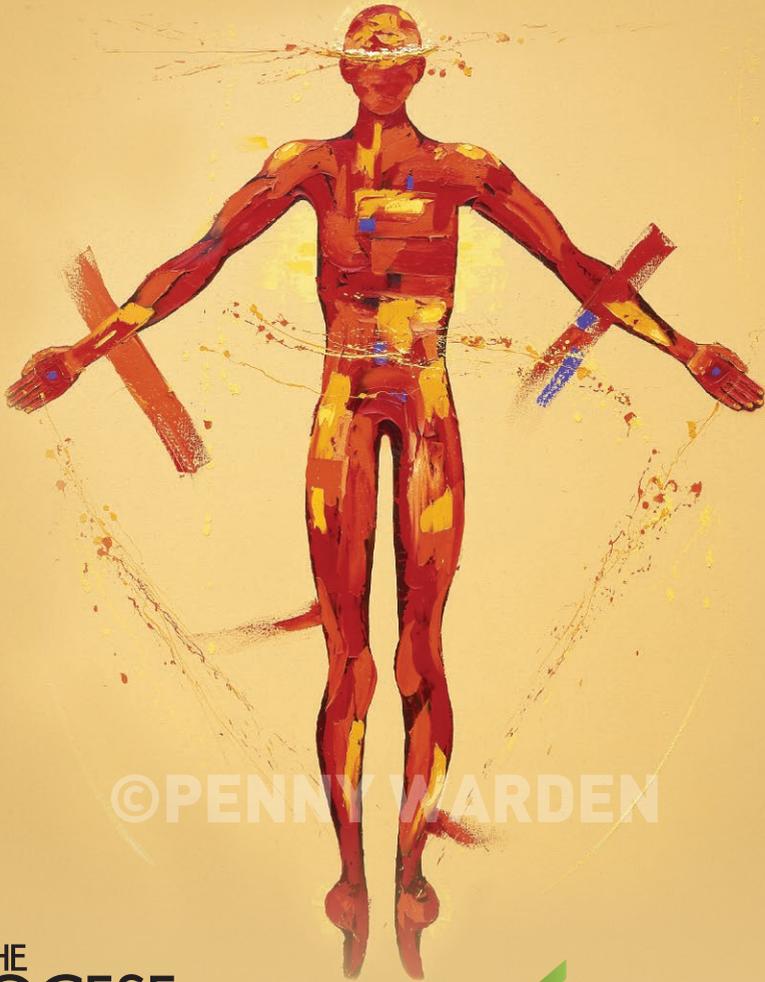
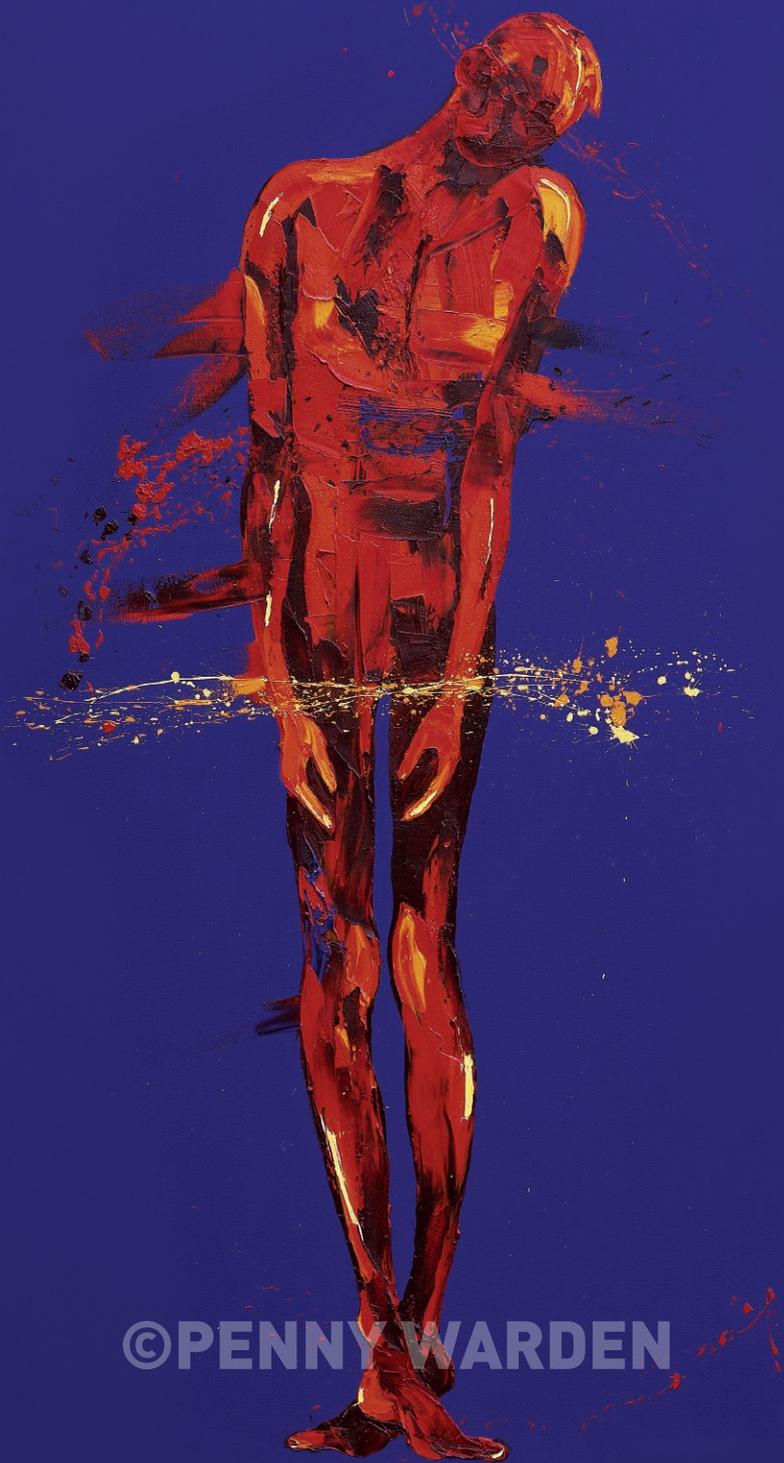


LENT 2021

# READ MARK AND LEARN



©PENNY WARDEN



©PENNY WARDEN

# FOREWORD

---

I love Mark's Gospel.

I love its breathless pace, written with all the energy of comparative youth. Mark may have been a teenager at the time of the crucifixion (Mark 14.51f gives us a hint), and may have been writing in his forties – giving us a very different perspective than that of John, writing with the reflections of a much older man. Mark uses the word 'immediately' (euthus in Greek) over 40 times, including 11 times in the first chapter.

I love the drama of the narrative, brought to life so powerfully by the 'Mark Drama' staged in the cathedral a year ago. Highly selective in the events he leaves out, Mark gives us vivid details about the events he does include, details left out by Matthew and Luke.

