

DESCENDING INTO GREATNESS

“Who Is Jesus?”

I've been holding my breath for almost two years. On May 19, cinemas will begin screening Ron Howard's latest suspenseful, action-packed thriller people have anticipated since 2003: *The Da Vinci Code*. The movie, starring Tom Hanks, is based on the novel that became a global sensation and spiritual phenomenon, weaving itself into the fabric of spiritual dialogue around the world. One reason for the book's phenomenal success is a radical suggestion that almost everything the Church ever taught us about Jesus is false. Brown depicts Jesus as a historical figure of staggering influence, one of the most inspirational leaders to ever live, whose legacy has been highjacked by the church, who transformed him into a God and saviour. In reality, Brown insists, Jesus is a great and powerful man, inspiring millions to live better lives, but just an ordinary Joe, married with children and trying to make a difference in the world.

Brown's description of Jesus is the most recent in a long line of historical reconstructions of the most momentous life that was ever lived. Some people believe that Jesus was a great teacher, a pious sage spinning enigmatic tales and proverbs. Some people insist that Jesus was a holy man, like Ghandi, inspiring people to peacemaking through passive non-resistance. Others view Jesus as a spiritual mystic, drawing people into a new understanding of themselves and a new experience of God. There are those who call him a miracle-worker, a social revolutionary, or a failed political insurrectionist. Then there are the four biographies preserved in the Bible.

The gospel written by Mark is probably the earliest recorded version of the life of Jesus. Mark's biography of Jesus is a vivid, lively narrative that church tradition tells us is based on anecdotes and recollections of Jesus' very close friend and disciple Peter, published within a few decades of Jesus' death. One thing that stands out in Mark's biography of Jesus is that right from the outset, starting in the prologue, Mark 1:1-13, Mark's first priority seems to be to ensure that his readers, before they travel too far into Jesus' story, understand the truth about who Jesus is so that they can understand the truth about what Jesus did. You get the sense from Mark that, right from his opening

words, he wants to pull the curtain back and reveal Jesus true identity.

Mark 1:1 [NIV – on Wizard of Oz background] — The beginning of the gospel about Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

Right from the outset, what Mark wants you to know is that the story he is about to tell, the story of Jesus, is the story of a man who is the Christ, the Son of God. Now Mark doesn't want you to be confused by what he means by that. Mark certainly doesn't want you to just take his word for it. So, in the rest of the prologue, he takes pains to uncover what it means for Jesus to be the Christ, the Son of God and he unfolds his reasons for believing that it is true. So, starting in the prologue, Mark gives the beginning of the good news about Jesus. Yet, to grasp the beginning of the Jesus story we really have to grasp the beginning of the human story. To grasp the beginning, you have to start at the beginning. In the movie, *Airplane 2*, Captain Steve McCroskey turns to his controller and demands, "Jacobs, I want to know absolutely everything that's happened up 'till now." "Well, let's see," Jacobs replies, "First the earth cooled. And, then the dinosaurs came, but they got too big and fat, so they all died, and they turned into oil. And, then the Arabs came and they all bought Mercedes Benzes." And so on, from the beginning.

This is absolutely everything that's happened up 'till Jesus. First the earth cooled. Then Adam and Eve came, created by God to be whole people experiencing the closeness of intimacy with God, the vulnerability of intimacy with each other, the mutuality of intimacy with creation, and the peace of intimacy with themselves. Then sin came and fragmented their experience of life. Guilt fractured their intimacy with God. Fear fractured their intimacy with each other. Grief fractured their intimacy with creation. Shame fractured their intimacy with themselves.

Sin had put the world off its rails but God didn't give up on the world. In Genesis God chose Israel to be the channel through which he would push back the darkness of sin and reclaim the world for good. In Exodus God rescued Israel from slavery in Egypt. He gave his vision of a godly life and a just society in his Law and he surrounded them with his powerful presence.

[Map of Exodus]

In Joshua, after forty years wandering in the wilderness, God miraculously opened a way for Israel to cross the Jordan River, enter the Promised Land, and settle it as their own. God appointed a godly king over them and a glorious temple for his powerful presence. He gave them everything they needed to push back the darkness of sin and model godly living and just society to the world. Yet, sin was still in control. In Numbers, they grumbled against God for forty years in the wilderness. In Judges, everybody did what was right in their own eyes. In Kings, 80% of Israel's kings led the people into idol worship and depravity. God's model society decayed and declined until he was forced to resort to drastic discipline. Israel was attacked by foreign invaders, destroyed, and carried into exile in modern day Iraq. Sin had won.

Yet, God repeatedly sent prophetic voices to Israel to remind them that, though it appeared that sin had won, God's powerful presence would one day return to Israel. God would visit his people, coming down to push back the darkness and reclaim this world for good.

