

“The Beginning of the Good News” – Mk 1:1-8

As Gillan and I were walking back up Burrard Street on Wednesday coming back from the Advent Vigil we noticed the sign at St. Andrew's-Wesley with the sermon title “Why are we in the Santa Claus parade?” I wasn't sure then whether it was a rhetorical question (one that doesn't really expect an answer) or the actual sermon title, but in a conversation with a local City Councilor yesterday I discovered that they actually do have a float in the parade, complete with the choir!

I'm not advocating that we should do the same, but I can see some good in a church putting a float into the parade. For example, it is a way to have some fun, to advertise, even to remind people watching the parade that Christmas is about more than Santa Claus. On the other hand, however, it seems to me there is the risk of confusing brands, so to speak – of adding to the confusion that seems to linger and grow among the general population over what the church is really about. One could even argue that it might add to the confusion among church people as to what the church is really about!

Confusion about the Christian faith is not new. In fact, at least one written record gives us some clues that confusion had started very early in the church. That writing? The gospel according to Mark, and we even heard in Mark's opening an attempt to address that confusion. The problem, apparently, was that people had some confusion over who was the real Messiah – was it Jesus, or John the baptizer? By Mark's own admission, John the baptizer was immensely popular, drawing crowds from rural Judea and especially from urban Jerusalem. They flocked to him confessing their sins and seeking redemption through baptism.

So how did Mark in his gospel address this confusion? In some ways he used the metaphor of a parade to try to clear up the confusion. (You just knew I would get back to parades here somehow, didn't you?!) Think for a moment about how a parade is structured, and then see if I'm not right about what Mark does in his opening.

A good parade has several key elements. Of course there has to be content, a sufficient mix of exciting things to see and hear (and sometimes even smell!) to entertain the people who have gathered. But the content cannot be random. The structure of a parade provides an important boost to anticipation, to excitement while waiting. Waiting not just before the parade starts but the building up of excitement as the parade builds to its climax with the most important element at the end. After all, the Santa Claus parade always ends with Santa's float because that is what it is really about! (And which is one of the reasons why a sermon might need to be preached about why a congregation is endorsing that message!)

That same building of excitement is also there in our readings this morning. The stirring begins, the crowd starts to gather with Psalm 85: “Righteousness will go before him, and will make a path for his steps”. The first images of a path being formed, a parade route formed as the people are pushed back to clear the way. Next the distant drums of prophecy in Isaiah begin to beat a cadence, and the promise of a parade through the wilderness back into the presence of God begins to ripple through the crowd. It is not long now before the full glory will be revealed; soon excitement will burst open and flood across the people of faith, and they will lift their voices and celebrate and wave and cheer. Finally, the trumpets blare forth from Mark's gospel, “the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God”, and the Parade Marshall proudly struts around the corner, and the entire watching crowd falls silent.

Wait a minute -- this can't be the Parade Marshall! He's nothing like what we were expecting! Just look at him! What a disgusting travesty of a uniform!! Where's the gold braid? Where's the fancy hat? No epaulets, no brass buttons, no buttons of any sort! What is he wearing -- it looks like a raw camel skin -- yuck!

But yes, Mark wants us to be absolutely clear that John the baptizer was NOT the climax of the parade, but instead only the parade Marshall. Important? Without question! But definitely not the main event. In fact, Mark goes to a great deal of effort to make sure we understand he is not trying to minimize John the baptizer, or to write him off as a nobody. John was obviously seen by the people as a legitimate man of God by the people, and Mark emphasises that with his affirmations of how the people flocked to follow him. Mark even provides scriptural legitimacy for John, identifying him as the messenger proclaimed by Isaiah, the one crying out in the wilderness. Mark goes so far as to present John as worthy of being himself called a prophet, following the disciplines and practices of self-denial in clothing and food.

But make no mistake -- for all that Mark underscores the importance of John the baptizer, he makes it abundantly clear that the key figure, the climactic person of this particular holy parade is none other than Jesus. He does so right from his opening words: "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, Son of God." He sets the context with that opening declaration because he wants his readers to be in no doubt that John was only the warmup and that Jesus was the main act. He even quotes John as saying as much. More than that, through identifying John as a true prophet linked with Isaiah, Mark underscores as prophetic John's proclamations about Jesus baptizing with the Holy Spirit.

What follows in Mark's gospel -- *euangelion*, *good news* -- is the rest of the parade. Some of the floats are exciting, some of them ordinary. Sometimes the marchers are clearly in step, other times they are clearly out of step with the divine music. Just like those watching from the sidelines, some are colourful and some are drab. But nonetheless the parade builds to its climax, to the identification and verification of Jesus as the Christ, truly the Son of God. And while Mark doesn't record it, the people -- including ourselves -- come away from the parade happy and content, feeling uplifted, feeling like we have seen something glorious, because we have: Mark's parade of "The Good News of Jesus Christ, the Son of God."

And what better time to hear this news than now? What better time than this Advent moment when we understand once again that the king in whose honour this parade is being held is indeed riding on the last float as a newborn baby? In classic gospel style, God provides the world with yet another astounding, unexpected shake-up and wake-up call. With a divine style and flair, so far removed from our limited ways, so unreal as to certify its reality, this parade that begins with a most unusual Parade Marshall has as its central character not a beauty queen, not a jolly rotund actor replete with red suit and white beard, neither a politician nor a pope, but a helpless infant, born to set us free.

Be a kid again. Let the excitement build. Jostle your neighbour. Climb up on the mailbox, shinny up the light pole. Wave at people you know. Join in the laughter. Surge forward with the crowd to follow the parade in Mark's gospel. Rejoice, repent and be forgiven, for this is the beginning of the good news, the moment to celebrate and help prepare the way of the Lord, to make his paths straight to your heart. This is the moment to rejoice and celebrate the arrival of the One who not only brings true hope, but is himself our true hope and ultimate comfort, even our Lord Jesus Christ.