

Mark 1:1 – 8

Fit for Purpose

What's the point?

It's tempting in these difficult days to question the point of putting all the required effort into whatever we're doing. With all the pressures on everyone there doesn't appear to be much room for care and consideration, for affirmation and appreciation, even for common (actually not so common) courtesy. Is there a place these days for enjoyment, satisfaction and a sense of achievement – or we are all just so busy cracking on that these important (and human) considerations are apt to go by the board?

Rather than embarking on an esoteric discussion on the purpose and meaning of life I would like to home in on our readings this morning and suggest that they each portray their main character as having a clearly defined role and purpose. John the Baptist's role in life is to point to the coming of the Christ, the Messiah, to Jesus. Everything he did was intended to prepare God's people to welcome and embrace Jesus as the long promised Messiah and through repentance and faith seek to share in the establishment of God's reign of peace and justice. Isaiah also points to the bringing in of God's kingdom but personifies it as the Messiah in words that Jesus was later to take to himself in the synagogue at Nazareth "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor, to bind up the broken hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives and release to the prisoners." John and Jesus were in no doubt what the point was – they were there to proclaim the good news of salvation (in its deepest and widest sense) to all who would listen, and they were to bear out the message they preached in the way that they lived out their lives. They didn't need to have endless meetings about the direction they were heading, they didn't require countless policy reviews, they certainly weren't drifting through life with no purpose. They were about God's business and they engaged in it with boldness and dedication.

We have a place

One of the reasons for having an Advent season is not simply to highlight that we are in the run up to Christmas (which of course we are!) but to remind all of us that we have a share in furthering God's kingdom where we are and of encouraging us to avail ourselves of the spiritual resources God has provided so that we can play our full part in preparing the way for Jesus and of sharing the good news of peace, liberty and salvation not only by what we SAY but through what we DO. There is no need for any Christian to feel that life is pointless – the wonderful thing is that God has given each and every one of us a clear purpose in life, an over-arching goal – which will vary in detail but in general terms is constant – we are to live to **prepare the way for Jesus** and share with him the task of bringing about God's reign of love and forgiveness in our dark and needy world. Is that too highbrow? Is it too remote from the way we normally think and act? If it is, it

shouldn't be. Without a purpose in mind, we are apt to drift through life allowing circumstances to define us. But in Jesus we have a purpose – there is a point to life. We aren't here just to get battered and buffeted by the storms of life – we are here to glorify God and to enjoy him forever. If you are in any doubt about your worth or feel that life is pretty pointless, let me try to help. It wasn't only John and Jesus who were given a real purpose in life, something that gives meaning and a point to their existence. The wonderful thing is that ALL of us who trust Jesus are given the privilege of sharing in God's plan and purpose. We are invited to share with him in proclaiming and living out the kingdom or reign of God. It's not just for apostles and prophets of old, not just for those who turn their collar back to front - all who follow Jesus are called to share in this marvellous enterprise of preparing the way for Jesus and living and working to implement God's plan of salvation, peace, and justice for all of humanity. Individually, we may not "change the world" but together (with one another and with the Spirit of God working in our midst) we can change the world for some people round about us, our neighbours, our town, our area. And if we see that we do have a real purpose in life, a point – so that what we do and say, so that our efforts to participate in God's work actually matter - then we are far more likely to throw our weight behind it. The kingdom of God, God's plan for the world isn't far away or unconnected from us – it's actually right here in our midst. What's the point? We may have good cause to question the significance of our work, the way we spend our time, the effect (or lack of it) that we are making, but really we shouldn't – for we have a part to play in advancing God's cause, perhaps a part that no-one else could play. Do not be discouraged. Don't imagine that you have nothing to offer, that you are just destined to keep hard at it without seeing much to show for your efforts. We fail to see the significance of the Christmas story if we imagine that only the likes of Mary and Joseph were significant. The nameless individual who took pity on the young couple and offered them temporary accommodation with the animals so that Jesus was laid in a manger, each of the shepherds (not renowned for their honesty and integrity) played their part and contributed to the God's plan and purpose of having his Son come among us. There is a point to your life and mine, a unique and significant contribution to God's overall plan, a point to it all. Don't under-rate that, don't run down what God is able to do with willing hands and willing hearts. That's the point – there is purpose to your life, there is a point. Grasp that, accept it as Mary did, as John did, as Joseph did, as the innkeeper, the shepherds and lots of ordinary folk ever since – and you will see what God can do.

Fit for purpose

I'm not talking about the Consumer Rights Act (where one of the planks of consumer rights is the requirement that goods should be "fit for purpose."). I have no doubt that on that basis God would be able to get a replacement or refund if we'd been goods that he'd bought! But having made a case that we all have a purpose – primarily to share with God in making known the good news of his Son and of working to establish his reign of love

we do need to consider if we are fit for it. In and of ourselves we don't have the capacity to deliver BUT we are not on our own. God has called us to share both with him and with one another in a joint enterprise. Jesus promised that he would be with us always. He said that the Spirit of God would enable us to do even greater things than he had done. So it is not beyond the bounds of possibility to expect that God can fit us to do what he means us to do to further his glory. As is so often the case the key is to focus first on Jesus (and all that he has provided us with) rather than looking first at how far short of his expectations we fall. "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me" has to be the kicking off point rather than "I'll never be much use." At a gym – a personal trainer is someone who comes to work alongside someone who wants to get fit. From their knowledge of the individual and all the facilities available they tailor a package that will help the individual to improve their fitness and work towards their goals and they support them in achieving their goals – encouragement is a key part of it, but still it involves commitment and effort by the person themselves. If the trainer pushes too hard, if the goals are seen as impossible, if they are too demanding it simply won't work. We have the Holy Spirit of God to work as a kind of spiritual personal trainer, to come alongside us, to work with us, giving us the encouragement and spiritual resources that we require to deliver on our share of God's plan and purpose for our lives, for his reign of love for the world. Having seen the point to our lives, surely we ought to be more ready to make use of this wonderful provision from God.

I'm not so much asking "Are we fit for purpose?" but encouraging us all to use the gifts that God has given us so that we are able to rise to our purpose – to point to Jesus, to share in bringing in his kingdom, his reign. God longs to enable us to share with him – don't let's be like the many who sign up to a gym but never go. Anything new with us? Yes, God has given me a real purpose in life, and with his help I'm going for it!

May the Lord bless you! Amen.