I love the fact that it's the earliest of the four Gospels, drawing on Peter's eyewitness testimony, giving a reliable historical source that both Matthew and Luke likely drew on when writing their own longer accounts of Jesus.

I love its brevity – the shortest of the four Gospels, easy to read through in little more than an hour. As we prepare to walk with Mark through the season of Lent, a great way to bookend our journey would be to read the whole Gospel through on Ash Wednesday, so that we get to see the whole landscape before we begin to read it bit by bit. And then to end our journey by reading it through again

on Easter Day, seeing how our study has changed our reading of the text.

As a namesake of the Gospel writer, I take comfort that although Mark made mistakes – he deserted Paul and Barnabas in Cyprus which caused them to fall out – he was faithful to the Lord and left a legacy through his writing. That he was eventually reconciled with Paul is shown in Paul's beautiful request to Timothy to bring Mark with him 'for he is useful in my ministry'. (2 Timothy 4.11)

Mark has preserved for us the words and deeds of Jesus. As we prepare to read the words of his Gospel through Lent, let's pray that we may meet afresh Jesus, the Word made flesh, and so be made ready to enter into the events of his passion and resurrection. Let us, indeed, read Mark and learn.

---

*Blessed Lord, who caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning:  
help us so to hear them, to read, mark, learn and inwardly digest them  
that, through patience, and the comfort of your holy word,  
we may embrace and for ever hold fast the hope of everlasting life,  
which you have given us in our Saviour Jesus Christ,  
who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit,  
one God, now and for ever.  
Amen.*

---

*The Venerable Mark Ireland,  
Archdeacon of Blackburn.*

# CONTENTS

---

|   |         |
|---|---------|
| <b>FOREWORD</b>   | PAGE 3  |
| <b>ASH WEDNESDAY</b><br>WEDNESDAY 17 <sup>TH</sup> FEBRUARY   | PAGE 7  |
| <b>WEEK 1</b><br>STARTING SUNDAY 21 <sup>ST</sup> FEBRUARY    | PAGE 11 |
| <b>WEEK 2</b><br>STARTING SUNDAY 28 <sup>TH</sup> FEBRUARY    | PAGE 18 |
| <b>WEEK 3</b><br>STARTING SUNDAY 7 <sup>TH</sup> MARCH        | PAGE 25 |
| <b>WEEK 4</b><br>STARTING SUNDAY 14 <sup>TH</sup> MARCH       | PAGE 32 |
| <b>WEEK 5</b><br>STARTING SUNDAY 21 <sup>ST</sup> MARCH       | PAGE 39 |
| <b>HOLY WEEK</b><br>STARTING SUNDAY 28 <sup>TH</sup> FEBRUARY | PAGE 46 |
| <b>WHAT'S NEXT?</b>   | PAGE 54 |



©PENNY WARDEN

# WEDNESDAY 17<sup>TH</sup> FEBRUARY

## ASH WEDNESDAY

### READ: MARK 1:1-13

*'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.'* **Mark 1:3**

Have you noticed the days getting a little longer and lighter? The prospect of milder weather on the horizon? For many people this is a trigger for a good spring-clean. Dusters, polish, and rubber gloves find their way onto supermarket shopping lists with a burst of activity to clear the decks after the dark, cold winter months to get ready for the brighter, warmer days ahead.

The opening verses of Mark's gospel describe a similar transition and are full of energy! The people of Israel had experienced dark times, they had been without a king and under the rulership of other nations for many years. They were waiting for the arrival of the 'Messiah' who God had promised to send to rescue them and these opening verses herald his imminent arrival. Get ready! The one you have been waiting for is on his way! Brighter days are ahead.

John the Baptist was sent by God to prepare the people for Jesus' arrival. John did this by calling them out into the wilderness, proclaiming that they needed to repent of their sins and turn to God for forgiveness. This was symbolised by baptism in the River Jordan. John adds to the sense of expectation by explaining that while he could only baptise with water, One was coming who would baptise with the Holy Spirit.

In a similar way to the people preparing for the arrival of their Messiah, Lent is an opportunity for us to prepare the way for Jesus as we look ahead to His victory over death in the resurrection on Easter Day. As the people went to the wilderness, so many of our churches will appear barren, bereft of flowers, and decoration. And as John the Baptist called for repentance so today, Ash Wednesday, marks the beginning of the Lenten season of repentance, self-denial and prayer.

As these early Spring days bring an opportunity to spring- clean our homes, the season of Lent enables us to spring clean our spiritual lives. To confess and be washed clean of our sin, to strip back excess, to generously give away and to turn to God in prayer and scripture. What might that look like for you over the next six weeks as we journey through Mark's Gospel together and prepare for Easter?

*Carolyn Barton, Diocesan Vision Coordinator.*

**READ: MARK 1:14-20**

*'And immediately they left their nets and followed him [...] Immediately he called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men, and followed him'*

**Mark 1:18, 20**

We live in an 'instant' world, where we can get what we want very quickly indeed. The internet and the growth of online shopping has seen to this. We can now shop for items and have them delivered on the same or the next day. We see the world news on our phones before it is even announced on the main television news broadcasts, we connect with social media and know all about other peoples' lives and more. We have new job titles such as 'social influencers'. All we have to do is 'like' and 'follow'.

Our demand for instant action and attention can be overwhelming and concerning at times. What fuels this? What drives so many to 'like' and 'follow' people on social media? These are questions for us to perhaps ponder during Lent.

There is a sense of the instant in our text today. The word 'immediately' is said twice in a short time. Immediately could be replaced by the words 'straight away', or 'at once'. There is a sense of urgency from the Gospel writer, Mark. We are only in chapter one of his writings and already Mark is getting straight to the point; that of Jesus' ministry and the Good News he brings. This is pressing news – no long preamble from Mark... let us get straight to the point!

So, what is the point for us today? We are all slowly picking up our lives following 2020; many of us are having to rethink the way we have done things for so long; many of us will have started to do things differently. That may include how we worship, how we pray, how we connect with God. How is our relationship with him today? Again, more questions to ponder during Lent.

Jesus brings Good News...he is our hope and our salvation. During 2020 he has been and will continue to be the rock for many to cling to in the storms of our lives...he is our refuge...our Great Shepherd who cares and loves each one of us. His faithfulness endures forever. Verse 20 reminds us that Jesus urgently calls us ...you and me, to follow him...to walk closely with him.

As we begin Lent, are we ready to immediately, with urgency, put down all the things that pull us away from Jesus? Are we ready to turn to him and 'like' and 'follow' him?

*The Revd Lesley Hinchcliffe, Vicar of St John's, Higham and St Anne's, Fence-in-Pendle.*

**READ: MARK 1:21-2:12**

*They were all amazed, and they kept on asking one another, 'What is this? A new teaching - with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him [...] they were all amazed and glorified God, saying, 'We have never seen anything like this!'*

**Mark 1:27; 2:12**

A few years ago I was leading a school assembly on one of Jesus' miracles. I told the story in as dramatic fashion as I could muster, building the suspense until the climactic miracle. A lone voice broke the subsequent 'pause-for-dramatic-effect'... 'Wow!'

