

Mark 1:1-8

The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.
As it is written in Isaiah the prophet: "BEHOLD, I SEND MY
MESSENGER AHEAD OF YOU, WHO WILL PREPARE YOUR
WAY;

THE VOICE OF ONE CRYING IN THE WILDERNESS, 'MAKE
READY THE WAY OF THE LORD, MAKE HIS PATHS STRAIGHT.'
"

John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness preaching a
baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

And all the country of Judea was going out to him, and all
the people of Jerusalem; and they were being baptized by
him in the Jordan River, confessing their sins.

John was clothed with camel's hair and {wore} a leather
belt around his waist, and his diet was locusts and wild
honey.

And he was preaching, and saying, "After me One is coming
who is mightier than I, and I am not fit to stoop down and
untie the thong of His sandals.

I baptized you with water; but He will baptize you with the
Holy Spirit."

May my lips be open to speak the word of God.

A M E N

SEASON'S GREETINGS . . .

“Merry Christmas to all”, and and to all a good night? . . . we all know that Christmas is coming because there are all sorts of notices and promises and messengers bringing us the news.

For starters, there's the 101st Santa Claus parade making its way through the streets of Toronto, with jolly old St Nick . . . and the children and grandchildren hinting at their letters to Santa. There are malls with sound systems

blaring out 'Frosty the Snowman' and 'Here Comes Santa Claus', and sales promising prices lower than Boxing Day . . . and of course there is the guilt of unaddressed cards and too many parties to attend, gifts to buy, a tree to decorate, visits to be made and no time to do any of it . . .

All these harbingers of Christmas tell us that the celebration of Christ's birth is at hand. This is the wonderful time of anticipation . . .

But imagine the first Christmas, when Jesus' name had never been heard . . . when there was this very pregnant young girl traveling far from home . . . and then there was the humble birth of

a boy child in a stable because there was no room in an inn.

Throughout the Old Testament prophets had proclaimed that a Saviour, a Messiah would come and deliver Israel. Scholars studied the Torah and searched the skies and sought enlightenment in their prayers.

But before the shepherds or the wise men, came the very first acknowledgement that this baby was something tremendously special, and that occurred before He born: when his mother, Mary, went to visit her cousin Elizabeth and her husband Zachary. Although they were an

elderly couple, an angel had recently visited Zachary with news that they would soon have a son they would call John, who would bring many to the Lord and who would be a blessed with the Holy Ghost. It was this wondrous infant who first heralded Christ's arrival when, at Mary's arrival he leapt in his mother's womb in acknowledgment of Christ's presence.

Throughout John's life he called people to repent, just as we are called to repent throughout Advent, to be worthy of the wonder that is at hand. To signify the washing away of sin and rebirth in faith, John baptized his followers in the Jordan River and it was this

man who baptized Jesus: this wonderful, larger than life character, his cousin, John. In Biblical descriptions he sounds like an ancient-day hippy, an anchorite, living a solitary life in the desert, a scrawny reed of a man¹ living on a diet of bugs and honey, who arrives on the scene wearing camel's cloth and a leather girdle, proclaiming the coming of the Messiah and urging, "Do penance for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."²

In baptizing Christ, John the Baptist hosted one of the most unique moments in the Bible: God's voice was heard: "This is my beloved son

¹ Luke 7:24

² Matthew 3:2

“. . . the Holy Ghost joined Father and Son in the form of a dove who settled on Jesus: the only time that God appears in all three persons at the same time and place.

Now, as we go about the streets of Christmas, hear the bells calling us to give, to spend or to worship, we should enjoy these wonderful days, anticipating and preparing for the birth of our Saviour. . . born a person as you and I were: born to nurse, eat, work, love, attend celebrations, have friends, teach and . . . ultimately . . . born to die to bring salvation for you and me.

It **IS** a wonder and as Christians we should be delighted to remember that wonderful night in Bethlehem when Christ was born. Christmas is our holiday. And we are happy to share the joy and the fun and games with others, this, the most wonderful birthday party of the year.

But it is also a time when we should greet everyone we meet with a bonny “MERRY CHRISTMAS”. . . so that as we celebrate the holidays, we may, like John, be messengers for the coming of Christ.

It shouldn't be necessary, but it is.

These days the newspapers are full of articles on the proper protocol for the holidays: the politically correct way to avoid offending anyone and how to be 'inclusive'.

Let me give you an example: since 1917 when Boston sent aid to Halifax after a massive ship explosion, each year a huge Christmas Tree has been given to Boston each year as a thank-you gift. This year Boston's municipal officials decided it would be *less offensive* to call the tree a "holiday tree", rather than the **Christmas Tree**, that it is. Now, the tree farmer who grew it for 36 years: he said he wouldn't have sent the tree if he'd known they were going

to rename it: said he's rather see it run through his wood chipper!

And then there's the new word for the season:

Happy

CHRISMAHANUKWANZAH!

Whatever that may be . . . but it is politically correct.

You know, most schools have abandoned their annual Christmas Concert in favour of a Winter Festival: Santa Claus may be welcome but the Christ Child is certainly not to be seen.

And then there are the cards sent out by politicians and companies . . . sporting family pictures, beautiful scenery, Victorian streetscapes, even drunken reindeers . . . but nary a nativity scene or a “Merry Christmas” . . . “Happy Holidays” and “Seasons Greetings”, are the pallid, politically correct, replacements.

Just for a moment, can you imagine the reaction that would be unleashed were we to tell the Jewish community that they could no longer have their Chanukah Menorah on the grounds of Queen’s Park: that in future a non-denominational Winter Candelabra would replace it . . . or that Ramadan would henceforth

be referred to as the Fall Diet . . . or that Kwanzaa had been deemed racist and could no longer be celebrated in public spaces.

I am confident that Christians would be the first to object to such proposals. So why don't we stand up for our own symbols and holidays?

Just as John the Baptist proclaimed the coming of the Messiah and called us to Him, we should be proud proclaimers of such Good News.

This is Christ's birthday that we celebrate: the long-awaited, highly anticipated Messiah is born, the birthday celebration of the most special

man that ever walked the earth. This holiday season, lets make it Christ's own. Let's make the effort this Christmas to do something wonderful for Christ: let each of us, like John the Baptist be a messenger, and proclaim the news to the world.

So, my wish for you and for everyone you meet, is a **very blessed and Merry Christmas.**

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