

Historic Commentary

(Second Sunday of Advent - Year B)



The Liturgy Letter

Commentary on Mark 1 from Selected Church Fathers and John Calvin

[Thomas Aquinas' curated commentary on Mark 1](#), from a 13th century document called the [Catena Aurea](#) that contains compiled verse by verse commentary on the Gospels from the patristics and others.

[Origen](#): The way of the Lord must be prepared within the heart; for great and spacious is the heart of man, as if it were a whole world. But see its greatness, not in bodily quantity, but in the power of the mind which enables it to encompass so great a knowledge of the truth. Prepare, therefore, in your hearts the way of the Lord, by a worthy manner of life. Keep straight the path of your life, so that the words of the Lord may enter in without hindrance.

[Augustine](#): Note that Mark mentions nothing of the nativity or infancy or youth of the Lord. He has made his Gospel begin directly with the preaching of John.

[Origen](#): The gospel is primarily concerned with Christ Jesus, who is the head of the whole body of those who are being saved. Mark conveys this point when he says, "The beginning of the gospel concerning Christ Jesus." ... In its unfolding the gospel has a beginning, a continuing middle and an end. The beginning can be viewed either as the entire Old Testament, with John the Baptist being its summarizing type, or (because he stands at the juncture of the new with the old) the final stages of the old covenant. This runs counter to those who would assign the two covenants to two different Gods.

[Cyril of Jerusalem](#): With baptism the old covenant ends and the new begins. This is seen in the fact that the inaugurator of the New Testament is John the Baptist. "Among those born of women there is none greater than John." He is the crown of all the prophetic tradition: "For all the prophets and the law prophesied until John." Of the gospel dispensation he was the firstfruits, for we read "the beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ" and after some words "John did baptize in the wilderness."

[Irenaeus](#): How plainly does the beginning of the gospel focus upon the expectations of the holy prophets. At once it points out that the One whom they confessed as God and Lord, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who had also made promise to him, would send his messenger before his face. This was John, crying in the wilderness, in "the spirit and

power of Elijah,” “Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.”¹³ For the prophets did not announce first one God and then another, but one and the same God under complementary aspects, and with many various names.

Tertullian: Now he called him an “angel” on account of the great consequence of the mighty deeds which he was to accomplish, comparable to those mighty deeds of Joshua the son of Nun about whom you have read. John served in the office of a prophet to announce God’s will, as the forerunner of the Anointed One. The Spirit, speaking in the voice of the Father, called John an “angel” in accord with the promise declared by Malachi: “Behold, I send my messenger to prepare the way before me.” It is not a novelty that the Holy Spirit would call those he has appointed ministers of his power “angels.”

Augustine: The efficacy of John’s baptism is attested by the holy way he lived as a person. His baptism was in accord with the justice of a just man, yet still a mere man, but one who had received extraordinary grace from the Lord, a grace so great that he was deemed worthy to precede the final Judge of history, and to point him out with his finger, and to fulfill the words of that prophecy: “The voice of one crying out in the desert, prepare the way for the Lord.”

Maximus of Turin: Voice and crying go together: the voice preaches faith; the cry calls for repentance; the voice, comfort; the cry, danger; the voice sings mercy; the cry announces judgment.

Jerome: The quotation is made up from two prophets, Malachi and Isaiah. From the first part: “Behold I send my messenger to prepare the way before me,” occurs at the close of Malachi. But the second part: “The voice of one crying,” etc., we read in Isaiah. On what ground then has Mark in the very beginning of his book set the words: “As it is written in the prophet Isaiah, Behold I send my messenger,” when, as we have said, it is [in part] not written in Isaiah at all, but in Malachi, the last of the twelve prophets? Let ignorant presumption solve this nice question if it can. I will ask pardon for being in the wrong.... The apostle has not rendered his original word for word, but using a paraphrase, he has given the sense in different terms.

Tertullian: John called for the baptism of repentance to prepare the way for the Lord. He himself led in that way by means of the sign and seal of repentance for all whom God was calling through grace to inherit the promise surely made to Abraham.... He called us to purge our minds of whatever impurity error had imparted, whatever contamination ignorance had engendered, which repentance would sweep and scour away, and cast out. So prepare the home of your heart by making it clean for the Holy Spirit.

Tertullian: Those who sought the baptism of repentance were dealt with as if candidates preparing for the baptismal remission and sanctification that were soon to follow in the ministry of Christ. When John preached baptism *for* “the remission of sins,” the declaration was made with reference to a *future* remission. If so, John’s call to repentance is to lead the way, and actual remission is to follow. This is what is meant by

“preparing the way.” But one who prepares does not himself perfect, but rather makes ready for another to perfect.

Cyprian: The Lord was baptized by his servant. The holy One who was destined to grant remission of sins did not himself disdain to submit his body to be cleansed with the water of regeneration.