The response shocked me. At first I assumed it was a mocking Year 6. But no. The exclamation came from a little boy in the Reception class - his face a picture of dumbfounded joy. He'd clearly never heard anything like this before and he was genuinely amazed. I'm ashamed to say I inwardly dismissed his 'naive innocence'. He would soon 'grow up' and respond to such stories with a familiarity-bred contempt like the rest of us ... or perhaps he'd learn to act out a faux-excitement but only when telling the story to kids! But that little boy's response was absolutely right. And mine (and the rest of those who filled that school hall) was wrong.

In this reading people are rightly amazed at Jesus (1:22, 27; 2:12). Jesus' words and actions are truly astonishing - His authority over unclean spirits (1:26, 34, 39) and various types of sickness (1:31, 34, 42; 2:12). His power to command (1:38, 43-44) and teach (1:21-22, 39). His disregard for legal taboos - healing on the Sabbath (1:21) and touching lepers (1:41). His repudiation of the desire for popularity (1:35-38, 44). He even forgives sins (2:5)! The inference of the scribes is partly correct (2:7) ... Jesus is saying and doing things only God can do. No wonder people were amazed ... they'd never seen anything like this (2:12).

But the truth is, neither have we. Often our familiarity with these stories blinds us to the enormity of what is being described. Jesus is saying and doing things that, were we present, would cause us to uncontrollably blurt out, 'wow!' Today, let's rediscover that child-like sense of open-mouthed astonishment at Jesus. Only then will we, like the disciples, come to Jesus 'at once' for help with our cares and concerns (1:30). Lest we allow our offended rationality and 'maturity' to lead us towards the disapproval and disbelief of the scribes (2:7).

*The Revd Andrew Meeson, Vicar of St John's, Leyland.*

**READ: MARK 2:13-17**

*‘When the teachers of the law who were Pharisees saw him eating with the ‘sinners’ and tax collectors, they asked his disciples: “Why does he eat with tax collectors and ‘sinners’?” On hearing this, Jesus said to them, “It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.’* **Mark 2:16-17**

‘He should have known better!’ How many times have we heard that phrase? Sometimes it can be because we have done something which we should have been aware we shouldn't do, and sometimes it is because we have done something right, which is not appreciated by others around us. We could say Jesus ‘rocked the boat’ in this passage.

Why did the Pharisees, known to be hypercritical and focusing on purity and obedience to the law, think that Jesus should have known better? Jesus called Levi, a tax collector in Capernaum, to follow Him. They were aghast – tax collectors were renowned for their dishonesty and extortion. It is likely Levi collected taxes for Herod Antipas and creamed off some of the money for himself. Most Jews in Jesus' day would shun tax collectors as those who sought riches rather than righteousness.

And then Jesus came, with an attitude of acceptance of Levi, and asked him to follow. And he did! He abandoned his job immediately and followed. And not only that, but Jesus befriended Levi and other ‘tax collectors and sinners’ and sat down to eat with them, a measure of true acceptance!

Let's reflect on the Pharisaic attitude – they looked down on ‘sinners’, and tried to keep them at arm's length. There was a great fear of contamination from those not approved of or accepted by the 1st century Jews. People were generally treated according to their race, their class and their jobs.

Does this sound familiar? Are we really as accepting as we think we are, or are there inherent attitudes and actions which we need to reflect on as we journey through Lent?

What about Jesus' attitude as we see it in these verses? He was, to quote a phrase ‘open to all comers’. He searched out ‘tax collectors and sinners’ and invited them to eat with Him – a sign of true acceptance. He didn't fear contamination, but He ‘contaminated’ all those around him with God's love and power. He asks us to do the same as we reach out to the communities around us, without fear, without judgement, and with the love and grace of Jesus Christ.

*Ruth Haldane, Warden of Lay Ministry.*

## WEEK 1 SUNDAY 21<sup>ST</sup> FEBRUARY

# THE FIRST SUNDAY OF LENT

### READ: MARK 2:18-3:6

*Jesus said to them, "The wedding guests cannot fast while the bridegroom is with them, can they? As long as they have the bridegroom with them, they cannot fast. The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast on that day."*

#### Mark 2:19-20

I really don't like fasting. But it works. I have always been challenged by these words of Jesus, "and then they will fast on that day." Jesus has just been questioned by the people as to why His disciples and He were seen feasting in the home of Levi, whilst the disciples of John the Baptist and of the Pharisees were known for their practice of fasting rather than feasting. Jesus answers that His presence among them is a cause for celebration, like a wedding feast, when fasting would be inappropriate. However there will come a time when the bridegroom is taken away from them "and then they will fast on that day."

For the disciples, the reference to the bridegroom being taken away from them would have pointed forward both to the Passion and the Ascension. Jesus clearly assumed that fasting would be part of the devotional life of His followers after He was taken from them, and so it has been down the centuries. Fasting in the Christian tradition can mean giving up something for a season (such as sweets or alcohol in Lent) but it also means giving up food altogether for a limited period, perhaps a day, and drinking only water.

I find the purposes of these two types of fasting are quite different. Giving up something for Lent is good for self-discipline, challenges my selfish consumerism and helps me to remember the poor. Fasting from food for a day or part of a day is a way of praying more intently about a specific issue or problem, sometimes where I can see no way through and I just need a breakthrough from God. In ways I can't explain, going without food helps me hear God more clearly and sometimes seems to remove a blockage in the spiritual realm.

Is there some issue you are wrestling with, where you cannot see the way forward? Why not plan a day of prayer and fasting one day this Lent? Fasting for 24 hours (i.e. missing two meals and the snacks in between) is a good place to start and is quite straightforward for people in good health. Keep the mealtimes as times of prayer, and instead of satisfying your body, ask God to show you how you can satisfy Him.

*The Venerable Mark Ireland, Archdeacon of Blackburn.*

**READ: MARK 3:7-19**

*'Hearing all that [Jesus] was doing, they came to him in great numbers from Judea, Jerusalem, Idumea, beyond the Jordan, and the region around Tyre and Sidon [...] He went up the mountain and called to him those whom he wanted, and they came to him. And he appointed twelve [...] to be with him'* **Mark 3:8,13-14**

In the mid 1950's millions of people flocked to London to hear Billy Graham. Coaches left from all over the UK. In first century Palestine a similar phenomenon was happening. Crowds arrived at the seaside to see, hear and touch Jesus. No longer just from the local area, they travelled considerable distances from every direction - the coast, the desert, the hills and plains. Where do we come from?

Jesus was busy! So many needs, so much compassion, so many demands – so much He could do! BUT... at the right time He is able to walk - or, with the practical help of His disciples, sail away.