Isaiah 40:3-5a [NIV – with the Exodus map as the background?] — A voice of one calling: “In the wilderness prepare the way for the LORD; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain. And the glory of the LORD will be revealed, and all people will see it together.”

When he did, God himself would reign as king and he would push back the darkness of sin once and for all. Poverty would be eradicated as the land prospered under his blessing. Class warfare would be history as the wealthy downgraded their lives to upgrade the lives of the poor. Disease would decline and life expectancy increase, until even centenarians were considered to be youths. War would be end as nations dismantled the technologies of war to create technology for peace. Racism would vanish as all the nations would stand together, worshiping God. The joy of music and dancing would prevail as all creation celebrated together the end of sin.

When God established his kingdom, the Law would be unnecessary because it will be written on every heart, so that people would intuitively want to do good. His Spirit would dwell inside of people, so that they would be empowered to do what is right. Their sins would be forgiven, once and for all. When it happens, the prophets would say, it would happen because of the Messiah, God's king, who will be responsible for it all.

According to Mark, it is with this vision of the kingdom that the Jesus story begins.

Mark 1:1-3 [NIV] — The beginning of the gospel about Jesus Christ, the Son of God. It is written in Isaiah the prophet: “I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way”, “a voice of one calling in the desert, ‘Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.’”

Where other biographies of Jesus begin with his family tree, angelic visitations, manger scenes, or a treatise about his place in history, Mark says that the true beginning of the Jesus story to be found in Isaiah’s prediction of the coming kingdom of God, that what the prophets predicted way back then was precisely what was happening because of Jesus. In Jesus, God restored his presence to earth to push back the darkness and reclaim our world for good.

How does Mark know? He has some clues. With Isaiah’s vision of God’s kingdom in the back of his mind, he turns to the prophet Malachi, who once predicted that before God would restore his presence to earth, pushing back the darkness and reclaiming the world for good, he would send a messenger, a preacher to prepare people’s hearts for the coming of God’s kingdom.

Malachi 3:1 [NIV] — See, I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me.

Reading this, Mark understands that the messenger of Malachi is the voice that Isaiah predicted would call out in the desert. So, he quotes them together to say, “When you hear about a preacher in the wilderness changing people’s hearts know that God’s kingdom is beginning!”

Mark 1:4-6 [NIV] — And so John came, baptizing in the desert region and preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River. John wore clothing made of camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey.

According to Mark, John the Baptist was the messenger preaching in the wilderness. The location of John’s ministry perfectly fit the bill. He preached in the wilderness. The style of John’s ministry perfectly fit the bill. In another passage, Malachi predicted that the ministry of the messenger would remind people of the ministry of Elijah, a famous prophet from 800 years earlier. Both John and Elijah were desert-dwellers who lived by the Jordan River. Both John and Elijah preached repentance, turning of people’s hearts back towards God. Baptism in the Jordan

River was the perfect symbol for repentance. When Israel entered their new life with God in the Promised Land, it was because God parted the Jordan River and they had passed through. Baptism in the Jordan was symbolically inviting people to cross the river all over again to initiate a fresh start with God. John and Elijah even shared the same uniform.

2 Kings 1:8 [NIV] — They replied, “[Elijah] was a man with a garment of hair and with a leather belt around his waist.”

Furthermore, John understood his own ministry as preparing the way for the Messiah, the king who would rule for God, the one who would restore God’s presence to his people and push back the darkness to reclaim the world for good.

Mark 1:7-8 [NIV] — And this was his message: “After me will come one more powerful than I, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

In a world without shoes, a world without modern drainage systems or sewage systems to wash away human and animal waste, during the course of a day, people’s feet got kind of dirty and disgusting. That’s why it was the job of only the lowest ranking slave to untie the master’s sandals and wash his feet after a day on the road. It was such a disgusting job that it was illegal for any Jew to be forced to perform this duty. Here’s the point. Though throngs of Jews flooded to John to be baptized as the messenger preparing the way, the one who would come after him would be so far superior to John that he would not even be worthy to serve as the lowest slave imaginable. Why? Because the one who would follow would restore the presence of God to the people by bringing the Holy Spirit into their lives, just as the prophets predicted of the Messiah.

Mark has set the stage. Now is the moment of truth. The next character on stage, the one who follows John, the one who brings the Spirit, is the person the Jews have anticipated for centuries, the one who will push back the darkness of sin and reclaim our world for good.

Mark 1:9 [NIV] — At that time Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan.