Chrysostom: Since the Victim had not been offered, nor had the Holy Spirit yet descended, of what kind was this remission of sins?... Fittingly therefore, when he had said that he came “preaching the baptism of repentance,” he adds, “for the remission of sins”; as if to say: he persuaded them to repent of their sins, so that later they might more easily receive pardon through believing in Christ. For unless brought to it by repentance, they would not seek for pardon. His baptism therefore served no other end than as a preparation for belief in Christ.

Jerome: The baptism of John did not so much consist in the forgiveness of sins as in being a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins, that is, for a future remission, which was to follow through the sanctification of Christ.

Clement of Alexandria: The blessed John disdained hair obtained from flocks of sheep as smelling of luxury. Instead he chose camel’s hair, making his life’s pattern one of simplicity and frugality. For he also “ate locusts and wild honey,” sweet and spiritual food, preparing for the humble and self-controlled ways of the Lord. How could John have possibly worn a purple robe? He was one who avoided all false pretenses of the city and lived a calm existence in the desert apart from all frivolous pursuits, from anything ignoble or mean.

Jerome: John the Baptist had a religious mother and his father was a priest. Yet neither his mother’s affection nor his father’s affluence could induce him to live in his parents’ house at the risk of the world’s temptations. So he lived in the desert. Seeking Christ with his eyes, he refused to look at anything else. His rough garb, his girdle made of skins, his diet of locusts and wild honey were all alike designed to encourage virtue and continence. Later the spiritual descendants of the prophets, who were the monks of the Old Testament, would build for themselves huts by the waters of Jordan and forsaking the crowded cities live in these on pottage and wild herbs. As long as you are at home, make your cell your paradise, gather there the varied fruits of Scripture, let them be your favorite companions, and take its precepts to your heart.

Chrysostom: You may ask, why did he wear a leather girdle?... Elijah also was so clothed, and likewise many others among holy men, either because they were engaged in heavy labor, or were upon a journey, or in any other necessity that involved labor, and because they despised ornament, and followed an austere way of life.... Let us, putting away all excess, and drinking the healthy cup of moderation, live in a manner that is becoming and temperate. Let us give ourselves in earnest to prayer. And if we do not receive that for which we pray, let us persevere that we may receive it. And if we do receive it, then let

us persevere all the more for what we have received. For it is not his will to withhold the gift we ask for, but in his wisdom, to encourage our perseverance by delaying it.

Ambrose: Neither repentance avails without grace, nor grace without repentance; for repentance must first condemn sin, that grace may blot it out. So then John, who was a type of the law, came baptizing for repentance, while Christ came to offer grace.

Jerome: As he himself bodily preceded Christ as his forerunner, so also his baptism was the prologue to the Lord's baptism.

Augustine: John therefore was a foreteller of Christ, nearer to him in time than all who went before him. And because all the righteous ones and prophets of former times desired to see the fulfillment of what, through the revelation of the Spirit, they foresaw should come to pass—so also the Lord himself says that “many prophets and righteous men have desired to see those things which you see, and have not seen them; and to hear those things which you hear, and have not heard them.” Therefore it was said of John that he was more than a prophet, and that among all that were born of women there was none greater than he, because to the righteous who went before him it was only granted to foretell the coming of Christ, but to John it was given both to foretell him in his absence and to behold him in his presence, so that it should be found that to him was made manifest what the others had desired.

Chrysostom: John was setting forth the anticipatory and ancillary value of his own baptism, showing that it had no other purpose than to lead to repentance. He did not say he baptized with water of forgiveness, but of repentance. He pointed toward Christ's baptism, full of inexpressible gifts. John seems to be saying: “On being told that he comes after me, you must not think lightly of him because he comes later. When you understand the power of Christ's gift, you will see that I said nothing lofty or noble when I said ‘I am unworthy to untie the thong of his sandal.’ When you hear, ‘He is mightier than I,’ do not imagine that I said this by way of comparison. For I am not worthy to be ranked so much as among Christ's servants, no, not even the lowest of his servants, nor to receive the least honored portion of his ministry.” Therefore John did not simply say, “his sandals,” he said “the thong of his sandals,” the part counted the least of all.

Basil of Caesarea: The baptism of the Lord, however, surpasses all human powers of comprehension. It contains a glory beyond all that humanity hopes or prays for, a preeminence of grace and power which exceeds the others more than the sun outshines the stars. More than this, if the words of the righteous are recalled to mind, they prove even more conclusively its incomparable superiority. Yet, we must not therefore refrain from speaking of it, but, using the very utterances of our Lord Jesus Christ as our guides, we grope along the way, as with a mirror, or through the maze of an enigma. We must speak, not so as to diminish the greatness of the subject, by an exposition made in weakness of body and with the aid of a form of reasoning that is set at naught. We must speak to magnify the greatness and the long-suffering benevolence of the good God in tolerating our stammering attempts to speak about the prodigies of his love and grace in Christ Jesus.

Jerome: No baptism can be called perfect except that which depends on the cross and resurrection of Christ.