The scene changes. Jesus goes up a mountain to find a quiet place alone with God. Not just to pray and recharge the batteries for more of the same, but to see things from God's perspective. He emerges with His next steps clear. For now He will turn his attention from the crowds to individuals.

He calls several disciples to join Him on the mountain and chooses 12 of them. First and foremost just to be with Him – before fulfilling a particular task. There is radical symbolism in the choice of twelve; there is interesting symbolism in the diversity of those named - in temperament, background, strengths - all revealed by their names. But what is really striking is that Jesus already knows them. And chooses to invest time in them. If they are going to work together there must be relationship. You can almost hear the smile in His voice as gives them nicknames!

Two challenges for us this Lent: First, are we in danger of becoming too busy, caught up in tasks and the demands placed on us? Time to find a space with God to assess! Time to get His perspective on our next steps.

Second, who in our life do we need to invest time in? Deepen relationships with? Time to know and value our friends (and colleagues?)! Time to deliberately make time for people with all their potentials, pitfalls and challenges!

*Father God, drop into my mind a person or situation.  
Give me the courage and wisdom to act. Amen.*

*Melanie Clark, Assistant Warden of Lay Ministry.*

**READ: MARK 3:20-30**

*'When his family heard it, they went out to restrain him, for people were saying, 'He has gone out of his mind.' And the scribes who came down from Jerusalem said, 'He has Beelzebul, and by the ruler of the demons he casts out demons.'* **Mark 3:21-22**

It seems incredible to us that people should react to Jesus as they did in today's passage. Today, Jesus is admired and respected almost universally by people who wouldn't call themselves Christians. So even Gandhi is purported to have said, "I like your Christ. I do not like your Christians."

But the Jesus of the Bible is far more divisive than the Jesus of whom people are often thinking. The response of people to the Jesus of the Bible wasn't one of admiration, even if they didn't believe in Him. When they heard what Jesus had to say about himself, and His claims to forgive sins and even to be Lord of the Sabbath, there were only three options available to them. Either Jesus was mad, as his family think here in verse 21, or they thought he was bad, as the teachers of the law think in verse 22. No-one thought Jesus was merely a good teacher. As CS Lewis famously said:

*But the Jesus of the Bible is far more divisive than the Jesus of whom people are often thinking. The response of people to the Jesus of the Bible wasn't one of admiration, even if they didn't believe in Him.*

"A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic—on the level with the man who says he is a poached egg—or else he would be the Devil of Hell." - C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*.

But Jesus is having none of it. He dismisses their claim that He's evil by showing that it's evil that He's come to defeat. But then He gives a far starker warning. The error of the teachers of the law, who ascribed the work of the Holy Spirit in Jesus to Satan, was an error that would have eternal consequences. For to reject Jesus and claim He was evil was to blaspheme against the Holy Spirit, and so to reject the only hope of forgiveness.

And so the third option is the one we must take. Jesus is God. God himself, come to rescue us from the powers of evil and darkness, to forgive us all our sins and slanders. So how will you respond to Jesus? Was He mad, was He bad, or was He truly God?

*The Revd Duncan Bell, Associate Vicar, St Andrew's, Leyland.*

**READ: MARK 3:31-35**

*'Looking at those who sat around him, he said "Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother."'* **Mark 3:34-35**

Are you always looking to the past? Thinking about the 'good old days' and resting on your laurels? Do you often think 'what if' when it should be 'what is'? Do you seek to attend reunions to reminisce with old friends? Today, many people complain about their situation and yearn for change or a return to a pre-Covid normal.

We should attend to the present and the future, these are positively for us. Don't get me wrong, we should be lovingly grateful for all that has been given to us by God and that our parents and family have given in love and understanding over the years, but our service to God and our neighbours can only be given in the present with love and faith for the future.

Could it be that Jesus was in a similar frame of mind?

When he was told *'Your mother and your brother and sisters are outside'* he replied *'Here are my mother and my brothers'* referring to the many people who were around him listening to His teaching. This was not disrespecting His biological family; but rather recognising that the people with Him were His new family, the family of God. We should endeavour to bring all people into this family, without any judgement, and look for the good in everyone, although sometimes we might feel that we have to work harder to find it in some.

*We should endeavour to bring all people into this family... and look for the good in everyone, although sometimes we might feel that we have to work harder to find it in some.*

Jesus also explained how to become a member of His father's family *'Whosoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother'*. This family membership is for all who receive Jesus and believe in his name - *'the right to become children of God'* (John 1:12).

At this time, let us leave the past in the background, be penitent and seek to bring all into his family. Let us seek out those who have turned away from God, or who now question His existence, and the many who are left alone without family.

This is the message to us, and the message which we are to proclaim in God's name. 'Love and trust Jesus today as your Lord and Saviour, and He will make you part of God's everlasting family, then go and proclaim His Word and work in His service.'

*John Shaw, Lay-member of St John's, Higham.*

**READ: MARK 4:1-20**

*'And these are the ones sown on the good soil: they hear the word and accept it and bear fruit, thirty and sixty and a hundredfold.'* **Mark 4:20**

A recent preoccupation of mine is house plants. On a trip to the Butterfly House in Lancaster a little over a year ago, one of the gardeners gave the children and me some cuttings from a Fiddle Leaf Fig tree and encouraged us to try propagating them. After a little internet searching, the cuttings were trimmed, and the kitchen windowsill was full of jars of water each with one or two cuttings inside. One by one those cuttings died. All that remained was one solitary leaf, which after 3 months of sitting in water finally began to root. When the roots were long enough, I planted it in soil and joined a Facebook group for more advice. Unfortunately, what I discovered was that my poor solitary well-tended leaf, though rooted, would never produce a plant of its own! It still sits on my windowsill, planted in soil, alive, but still only one solitary leaf.

Nevertheless, my interest was piqued and this Facebook group of like-minded obsessives taught me all about the right mix of soil, the best place to position your tree, how often (or how little) to water it and how to deal with roots. So, when Fiddle Leaf Figs could be found in the middle of Lidl one week, I bought one knowing this time my tree would have the soil and conditions it needed to thrive.

My first little leaf will never bear fruit, just like those seeds that fall on poor quality soil, or the Word of God that falls on deaf ears. What use is a tree that never grows? What use is the Word of God if it remains a word and never turns into action?

I wonder if there's anything getting in the way of you bearing fruit this season? Does an attitude of disbelief stop the word of God from ever getting a hold (v.15)? Does hardship draw you away from truth (v.17)? Do the 'cares of the world, the lure of wealth and the desire for other things' seem more appealing (v.19)? Or is your soil good? Is it free of stones and weeds and fortified with nutrients that promote growth? When we do the ground-work of faith, nurturing our spirit through reading and meditating on the scriptures, and spend time in prayer, then our heart's desires will align with God's own heart. Then we cannot help but bear God's fruit.