There must be some mistake. He’s a total nobody! He can’t be the Messiah. He’s from the wrong part of

Israel. Galilee, Israel's most northerly province, was too far away from Jerusalem to have any serious political or religious influence over the nation. Nazareth is a village so insignificant that it never even gets mentioned in the Old Testament or any Jewish historical writings. It is so unremarkable that even other Galileans laughed at the idea that a person from Nazareth could be the Messiah. Jesus can't be the one. He's barely got credentials and the ones he has are wrong! How could Mark be so sure that this nobody was somebody?

Mark is sure because Mark believes that, though Jesus is unimpressive from a human perspective, from the heavenly perspective, the perspective of God, Jesus perfectly fits the bill. Pulling back the curtain, Mark reveals

Jesus as Messiah: God's reigning king.

Mark 1:10 [NIV] — As Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove.

Jesus' story begins with him coming to John to be baptized, just like the Jewish throngs who had come before him. Yet, unlike the rest of the Jewish throngs, as Jesus comes up out of the water, heaven reacts. It says that Jesus saw the sky being ripped apart and the Holy Spirit coming down. Without telling us what that would have looked like, to see the sky ripped in two, Mark does tell us that what Jesus saw is God answering a prayer prayed by Isaiah almost 800 years earlier. Near the end of his book, Isaiah spends several chapters of envisioning what it will be like for God to finally initiate his kingdom on earth. As he does, he finds himself growing in excitement over the prospect of God pushing back the darkness reclaiming the earth for good. He gets anxious for God to get a move on and do it now. In Isaiah 64:1 he bursts into prayer.

Isaiah 64:1 [NIV] — Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down, that the mountains would tremble before you!

Isaiah prayer was that God would rip the sky apart and descend to earth to get his kingdom going. At Jesus' baptism, 800 years later, God finally answers Isaiah's prayer as he rips the sky apart and the Holy Spirit comes down and rests on Jesus. God had taken his first move to initiate his kingdom on earth, to push back the darkness and reclaim the world for good.

When the Spirit settled on Jesus, it provided another clue about what God was planning to do. Not only was

God initiating his kingdom on earth, he was inaugurating his kingdom through Jesus. Jesus would be the agent through whom God would push back the darkness and reclaim the world for good, just as Isaiah predicted of the Messiah in Isaiah 61:1-2.

Isaiah 61:1-2a [NIV] — The Spirit of the sovereign Lord is on me, because the Lord has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour...

According to Isaiah, when it comes time for God to “proclaim the year of his favour,” to finally initiate and inaugurate his kingdom on earth, you would know it because he would anoint and empower someone, the Messiah with his Spirit to do it. According to Mark, after centuries of waiting, at the moment of Jesus’ baptism, God was finally setting his kingdom in motion and he was doing it through Jesus, the Messiah, the king who would reign over our world for God.

Not only does Jesus’ baptism pull the curtain of his identity back so that we can see him as the Messiah, at the moment of Jesus’ baptism, something else happens that pulls the curtain of his identity back even further so that we can see him as divine: God in human flesh.

Mark 1:11a [NIV] — And a voice came from heaven: “You are my Son, whom I love...”

Just to make sure that nobody misses the point, as the Holy Spirit settles on Jesus as a dove, the silence is broken and Jesus hears God’s voice proclaiming him to be “God’s Son”. At one level, God is just affirming everything that we’ve already said about Jesus. God is quoting Psalm 2, an ancient Jewish song that was sung at every royal coronation ceremony in celebration of the new king’s anticipated success with the help of God. In Psalm 2:7, God speaks to the king and says, “You are my son,” meaning, “you will represent me to the people by doing my will, and being an agent of my leadership, guidance and provision.” By Jesus’ day, Psalm 2 was understood to be about the Messiah, so when God says to Jesus, “You are my son,” at some level he’s saying, “You are my king, the Messiah, implementing my rule with my power.”

Yet, there seems to be more than that. In Mark 1:1, Mark describes Jesus as the “Christ (Messiah), the Son of God”. If the phrase “Son of God” just means Messiah, it seems like an awfully redundant thing to say. Besides,

in ancient literature, when a phrase like, “you are my son,” was followed by a phrase like, “whom I love”, most often it was intended to imply that in some way the “sonship” was unique. It is often translated, “my only son”. I mention it because neither of the prophets quoted in Mark 1:2-3, neither Malachi nor Isaiah, ever predicted that the messenger was preparing the way for a human king. In both passages, the prophet expected that the voice in the wilderness would be followed by the arrival of God himself. Both prophets believed that once Israel had witnessed the ministry of the messenger like Elijah, they were to expect that the very next figure to arrive on the scene would be God himself. So, when in Mark, the messenger, John the Baptist, suddenly appears, the expectation is that, after centuries of waiting, God is about to burst onto the scene. Mark insists that this actually did happen in the person of Jesus. I think that this is Mark’s way of saying that Jesus was more than just another good, spiritual holy man. Instead, Jesus was a divine man. He was God in human flesh.

