasize? What should he start with? He was apparently tired of what fanatics and skeptics alike were saying about Jesus and he wanted to write a concise, packed and focused story that people could read from cover to cover within a few hours. So, he decided to focus on Jesus Christ, the humble Servant, Saviour –King and miracle worker. In other words, cut the cheese and go straight to the heart of the matter! If He was humble, forget about His birth and go straight to His ministry! Cut out the numerous teachings (involving the use of parables) and demonstrate His compassion for the poor and the sick and His power over demonic forces. Demonstrate His power over suffering and death, leading to His resurrection. In sixteen short chapters, Mark gave us a very compelling story of Jesus. Chapter 1 gives us a glimpse of what to expect, as the following highlights show:

- a) *Focus on the important things*

The first verse says, “The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God” [Mk 1: 1]. In the remaining 44 verses of that chapter, we know the following things about Jesus:

- He was baptized by John the Baptist in the River Jordan. Soon after, the Holy Spirit descended on Him in the form of a dove, and a voice came from heaven affirming, “You are My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased” [vv. 9-11];
- The Holy Spirit drove Him into the wilderness where He spent forty days and was tempted of the devil [vv. 12-13];
- Jesus began preaching soon after John the Baptist was imprisoned by Herod, and He preached that “the kingdom of God is at hand. Repent and believe in the gospel” [vv. 14-15];
- He called His first set of disciples, namely, Simon and his brother, Andrew, James and John, the sons of Zebedee [vv. 16-20];
- He entered a synagogue in Capernaum on Sabbath day and cast out an unclean spirit that cried out, “I know who You are- the Holy One of God!” The people were astonished and said, “What new doctrine is this? For with authority He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey Him” [vv. 21-27];
- His fame spread throughout all the region around Galilee and many more miracles followed, to the extent that He could no longer openly enter the city but went to deserted places where the people went to meet Him “from every direction” [vv. 28-45].

In just one chapter, Mark has introduced you to what you need to know about Jesus. Even if you have no time to read the rest of the gospel, you can no longer claim ignorance of who Jesus really is!

b) Focus on the urgent things

Mark’s gospel has a reputation for urgency, underlined by the use of the word, “immediately.” For example, in the first chapter alone, Mark used that word seven times. The events covered are as follows:

- Affirmation of Christ’s membership of the Holy Trinity by the Holy Spirit and the Father [v. 10];
- Victory over Satan in the wilderness [v. 12];
- Unquestioning acceptance of His call by the first disciples [v. 18,20];
- Recognition of the divinity of Christ by demonic spirits [v.21];
- Spread of His fame [v. 28];;
- Instant healing results [v. 42]

Jesus had no time to waste. He had three short years to complete His earthly work and within the first few months, He had laid a solid foundation. Nevertheless, there was so much to do because the harvest was ripe but there were only few labourers [**Matt. 9: 37-38**].

Mark concentrated on the *urgent and important* aspects of Christ's earthly ministry. There is a lesson there for us. What do you consider important and urgent in your life? Is that where you are spending all your precious time and other scarce resources *right now*?

2. Getting your priorities right

Many of us know what we desire to achieve in life. That is why we make New Year resolutions every January! Nevertheless, when it comes to day-to-day operations, we are swarmed by work or responsibilities. It could be in the home or office or church or school. There is so much to do but, as always, there is no time. You only have 24 hours a day and you cannot borrow from tomorrow to use today! If we are not careful, we may soon burn out. That is why you need to know your priorities and to do first things first. But you may ask, "How can I know that?" You can use an elimination process to determine your priorities. The following check list may be quite helpful:

a) *First eliminate the noise!*

There are many things that we do that are neither important nor urgent and yet, that is where we spend the bulk of our precious time. For example, what do you gain from the extensive telephone or face-to-face gossips that you engage in with some people who have nothing to contribute to your progress in life or career? Why do you spend sleepless nights worrying about your past failures or mistakes when you know for sure that you cannot do anything about them?