*What use is a tree  
that never grows?  
What use is the Word  
of God if it remains a  
word and never turns  
into action?*

*The Revd Emma Swarbrick, Assistant Curate, St. Thomas', Blackpool.*

**READ: MARK 4:21-34**

*'It is like a mustard seed which at the time of its sowing in the soil is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; yet once it is sown it grows into the biggest shrub of them all.'* **Mark 4:31**

Just over six years ago we started opening St. Peter's Church on a Monday evening from 6-8 p.m. for anyone to pop in and have a brew and a chat. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic we would average 50-60 people attending each week receiving a three-course meal free of charge. As a result of this there have been many wonderful encounters with people, most of whom I would probably have never come across in the normal day-to-day life of the parish. We have had a few weddings, funerals, and enquiries about faith as a direct result of being willing to be open to an encounter. We call the project, Mustard Seed Monday!

Most of my ministry has been spent chasing around after people and I am not sure whether it was for my benefit or theirs. Yet as I look back, the most fruitful aspect of ministry for me I think has been those chance meetings which I have had, and I now believe they were Spirit-led. Lent serves to remind us that Jesus was led into the wilderness by the Holy Spirit for the purposes of an encounter. Now we too must allow the Holy Spirit to draw us back into a wilderness so that we might encounter the God of the silence. From these small journeys we make in Lent, the few minutes we give to God amidst the busyness of our lives, the impact of that encounter is enormous.

*Lent serves to remind us that Jesus was led into the wilderness by the Holy Spirit for the purposes of an encounter. Now we too must allow the Holy Spirit to draw us back into a wilderness that we might encounter the God of the silence.*

I love the chance encounters that my ministry here in Fleetwood has afforded me. In the great scheme of things they may well appear small and insignificant, but to those experiencing the encounter they are caught up in the things eternal. Small seeds set, which I may never see the harvest of, but Spirit-initiated they are drawn into the life of the Eternal. The chance encounters with God in the few moments of silence serve to shape us ever more into the glorious image of God. Small things indeed but of huge consequence eternally!

*The Revd Canon John Hall, Vicar, St Peter & St David Fleetwood.*

**READ: MARK 4:35-41**

*[Jesus] woke up and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, 'Peace! Be still!' Then the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm. He said to [the disciples], 'Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?' And they were filled with great awe and said to one another, 'Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?' Mark 4:39-41*

Following a full day of listening to Jesus' stories about seeds and living fruitful lives, the disciples were probably relieved at Jesus' request to leave the crowds behind and cross the lake. As experienced fishermen, they were used to braving the elements. However, this journey would be life changing. As they sailed, Mark recalls that the windstorm was great, waves beat into the boat so that it was swamped. Despite all their experience and human strength, they realised that death was staring them in the face. In fearful panic, they called out, 'Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?'

We can empathise with their raw honesty. They had sacrificed everything to follow this man and now they faced death with bitterness at his seeming indifference. Jesus awoke; he faced the wind and waves and shouted authoritatively, 'Peace! Be Still!' Immediately, the wind stopped. Into the stillness, Jesus turned and questioned why they were afraid and why they were without faith. Following Jesus' words, the disciples were awestruck and asked themselves one of the most important questions anyone will ever ask; 'who then is this, that even the winds and the sea obey him?'

In their journey through storms to stillness, the disciples learnt that Jesus was with them throughout. They saw first-hand His authority over the created world and how he used his power to save them. Unlike the plants with shallow roots that withered when problems came along. Jesus wanted His friends to be deep rooted with a thriving faith. By journeying with the disciples through the storm, He was showing them that he could be trusted because of who he was. Their fears could be transformed into faith.

Whatever storms and fears we are facing, Jesus, the Lord over creation, is with us; He hears our cries for help; He acts in ways no one else can. Tell Jesus what is on your mind knowing that He wants you to grow strong in your faith. Sit quietly and listen to Jesus' response to your deepest needs, 'Peace! Be Still.'

The disciples wondered if Jesus cared. The answer is yes – deeply. The next day, they see why He was so keen to cross a stormy lake, late at night. Another person, without hope, was needing his words of transformation.

*Joy Rushton, Diocesan Being Witnesses Manager.*

**WEEK 2 SUNDAY 28<sup>TH</sup> FEBRUARY**

# THE SECOND SUNDAY OF LENT

## **READ: MARK 5:1-20**

*'They came to Jesus and saw the demoniac sitting there, clothed and in his right mind, the very man who had had the legion; and they were afraid. [...] Then they began to beg Jesus to leave their neighbourhood.'* **Mark 5:15 & 17**

There's a familiar narrative in life that goes something along the lines of 'If it isn't broken, don't fix it!' Whether it is in the workplace, the family home, the local community even in the Church, there seems to be an in-built resistance to change, particularly when that change disturbs the comfort and normality of all that is familiar to us. The passage before us today from Mark Chapter 5 is an awesome example of God breaking into the normality of daily life and bringing about significant change. In this instance the laws of nature appear to be turned on their head as the demon-possessed man is released from his bondage and found to be in his right mind once again.

As Jesus commands Legion to come out of the traumatised man, it's easy to be distracted by the drama of the moment as our attention is understandably caught by the herd of pigs running to their death, not to mention the associated financial loss to the swineherd. But these incidents are marginal to the centre-point of the story in which Jesus is recognised as the Son of the Most High God by Legion and whose authority is clearly revealed as He commands the unclean spirit to leave the man.

Mark tells us that following the deliverance, the local people were afraid and begged Jesus to leave their neighbourhood. How strange! When Jesus stepped out of the boat He was immediately confronted by evil in the form of the possessed man. His response was to confront that evil and bring peace and restoration to the demoniac and the community. Surely this would have been a cause for celebration—but no! It would seem that as the crowd gathered they were more afraid of the power of God at work than a man possessed by a demon! It's as if the familiarity of the harmful situation had become 'normalized' and something that the people were prepared to live with. In disturbing their 'normality' Jesus confronts evil and ushers in something of the transforming power of the Kingdom of God, which of course is not welcomed by everyone!

It is a sad moment in life when individuals, communities and churches are more shocked by the power of God at work in the world today than we are by evil and sinfulness in our midst. As we enter the second week of Lent what might God be saying to us and where might we need Him to break into our lives afresh?

*The Very Revd Peter Howell-Jones, Dean of Blackburn.*

**READ: MARK 5:21-43**

*Jesus told the synagogue ruler, "Don't be afraid; just believe." Mark 5:36*

Our readings today concern two people who are in desperate situations. We are first introduced to a man of good social standing, a synagogue ruler. We are even told his name, Jairus, although in Mark's gospel very few characters are named. His despair concerns the illness of his 'little daughter' and we are informed that this illness is serious - *'My little daughter is dying.'* - a parent's worst nightmare. Jesus agrees to go with him but a large crowd is pressing in.

We are then introduced to a nameless woman and her plight is described as *'bleeding for 12 years.'* She has seen many doctors but none have been helpful and now her money has gone. This description hides a lot of detail, but her desperate situation is more than physical. Her financial situation is a worry and, according to Old Testament law, she is ritually unclean. That means everyone who comes in contact with her will also be ritually unclean. She is, as one commentator puts it, 'walking pollution'.