Mark doesn’t stop there. He continues to pull at that curtain to reveal even more of who Jesus truly was.

Not only is Jesus the Messiah, not only was he God in human flesh, in Mark 1 Jesus is revealed by Mark as saviour: God dying for our sin. Mark shows his cards when he reports the final phrase of God’s verbal affirmation of Jesus at his baptism.

Mark 1:11 [NIV] — And a voice came from heaven: “You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.”

That final phrase, “with you I am well pleased,” is a paraphrase of yet another prophecy of Isaiah. (Are you starting to get the sense that Mark believes that Jesus is a pretty central figure in Isaiah’s vision of God’s coming kingdom?) In Isaiah 42:1, Isaiah describes the coming Messiah in different terms than he has already used. Rather than describing him as the coming king, Isaiah describes him as a coming servant, a servant with a very specific role to play.

Isaiah 42:1 [NIV] — Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen one in whom I delight; I will put my Spirit on him and he will bring justice to the nations.

In this verse, Isaiah affirms again that the coming servant will be someone on whom God will put his Spirit (just as we’ve seen with the Spirit settling on Jesus in the form of a dove). He affirms that the role of the servant

will be to bring justice to the nations (just as we've talked about with respect to God's kingdom pushing back the darkness and reclaiming the world for good). Yet, as you read on in Isaiah's book, what you discover is that the servant accomplishes God's purposes in the world in a very different way than anyone expected.

Most of the Jews of Jesus' day had radical expectations of the Messiah. They believed that God's kingdom would come through the rise of a divinely-anointed human king in Israel who would throw off the oppressive rule of the Romans and conquer the Empire once and for all. They would establish Israel as the final, global superpower through whom God would rule the world, bringing justice by pushing back the darkness and reclaiming the world for Israel. Their expectation was that the Messiah would come in a flurry of military and political power, bringing God's kingdom to earth, doing things they way they were always meant to be done.

Isaiah 42, on the other hand, is the first of a series of poems, often called the "Servant Songs", that paint a very different picture of the kind of ministry God has in store for this chosen servant in whom he delights. The final servant song is found in Isaiah 52-53, where Isaiah describes in graphic detail the means through which God's kingdom comes in the world.

Isaiah 53:3-5 [TNIV] — He was despised and rejected by others, a man of suffering, and familiar with pain. Like one from whom people hide their faces he was despised, and we held him in low esteem. Surely he took up our pain and bore our suffering, yet we considered him punished by God, stricken by him, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed

The Messiah is not the national hero of glory and renown expected by Israel, but a lowly figure, despised by the very people he came to serve. God's kingdom is not established by a political power play, but by the Messiah becoming powerless and suffering on behalf of others. God's servant ushers in his kingdom, not by imposing death on others by military might, but by accepting death for himself, dying for the sins of others! He rules, not from a throne, but from the cross. Mark believes that Jesus is the Messiah, God's reigning king. He believes Jesus is divine, God come in human flesh to push back the darkness and reclaim the world for God. But, Mark believes that it is by dying on the cross that Jesus inaugurates God's kingdom in the world.

Mark concludes his portrait of Jesus with a snapshot of what Jesus' ministry is all about.

Mark 1:12-13 [NIV] — At once the Spirit sent him out into the desert, and he was in the desert forty days, being tempted by Satan. He was with the wild animals, and angels attended him.

Jesus' ministry on earth is a ministry that finds its origins in God, initiated, directed, and empowered by the Holy Spirit. His ministry was a battleground on which he fought for our lives and our world, filled with earthly and spiritual danger of opposing God's enemy, Satan, filled with the power of heaven and the support of angels to guarantee his victory. Ultimately, it was a ministry of the wilderness, which, in the Bible, is a place of new hope and new beginnings. The prophets were always calling people back to the wilderness to get a fresh start with God. It was to the wilderness that God brought Israel after rescuing them from slavery. It was in the wilderness that he gave them his Law and his presence. It was in the wilderness, the prophet Jeremiah says, that Israel first learned to love God. It was in the wilderness, Moses wrote, that they learned to trust in God's protection and provision. Jesus ministry was a ministry of the wilderness, where God would do something brand new in people's lives.

That is the Jesus that Mark wants us to meet. He is a Jesus who is truly the greatest human figure to ever live, God in human flesh, come to earth to inaugurate God's reign over the world. Yet, he is a Jesus who did not ascend, but descended into greatness, inaugurating God's kingdom as a servant rather than a king, by dying rather than killing, by forgiving rather than avenging, on the cross rather than on a throne. It is a Jesus who will change our lives and change the world if only we will let him be for us who he already is: God himself come down to earth to push back the darkness and reclaim our world for good.

