

A sermon preached by the Reverend Michael Anderson Bullock, Rector
 St. Martin's-in-the-Fields Episcopal Church, Columbia, South Carolina, on 22 January 2006 (Epiphany 3):
 Jeremiah 3:21-4:2; I Corinthians 7:17-23; Mark 1:14-20

Where's the Beef?

In this particular liturgical year, we will mostly use the Gospel of Mark as our gospel reference. Scholars believe Mark to be the first of the written gospels and that this happened around the year 65 A.D. Those were hot times in Palestine, not unlike now. Then, tensions were roiling between the restlessly expectant Jews and the occupying, imperial Romans, until in the year 70, when the pressure erupted.

In response to the Hebrew uprising, the heavy hand of Rome smashed the resistance, the most symbolic example of which was that the Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed as a sign of Roman retaliation and might. This is the condition of the Temple to this very day.

The rumblings of this historic tension palpably vibrate in the words of Mark's gospel. Perhaps these mounting tensions, themselves, were among the causes that put the gospel witness into writing. In any event, the rapid pacing and at times the almost breathless tone of Mark's gospel convey these same significant tensions, and today's reading is no exception.

This morning's gospel lesson is actually the third scene within the opening act of the great and cosmic drama that Mark wants to convey. Given with a characteristic clarity and punch, Mark begins his gospel with this headline: "The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God." From this banner heading and in rapid succession

thereafter, we are immediately and inexorably thrust directly into the action.

Act I; scene one emerges when we meet John the Baptist, the figure who paves the way for Jesus' emergence. The Baptizer says that while he (John) is baptizing with preparatory water, the expected One will baptize with the transforming Holy Spirit. Then, without so much as a hint of a segue, scene two plunges into Jesus' own baptism by John in the River Jordan, where the great gospel epiphany of Jesus' true and eternal identity comes into view: "Thou art my beloved Son, with thee I am well pleased." Yet, before we can even think of catching our breath, scene three bursts onto the stage.

Beginning (as you heard a few moments ago) with the interesting-yet-oh-so-pithy mention of the fact that "after John [the Baptist] was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of God..." (1:14)

Hold on! Not so fast. We've just got to stop for a moment to find out where we are and what is going on! That's a whole lot of action in a very short period of time. From the Baptist's proclamation, to Jesus' own baptism, to John's arrest inaugurating Jesus' public ministry – phew! And there's more, as you and I have already heard this morning. The point is that we must not let the action's flurry distract us from the meaning of the message, in this case from what Jesus' preaches and teaches.

Speaking of which, does any one remember how Mark describes Jesus' sermon? (And you think it's easy preaching! If you can't remember what the Son of God preached about, what chance do I have?!)

More seriously, have you ever wondered why people like Andrew, Peter, James and John responded so personally, with such passion to Jesus' invitation to follow him? Clearly, there was a connection between what Jesus was broadcasting through his preaching and teaching and the fact that no-nonsense anglers left everything to follow him.

What was so powerfully attractive? Can you identify it?

This is not a series of abstract questions. I say this because you and I are not just curious about these things; we, ourselves, are hungry for them. All of us, to some extent, are here in church because we are hungry for a kind of deep nourishment that we cannot give to ourselves. We are restless for a clear and dependable sense of meaning to our lives. Moreover, no matter how successful we have managed to become, have you noticed that that restlessness never goes away? And while most of us here are clear enough to believe that this hunger and this restlessness can only be touched by God in his Christ (we know that much), nonetheless, most of us are not nearly as sure about how to lay our hands on this God-life. And this has even caused some of us to give up on going to church, much less trying to be the church.

Some of you remember the presidential campaign of 1984. If you do, then you undoubtedly also remember one of the political ads that the challenger ran. The ad pictured a quintessential "little old lady," squinting up at a rather pathetic excuse for a hamburger and then screeching out with a voice that sounded like fingernails slowly

drawn over a chalk board: "Where's the beef?!"