The contrast is striking but their situations are similar - they are both beyond human help. Jairus, despite all his advantages and social standing, has no advantage when approaching Jesus. A woman who has nowhere to turn can still have hope (v28). So she reaches out to touch Jesus and we are told something happens immediately, 'her bleeding stops.'

Perhaps surprisingly, Jesus wants her to come forward and acknowledge what she has done. His words to her tell us the reason why: *'Daughter, your faith has healed you. Go in peace and be freed from your suffering.'* Mark then takes us back to Jairus whose plight has just got worse.

We sometimes hear people say 'Where there's life there's hope' but the men from Jairus' house tell him that all hope is gone. *'Your daughter is dead...'* (v35). Going to the house Jesus raises the little girl to life, much to everyone's amazement (v42).

In both cases Jesus leaves behind a transformed situation, and in both cases the centrality of faith is key. Jesus tells the woman her faith has healed her (v34). When Jairus is told his daughter has died Jesus tells him to believe (v36).

In this passage we have seen Jesus heal a woman no doctor could cure and raise a girl back to life when all hope had gone. Both characters had seen the hand of God in their lives but they would continue to see sickness and death, just as we do. But we now know that we have a Saviour who is greater than these and that His name is Jesus. His powerful word comes down through the centuries to us, *'Do not be afraid; just believe.'*

*The Revd Alan Hogarth, Vicar, St Paul's, Withnall & St Barnabas, Heapey.*

**READ: MARK 6:1-6**

*'[Jesus] left that place and came to his home town, and his disciples followed him [...] And he could do no deed of power there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them.'* **Mark 6:1,5**

Jesus has returned to Nazareth and it's a difficult visit. We could spend time looking at the attitudes of the people, the whys and wherefores of them rejecting him, the social complications of village structure, or the gradual escalation of the tension between Jesus and the authorities. But instead, let's take it from another angle - the heart of Jesus. The way he dealt with people: for He is our role model, whom we are trying to become more like this Lent.

Jesus was probably returning a second time to his childhood hometown; in Luke 4 v16-20 we see that he'd been about a year before this when things hadn't gone too well. The locals had tried to murder Him. We also read that Nazareth was a non-entity of a place, unimportant and lost in the Galilean hills. Nathaniel even says "Can any good thing come out of Nazareth?" (John 1 v46). And Jesus was by now a celebrity. He'd fed the hungry, preached and taught, healed the sick, and raised the dead. Yet he returned to the small and insignificant - why? Because He longed for the seemingly unimportant and insignificant to be loved, healed and saved. He taught them; they were astounded by his depth of insight and his wisdom (v2). He knew the healing He would bring to body and soul was for all. *'And he laid his hand on a few sick people and they were cured'* (v5.) Jesus wasn't worried about numbers, He was concerned for individuals. And he returned to a

situation where He knew there may be conflict. He didn't seek it out, but it didn't put him off. He did this because he knew the importance of his message.

*How often do we overlook the small and insignificant in our lives where we could show the love of Jesus?*

So what does this look like practically for us? How often do we overlook the small and insignificant in our lives where we could show the love of Jesus? And how often do we avoid showing love to those with whom we disagree or those with whom we have a "history"?

Today, pray that God will help you use the small and insignificant moments to show love to the people who may seem insignificant in our lives. (Think postworker or checkout assistant.) Ask for the opportunity and courage to go back to those who we find a challenge, because they, too, are God's children and need to be shown His love.

*Peter Williams, Assistant Warden of Lay Ministry.*

**READ: MARK 6:7-13**

*'He called the twelve and began to send them out two by two, and gave them authority over the unclean spirits. He ordered them to take nothing for their journey except a staff; no bread, no bag, no money in their belts'. Mark 6:7-8*

Imagine, if you can, how you would react given such a command, "drop everything you are doing now! I am sending you on a journey!" What about all your plans? It could be the very special holiday you have been planning for months or that long awaited family celebration with all the planning that's taken place, such as when and where. Not to mention all the telephone conversations, diaries consulted and cross-checked to agree the date suitable for everyone to get together. All suddenly brought to a halt... to a stop. What would you do? Perhaps some of this sudden change to our routines and plans is reminiscent of living with all the disruptions to our 'normal' way of life due to Covid 19?

Your instructions are, "take nothing with you, you only need the clothes you stand up in, no provision for how or when you might eat, no idea where you are going to stay and, if you are not made welcome or possibly made to feel uncomfortable in some way, just move on to the next place". Indeed, in this day and age imagine going on such a journey with no mobile phone and no communication with home - in other words, totally out of your control.

This text gives us much food for thought in 2021 in all our busyness and all our ways of seeking control. In this time of Lent perhaps we need to look at how we respond to day-to-day situations and how we go about carrying out God's commands. Do we let God have control in our lives?

Lent is a penitential time - time to reflect. God provides all we need and we are to have faith and trust in Him, just as the disciples did going off in their pairs to tell the Good News.

So maybe today we must put down our 'to-do list', concentrate on all we have and resist planning everything and seeking control. Let God in.

*Rosemary Hartley, Lay-member of St Anne's, Fence-in-Pendle.*

*Imagine, if you can, how you would react given such a command, "drop everything you are doing now! I am sending you on a journey!" What about all your plans? ...All suddenly brought to a halt... to a stop. What would you do?*

**READ: MARK 6:14-29**

*'[A soldier] went and beheaded [John] in the prison, brought his head on a platter, and gave it to the girl. Then the girl gave it to her mother. When his disciples heard about it, they came and took his body, and laid it in a tomb.'* **Mark 6:27b-29**

Human beings are complex characters – we are all made in the image of God – yet we do things that go against His teaching – or at least I do. As we come to this passage of scripture we encounter a group of people who are fully committed to living for themselves. At the heart of the story is a King who has an affair and who is called to repentance by John the Baptist. In these fifteen verses we get an incredible view of the deceitfulness and destructiveness of sin as well as a stark reminder of the significant opposition we can face as we stand for the things of God in a world that is in rebellion against Him.

This is a gruesome passage and it reveals the complexity of the character of Herod. At one and the same time, he feared John and respected him. At one and the same time he dreaded John's tongue and yet found pleasure in listening to him. We also catch a glimpse of the sin of pride. Herod in his brashness and vanity promises the daughter of Herodias *'anything you wish – even up to fifty percent of my wealth'*. All because this young dancing girl pleased Herod and his guests. She didn't want his wealth, but asked for the head of John the Baptist to be served on a platter. Herod duly obliged and ordered the execution of John. He acted in a cowardly manner just to save face and to seek favour. I presume none of us have caused a fellow human to be executed in order to save face amongst our friends and family, but by our actions have we caused someone discomfort and alienation to 'save face'?

