'It is a truth universally acknowledged, that single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife'; ‘All happy families resemble one another, but each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way’; ‘The boy stood on the burning deck / Whence all but he had fled’. Funny, isn’t it, how an opening sentence can make all the difference? We know not to judge a book by its cover, but often we do judge it by its opening lines. First impressions tend to stick – they put us off or they draw us in.

The opening of Mark’s gospel is about as bluff as it could be: ‘the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God’. Mark shoots from the hip. Not for him the lengthy prologues of the other evangelists – no genealogies or birth stories like Matthew and Luke, no theological discourses like John, just a stark statement: ‘the beginning of the good news [the gospel] of Jesus Christ, the Son of God’. And that same terseness continues throughout his gospel – Mark has only sixteen chapters to Matthew’s twenty-eight. His gospel is concise and compelling. Why not take this season of Advent as a chance to renew your acquaintance with it? – set aside an hour or so, sit down and read Mark’s account of the gospel of Christ from beginning to end.

Today we heard just its first eight verses. Of those verses seven – all but the first – are about John the Baptist. We’ll be hearing more about John next week, so today I’ll leave him to one side, and think instead about the passage from Isaiah that we heard as today’s first reading, a passage that Mark quotes in the gospel: ‘See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way; the voice of one crying in the wilderness: “Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight”’. Often when I’m thinking about what to say in a sermon, there is a single word that stands out and dominates my reading. In today’s passages it was the word ‘way’: ‘In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God’. Our Christian faith has long been seen as a way, a path of discipleship. In fact in the early church that was simply what it was called – the Acts of the Apostles tells us that Christians were known simply as followers of ‘the Way’. That’s reflected in the fact that our church parliament is still called a synod. Synod means a ‘shared way’. Admittedly synods often feel like pretty static gatherings, but the word comes from the Greek syn and hodos – syn meaning ‘with’ and hodos meaning ‘way’. To go to a synod is, or should be, to travel in companionship with one fellow Christians.

In Mark’s gospel the word ‘way’ is used on just six occasions, and each time Mark uses it we get a different angle, a new insight, into our faith. The first time we come across it is in the passage we heard today, a quotation from the prophet Isaiah. When Isaiah uses the phrase, he is thinking back to the Exodus, the people of Israel’s flight from Egypt to the Promised Land. In words made famous by Handel’s Messiah, he foresees a time when ‘every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made level, and the rough places plain’. Nowadays, in a more ecologically
destructive age, perhaps we don’t warm to those images as people might once have done; but they are not to be taken literally – what they point to is a time when, as Isaiah goes on to say, ‘the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together’. Mark borrows these words at the beginning of his gospel, because he believes them to have been fulfilled in the coming of Christ. John the Baptist, last and greatest of the prophets, prepares a way for Jesus, whose life metaphorically does lift up every valley - and literally reveals the glory of the Lord for all to see.

The next time we find the word ‘way’ is in chapter eight of the gospel. Jesus is travelling with his disciples through Galilee to the villages of Caesarea Philippi and ‘on the way’ he asks them, ‘Who do people say that I am?’. He receives a variety of replies – John the Baptist, or Elijah, or one of the prophets – but it’s Peter who speaks the truth: ‘You are the Messiah’. I don’t know about you, but I often find that it’s when travelling, particularly when walking with other people – and talking with them – that moments of insight come. Often it’s easier to talk about the deeper things in life when you’re doing something together, even something as simple as walking alongside one another. That’s how I imagine this conversation between Jesus and the disciples: walking together, talking freely, suddenly they realise who it is they are with – and the pattern repeats itself, of course, after the resurrection, on the road to Emmaus.

But then in the next chapter of Mark’s gospel, still as they are walking together, a slightly less edifying picture emerges. Picking up something of the disciples’ conversation, Jesus asks them, ‘what were you talking about on the way?’ Because they are embarrassed about the subject of their conversation, they remain silent. And why were they embarrassed? Because, Mark tells us, they had been arguing with one another about which of them was the greatest. Jesus doesn’t tell them off; he simply illustrates how mistaken they are, taking a little child and putting it among them: ‘Whoever wishes to be first must be last of all and servant of all’.

The last time we come across the ‘way’ is in the famous healing of Bartimaeus, the blind beggar. In first century Galilean society the blind were outcasts: of little practical use, they were therefore held to be of little importance. But Bartimaeus must have sensed that Jesus was different and, calling out to him, he got an unexpected response. Instead of pushing him aside, Jesus actually asks him a question: ‘What do you want me to do for you?’ Bartimaeus doesn’t have a healing thrust upon him. But when he asks that he might see again, immediately he regains his sight. It’s then that we hear the apparently insignificant words: he ‘followed Jesus on the way’. An insignificant phrase, but think how miraculous a change those words convey: a blind man, hitherto an outcast confined to one place, is now able to walk freely on the way with Jesus as one of his disciples.

It is on that same way of faith that we walk today. Our lives are a continual pilgrimage. There are moments of insight, like Peter’s at Caesarea Philippi; there are moments of error and self-deception; there are moments of healing and renewal. But – and in Advent especially we should recall this – the journey never ceases. As his disciples, we walk with Christ ‘in the way’; and in doing so we ‘prepare the way of the Lord’, making ready among us on earth a place for the glory of God to be revealed.