I mention this because I think that this is where many of us are with respect to Jesus and the Christian faith and the church. "Where's the beef?!" Which is to say, what about Jesus makes the difference? Where's the action? How did Jesus change people's lives, and if I wanted this God-life in my life, what do I need to do?

"Where's the beef?!"

What does Mark tell us about these questions of ours? How does he convey Jesus' answer to our need for clarity about life with God? What's so "good" about the "Good News"?

Well, for one thing, we will have to slow the action down in order to see and hear and feel what is going on in these gospel scenes.

This is so because the answers are there, and the point of this sermon is to begin to identify them with respect to Jesus and being members of his Body, the church. I want to point them out to you so that, together, we can continue to talk about "the beef," learn about it, live it fully and celebrate it.

So to begin this work in a preliminary way, we note that at the Baptizer's arrest, Jesus receives the signal that it is his stage, his time. The main show now begins. Mark tells us that Jesus preached, but the words were very similar to what John the Baptist had offered. With both men's proclamations, there was a call to "repent" and an announcement that "the kingdom of God is at hand." In both cases, the need for "turning around" (that's what "repent means – to turn around both in terms of the direction of our lives and in terms of the way we think) – the need to "turn around" is necessary because the kingdom of God is at hand – that is, life

on God's terms is about to emerge like the long-awaited birth of a child.

Yet, when Jesus preaches this message, there is an important difference from John the Baptizer's message. Yes, Jesus' words echo John's words. (Some scholars even speculate that John the Baptist was Jesus' spiritual mentor, in addition to being his harbinger). Nevertheless, when Jesus preaches this message about repentance and the kingdom, the crucial difference between what he says and what the Baptist says lies in the fact that our Lord declares that the kingdom clock has now begun to move -- "by him and with him and in him" (using the prepositional theology of our Eucharistic prayer – page 363)

"The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand." He then adds the admonition to "repent" ("turn around") and "believe the gospel."

Evidently, according to St. Mark, that's Jesus' message – plain and simple. In effect, Mark gives us the "Gospel for Dummies." And I admire what Mark has done. To convey Jesus and his message in simple ways with out dunning it down is a high and demanding calling, indeed. The gospel is, quite literally, "Good News;" but we must know for ourselves what the "news" is and what makes it "good."

So, in terms of this morning's gospel reading, "Where's the 'beef?!"

I firmly believe that what Jesus preached and the difference that his Word made – and continues to make -- in the lives of his followers – is exactly where you and I are, here – now -- at St. Martin's. It is as if Jesus were saying: "Guess what! God has given us what we need and cannot provide for ourselves." Guess what! All you have to do to participate in this gift is to say "thank you"

from your heart." "Guess what! Once you receive the life God gives, you not only won't be hungry any more; you'll actually start feeding others with an uncontrollable joy."

That's the news, and it is very good!

So, "turn around" – repent -- so that you can see what is being given to you and Who it is that is doing the giving.

"Turn around" – repent – and experience life on God's terms and feel the joy and freedom of not having to earn your own way.

"Turn around" – repent – the kingdom life is nothing short of Communion, and this life is now; and you are asked to join Jesus in sharing it with a world that is as hungry and fearful as you are for Communion.

"The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe in the gospel"..."Follow me and I will make you fish for people."

You and I need to come to grips with the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

We need to help one another be clear about what it is and where it is and how it works. For we are hungry; aren't we? And what's wrong with the picture of us working in the grocery store and starving to death?

The Good News is that life with God is about Communion. We belong. We are forgiven. There is food for our souls. We are loved – no matter what. So, come home. Celebrate. Tell everyone you know about it.

And this is real, this Gospel-stuff, this kingdom-stuff. You know it is, as well as I do. It's just that the very thing we need and are given in Jesus also has the capacity to scare us to death. So, we are torn between the hope of abundance and joy and new life

and the fear of letting go of our familiar yet deadly ways. But God gives Communion – no matter what,

To the extent that we dare to receive this Communion into our deepest selves and share it in our lives, we demonstrate the truth and the ongoing promise of what Jesus has said:” The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe in the gospel.”

Thanks be to God. Amen.