John the Baptist stands as a man of courage. Here was a man of the desert who loved the wide open spaces and to have been cast into a dark dungeon must have been real torture. Yet, in this passage, we see that John preferred death to falsehood. He lived for the truth but it was the cause of his death. John in his ministry sought to bring to others God's voice – he was their conscience and many responded.

John stood for the truth; He followed God faithfully and he died a martyr's death. But of course, his death was not the end for him or for the mission of God in the world. John paved the way for Jesus and his death foreshadowed the death of Christ. And it's because of the death and resurrection of Jesus that we have the hope of eternal life and a message worth dying for.

The Scriptures are clear that, as we stand for Christ, we will suffer. But we also know that, while we may be despised by kings in this life, we will reign with The King for all eternity.

*The Revd David Ward, Vicar, St James' Brindle.*

## READ: MARK 6:30-44

*'As he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them because they were like sheep without a shepherd'* **Mark 6:34**

The Feeding of the Five Thousand is a dramatic tale with all the features of a good story. Perhaps this is why it is popular in children's selections of Bible Stories. Jesus is teaching when he is presented with a problem (the crowd are hungry). All the conditions (it is late, far from civilisation and there is no food to be had) work against him, and so the reader is intrigued to see what solution Jesus will provide. As it turns out, there is a most satisfying resolution. He performs a miracle to ensure that all five thousand people are fed.

Important though the miracle is, this account offers much more and, if we are not careful, we can be distracted by Jesus's extraordinary deed. It is in the minor, easily-overlooked details that we encounter the real Jesus.

First, note the context of this miracle: the disciples have gathered around Jesus to tell him of the teaching and ministering they have done. Jesus and the Gospel-writer both acknowledge their tiredness. They are fatigued by the constant bustle and rarely even have leisure to eat. Jesus understands their need and encourages them to *'rest a while'*.

Second, Jesus's reaction to the crowd who follow them into the deserted place is important - He feels compassion. Regardless of his exhaustion and that of the disciples he has time for this crowd. Again, he is aware of their need - this time, their spiritual need. They are *'sheep without a shepherd'* and He teaches them *'many things'*.

Third, Jesus' treatment of the crowd is significant. He continues teaching until *'very late'*. He is so immersed in the word of the Father that he appears unaware that his audience are hungry. At this point, the disciples seem more aware of the practical realities than the unworldly Jesus. Alerted to the needs of his hearers though, He will not hear of the crowd being dismissed, and settles them down to eat.

Throughout this passage, then, in the little details we see a Jesus for whom the spiritual and physical needs of his followers are inextricably entwined. Jesus safeguards the whole of our being. He does not demand from us ascetic self-denial, or mortification of the body, or a kind of pained and joyless martyrdom but acknowledges his followers' need for rest and food as well as teaching. This Lent, may we too cherish and feed the whole of our God-created being.

*William Young, Lay member of St Paul's, Adlington.*

**READ: MARK 6:45-56**

*'When he saw that they were straining at the oars against an adverse wind, he came towards them early in the morning, walking on the sea. He intended to pass them by. For they did not understand about the loaves, but their hearts were hardened.'* **Mark 6:48, 52**

Today is about two and half weeks into our Lenten voyage. For some of us it is an emotional journey beginning with ashes smeared on our forehead and ending with heart-break on Good Friday. For others, the penitential aspect of Lent shapes our spiritual journey. Some will take up the traditional discipline of denial, practising charity more keenly and trying to live a simpler life. Others may undertake a course of study to look at an aspect of faith more deeply. Yet however we mark Lent, events can occur that will threaten to blow us off course, just like the disciples experienced when they were struggling to row against an adverse wind.

From the mountain top Jesus sees their struggle and sets out to help them. Not by calming a stormy sea but by giving the disciples an epiphany moment. The disciples hadn't understood what God was doing through Jesus in the feeding of the crowd. They had missed the link between God being known in the Old Testament as a God who feeds his people and Jesus feeding the crowd, indicating that He is endowed with the kind of power normally expected only of God. And now, just a little later, the disciples miss this further revelation and think Jesus is a ghost. The words '*He intended to pass them by*' might cause us to have some difficulty grasping what Jesus is doing. If someone said that to us today we might think they want to get by us as quickly as possible and avoid us. But Jesus doesn't intend this. In the Old Testament the phrase 'to pass by' is used when God reveals himself to Moses and Elijah. So, the disciples' reaction to what they think is a ghost is actually nothing less than Jesus as a personal revelation of God. He then declares to them: 'It is I' which echoes God's declaration to Moses, '*I AM WHO I AM*'. But sadly, once more the disciples can't grasp this meaning. They haven't yet learned to open their eyes and have hardened their hearts to who Jesus is.

So, don't lose heart if your Lenten voyage is blown off course. Expect Jesus to come to you when you need Him. Don't be frightened when He does, perhaps not as a ghost but in some other surprising way.

Such experiences are not meant to scare us but to strengthen our faith and reassure us in our growth as disciples. We know that God the Father, who feeds His people, and Christ, who walks on water, and the Holy Spirit, who inspires us to understanding, will never abandon us.

*The Revd Lesley Atkins, Vicar, St Paul's, Marton.*

## WEEK 3 SUNDAY 7<sup>TH</sup> MARCH

# THE THIRD SUNDAY OF LENT

### READ: MARK 7:1-23

*Then he called the crowd again and said to them, 'Listen to me, all of you, and understand: there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile.'* **Mark 7:14-15**

Just try a day of prayer and fasting to find out how food dominates so much of our culture. Adverts, aromas, offers of hospitality (outside of pandemics) all draw us to food. People in Jesus' day were no different at one level. For them, it was all about religious purity. No doubt there were some good reasons for this. We would probably call them Health and Safety these days. As Jesus exposes in today's gospel, too often this was an obsessive hypocrisy that had little to do with following God's wishes. It is possible to be scrupulous about hygiene but know nothing of purity of heart and soul. Jesus teaches clearly that people's primary concerns should be about right relationship with God and not whether they had obeyed the rules.

The thing is rules can feel safe. Of course, we need them and the laws of the land to give us a sense of order to live by. However, Jesus here, as elsewhere, expressed his frustration that what had become the all-consuming reality for the religious leaders was following the rules, not considering how any rules helped them and others to be holy and righteous in the sight of God.

It is too easy for us to be judgmental of the leaders of the day, however. They really believed, no doubt, that they were helping people. What Jesus came to do is liberate us from an all-consuming desire just to do the right things. He wants us to know the freedom of living in the reality of a grace-filled life. It is possible to live the purest of lives nutritionally yet, sadly, live a life that is full of infringements of the list of sins at the end of today's scripture. Truly healthy lives are about working from the inside out rather than the other way around. Of course, good diet is helpful but only in as much as the moral compass we have is aligned with His.