John Calvin: [Mark 1:1](#). The beginning of the Gospel. Though what we have hitherto taken out of Matthew and Luke is a part of the Gospel, yet it is not without reason that Mark makes the beginning of the Gospel to be the preaching of John the Baptist. For the Law and the Prophets then came to an end, ([John 1:17](#).) “The Law and the Prophets were until John: since that time the kingdom of God is preached,” ([Luke 16:16](#).) And with this agrees most fully the quotation which he makes from the Prophet Malachi, ([3:1](#).) In order to inflame the minds of his people with a stronger desire of the promised salvation, the Lord had determined to leave them, for a time, without new prophecies. We know that the last of the true and lawful prophets was Malachi.

Malachi, distinguishing the two conditions of the Church, places the one under the Law, and commences the other with the preaching of John. He unquestionably describes the Baptist, when he says, “Behold, I send my messenger,” ([Malachi 3:1](#);) for, as we have already said, that passage lays down an express distinction between the Law and the new order and condition of the Church. With the same view he had said a little before, (which is quoted by Mark, [[9:13](#)];) for the passages are quite similar,) “Behold, I send you Elijah the Prophet, before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord,” ([Malachi 4:5](#).) Again, “Behold, I send my messenger, and he shall prepare the way before me: and the Lord, whom ye seek, shall suddenly come to his temple,” ([Malachi 3:1](#).)

In both passages, the Lord promises a better condition of his Church than had existed under the Law, and this unquestionably points out the beginning of the Gospel. But before the Lord came to restore the Church, a forerunner or herald was to come, and announce that he was at hand. Hence we infer, that the abrogation of the Law, and the beginning of the Gospel, strictly speaking, took place when John began to preach.

The Evangelist John presents to us Christ clothed in flesh, “the Word made flesh,” ([John 1:14](#);) so that his birth and the whole history of his appearance are included in the Gospel. But here Mark inquires, when the Gospel began to be published, and, therefore, properly begins with John, who was its first minister. And with this view the Heavenly Father chose that the life of his Son should be buried, as it were, in silence, until the time of the full revelation arrived. For it did not happen without the undoubted Providence of God, that the Evangelists leave out the whole period which Christ spent in private, and pass at once from his earliest infancy to his thirtieth year, when he was openly exhibited to the world, invested with his public character as a Redeemer; Luke excepted, who slightly touches one indication of his future calling, which occurred about his twelfth year, ([Luke 2:42](#).)

It had a very close connection with this object, that we should be informed, first, that Christ is a true man, ([John 1:14](#);) and next, that he is “the Son of Abraham and of David,” ([Matthew 1:1](#);) as to both of which, the Lord has been pleased to give us an attestation. The other matters which we have examined, relating to “the shepherds,” ([Luke 2:8](#);) the “Magi,” ([Matthew 2:1](#);) and “Simeon,” ([Luke 2:25](#);) were intended to prove his Divinity.

What Luke relates about John and his father Zacharias, ([Luke 1:5](#)), was a sort of preparation for the Gospel.

There is no impropriety in the change of the person which is here made, in quoting the words of Malachi. According to the prophet, God says, I send my messenger, and he shall prepare the way Before Me. Mark introduces God as addressing the Son, Behold, I send my messenger before thy face, who shall prepare thy way Before Thee. But we see that Mark had no other intention, than to express more clearly the prophet's meaning. Mark designates Christ the Son of God The other Evangelists testify that he was born of the seed of Abraham and David, and therefore was the Son of man, ([Matthew 8:20](#).) But Mark shows us, that no redemption is to be expected but from the Son of God

[Mark 1:5](#). And were baptized, confessing their sins This confession was a testimony of repentance: for, as the Lord, in the sacraments, brings himself under obligation to us, as if he had given his own handwriting, so it is our duty, on the other hand, to reply to him. In Baptism, he declares that our sins are forgiven, and calls us to repentance. That men may come forward, in a right manner, to be baptized, confession of sins is demanded from them: otherwise the whole performance would be nothing but an idle mockery Let it be observed, that we are here speaking of adults, who ought not, we. are aware, to be admitted indiscriminately into the Church, or introduced by Baptism into the body of Christ, till an examination has been previously made...

Hence it is obvious, how absurdly this passage has been tortured by the Papists, to support auricular confession. There were no priests at hand, in whose ears each individual might privately mutter his sins; nor is it said that they enumerated all their sins; nor are we told that John left in charge to his disciples an ordinary rule for confession. Even granting to Papists all that they ask, confession will belong to Catechumens alone, and will have no place after Baptism. At all events, the law which they lay down for confession after Baptism, derives no countenance from John's example...

We must therefore hold by what I have already said, that John merely distinguishes, in this passage, between himself and the other ministers of baptism, on the one hand, and the power of Christ, on the other, and maintains the superiority of the master over the servants. And hence we deduce the general doctrine, as to what is done in baptism by men, and what is accomplished in it by the Son of God. To men has been committed nothing more than the administration of an outward and visible sign: the reality dwells with Christ alone.