A good way to know how such things junk your life is to look at your wardrobe or trash can. If you are like most people, you have not used more than half of the clothes or shoes in your wardrobe for the past few years. So, if you have not missed them for so long, it suggests that you no longer need all or some of them. So, give away those you no longer need. But if you were to put all or some of them in your trash can that you do not empty, you have only moved the junk from one part of your apartment or house to another! It is the same thing if you move your bitterness from talking about it to nursing it within you. You must *completely get rid of everything* so as to create room for fresh supplies of opportunities. Paul puts the matter this way, "One thing I do, *forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things which are ahead*. I press toward the goal for the prize of the inward call of God in Christ Jesus" [**Phil. 3: 13-14**].

b) *Next shelve the future!*

There are certain things that are very important in your life but they can wait. For example, why should you take a bank loan to buy a car for your 12-year-old daughter who is not qualified to drive it in the next five years or so? Why should you worry about what to eat next week when you do not even know that you may be alive the following day? The fact is that, as important as such matters may seem, they can wait. That is why in the Sermon on the Mount; Jesus taught His listeners, “Do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about its own things. *Sufficient for the day is its own trouble*” [Matt. 6: 34].

For example, after Jesus had miraculously fed about five thousand men with five barley loaves of bread and two small fishes, the people said, “This is truly the Prophet who is to come into the world.” That was true and important to Jesus. However, “when Jesus perceived that they were about to come and take Him by force to make Him king, He departed again to the mountain by Himself alone” [Jn 6: 1-15]. He will be King but not yet, and certainly not like that! He knew His priorities.

c) *Next clear the deck!*

Sometimes, you may have to deal with matters which are not necessarily important to you but they are very urgent. If you do not deal with them, they can clutter your deck and block the room for the important things that you want to focus on. We saw the example of Senate Majority Leader, Harry Reid in our opening story. The most important decision of his political career is getting President Obama’s health care bill passed by Congress. In the midst of that, he received the bad news of the car accident of his wife (aged 69) and daughter (49). The matter was urgent. If he did not rush to the hospital to see their state, there is no way he could concentrate on the ongoing negotiations on Capitol Hill. So, he dashed to the hospital, cleared the deck and returned to his important work.

Remember when Mary the mother of Jesus came to Him at the wedding in Canaan. She came to let Him know that the host had run out of wine. Jesus replied her, “Woman, what does your concern have to do with Me? *My time is not yet come*” [Jn 2: 1-4]. In other words, miracle-working was important to Jesus but it belonged to His future, not the present (time of the wedding). I believe that He obliged His mother, in spite of His answer, because the matter was urgent though not important.

d) *Now you can focus on the essentials!*

Having eliminated the noise of distractions, kept the future in its appropriate distance and cleared the deck by taking care of urgent matters that are not necessarily important, you have created enough room and time to deal with those matters that are germane to your goals and aspirations.

Look at what happened on another occasion when it was reported to Jesus that His mother and brothers were outside looking for Him. He looked around the multitude that sat to hear Him and said, “Here are My mother and My brothers! For whoever does the will of God is My brother and My sister and mother” [Mk 3: 31-35]. On this occasion, matters of the kingdom of God were more important and more urgent. There was no urgency for Him to go and see His mother and other family members because He had more brothers and sisters in the Lord that needed much more of His attention at that time.

From the forgoing, we have an idea of how to deal with our circumstances. Know your goals, that is, what you want to do or become. Look at all the things that you have to do each day. Try to classify them on the basis of their importance and urgency. Then, give top priority to those that are important and urgent. That way, you cannot miss. That was what Mark did and he was on the mark in his gospel. That is what the church elders did when they agreed the Apostles’ Creed. Concerning Jesus, they ***focused completely on the essentials***, as follows:

And [I believe.] in Jesus Christ, His only Son our Lord, who was born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead and buried. He descended into hell; on the third day, He rose again from the dead, and ascended into heaven and seated at the right hand of God the Father; from thence He shall come to judge the living and the dead; and of His kingdom, there shall be no end.

3. Conclusion: Make Salvation your top priority!

Jesus says, “***Seek first the kingdom of God***, and His righteousness, ***and all these things shall be added to you***” [Matt. 6:33]. That means that, in your life, you should put God first over earthly pursuits. Make salvation through Christ Jesus your priority for the rest of your life. Cut off your sinful nature [Gal. 5: 19-21], and make your body the temple of the Holy Spirit [1 Cor. 6: 19]. Look up to Jesus, the author and finisher of your faith [Heb. 12: 2], and treat His return as urgent and imminent. Live by your faith [Hab. 2: 4], and glory in the Lord, your God [Jer. 9: 23-24]. Sooner than later, you will have no reason to fret over your present or future needs because God will have taken care of them beyond your expectations [Jer. 29: 11-13]

First thing first!