During this Lenten time of preparation, many of us will have chosen to deprive ourselves of certain 'treats' in order to be closer to God. That is good. The important thing is they achieve the desired effect—to bring us closer to God. If our abstinence is simply a way of feeling self-righteous, as Jesus perceives in the religious leaders of the day, then it is not having the desired outcome. We are now almost halfway through our preparation for the great events of Holy week and Easter. May we re-commit our Lenten devotions to help us draw closer to Our Lord in his Passion and Resurrection.

*The Venerable David Picken, Archdeacon of Lancaster.*

**READ: MARK 7:24-30**

*'Even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs.'* **Mark 7:28**

This episode ends in just the same way as each of the other three exorcisms in Mark's Gospel, with the demon cast out at the word of Jesus. In place of fear and desperation Christ brought hope and healing. And yet as we read this passage our minds cannot help but fixate on the discomfort—embarrassment even—that we feel when we read Jesus' initial response to the mother's humble plea: *'Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.'*

The children Jesus refers to are the Jews: the children of Abraham, the children of the covenant. The bread with they are entitled to be fed is the sweet nourishment of the promises of God fulfilled in the ministry of the Messiah. The 'dogs,' therefore, are the gentiles; *'aliens from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenant of promise'* (Ephesians 2:12)—with no claim, therefore, on Israel's Messiah's salvation. Well, not quite no claim—as Jesus hinted and this gentile, Syrophenician woman rightly detected. Far from issuing a prejudiced rebuff, Jesus' answer actually seeks to draw into the open her latent faith and reveal the universal scope of his own mission. Playing the Ernie Wise to her Eric Morecambe, Jesus carefully tees up the woman's wonderful, bold-but-humble, famous one-liner.

Note first the word 'first': *'Let the children be fed first.'* First implies a second. First for the Jew—what's next?—then for the gentile (Romans 1:16). Next, the word Jesus uses for 'dogs' is the diminutive form, translated in other versions as 'puppies' (ISV) or 'pet dogs' (AMP, CJB). In other words, it wasn't the racial slur we might imagine. The term connoted a lower rank of priority, certainly, but the puppies/pet dogs are part of the household and are still fed by its master.

The Syrophenician mother picked up what Jesus was laying down: *'Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs.'* Exactly so: in Jesus the Messiah, as she saw, there is such an overflowing abundance of blessing that there is Bread enough to feed the children and the pups—the Jews and the gentiles.

We have much to learn from this woman's example. She did not respond to Jesus' apparent put-down with anger and insult. Instead, her response to being humbled by Jesus was to wear that humility with pride. Cranmer had this passage in mind when he penned those famous words in the Communion service: 'We are not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs under thy Table.' The name we give that Prayer reminds us, in the midst of our conceit, that the only way to access God's grace is through a humble attitude.

*The Revd Tom Woolford, Vicar, All Saints, New Longton.*

**READ: MARK 7:31-8:13**

*'Then looking up to heaven, he sighed and said to him, 'Ephphatha!', that is, 'Be opened.' And immediately his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly.'*

**Mark 7:34-35**

My father-in-law recently recollected how his Mancunian granny used to say to him with feeling, "There's none so deaf, luv, as those who won't hear and none so blind as those who won't see". I think Jesus would agree!

Everyone had heard about the amazing miracle Jesus performed in healing a deaf and mute man. The people wouldn't stop talking about it (even though Jesus commanded them not to!) – these were the things God's promised Messiah would do. The prophet Isaiah had spoken of a joyful time when God would come to save His people, and the signs would include the ears of the deaf being unstopped and the mute tongue shouting for joy (Isaiah 35:5-6).

Next, Mark tells us how Jesus provided enough food and to spare for a hungry crowd of over four thousand people, starting with just seven loaves and a few small fish. This was the second occasion he had performed a miraculous feeding on this scale. And yet in Mark 8:11 we read that, immediately after this, the Pharisees ask Jesus for a sign from heaven, presumably to prove His divine authority. No wonder Jesus sighed deeply! If they weren't prepared to believe the evidence of what Jesus had all ready done, what difference would another sign make?

In Mark's accounts of both these miraculous signs, he makes it clear that Jesus' motivation for what He did was not to prove Himself or to make a spectacle, but rather to respond with compassion to the needs of those who came to Him.

We all have an amazing capacity to filter what we see and hear according to what we expect, or believe to be possible. God is at work all around us today in so many different ways, but often we fail to recognise the signs of His activity or to hear what He is saying to us through them. Is there sometimes a danger that in what we pray for, our attitude can become like that of the Pharisees: 'Do this for me now God to prove that you care for me, or else I won't believe you'?

As we continue to read through Mark's gospel this Lent, let's pray that our ears will be opened to hear what Jesus has to say to us each day and that He will release our tongues to tell others of what He has done for us.

*Sue Champness, Lay-member of St John's, Leyland.*

**READ: MARK 8:14-21**

*‘Jesus said to [the disciples] “Why are you talking about having no bread? Do you still not perceive or understand? Are your hearts hardened? Do you have eyes, and fail to see? Do you have ears, and fail to hear? And do you not remember?”’* **Mark 8:17-18**

Jesus’ frustration with the disciples is palpable. Like me, when trying to train my puppy not to jump up at people who visit, but as soon as somebody comes to greet him, he gets so excited, he forgets and jumps up to say hello.

I’d like to think that if I were to witness a miracle such as the feeding of the five thousand, it would not be something I’d easily forget. So when the disciples, having witnessed not only the feeding of the five thousand but also the feeding of the four thousand, then think they are going to go hungry, Jesus exclaims *‘Do you still not perceive or understand? Are your hearts hardened? Do you have eyes, and fail to see? Do you have ears, and fail to hear? And do you not remember?’* It is quite the rebuke!

However much we hope that we wouldn’t respond as the disciples did, we do forget. We forget Jesus, we forget His preaching, we forget to pray and we forget His command to love. As the busyness of life overtakes us, going to work, looking after loved ones, the endless list of chores, God quickly and easily gets forgotten. We are in good company in our forgetting. The disciples forgot and so did the early churches who St Paul visited. It seems to be a common human struggle, to keep God centre stage throughout our day and not let the other actors push him into the wings.

In His Son, God gave us everything yet we still forget. And so Jesus gently whispers to us *‘Do you still not perceive or understand? Are your hearts hardened? Do you have eyes, and fail to see? Do you have ears, and fail to hear? And do you not remember?’*

It is right, therefore, in this penitential season, that we open our eyes to see how easily we forget God each day and forget that He will always provide. In this remembering we should lament our sin and turn ourselves back to Him. We can be comforted that, although Jesus rebuked the disciples, He did not turn His back on them. By the grace of God, even though we sin, Christ continues to embrace us and love us. However, we should not rest easy on our laurels thinking that we do enough. May we confess our faults, repent of them and turn back to Christ each and every day, comforted in the knowledge that we are precious in His sight and never forgetting his abundant generosity.

*The Revd Lois Ward, Assistant Curate of Poulton, Carleton, & Singleton.*

**READ: MARK 8:22-30**

*'[Jesus] asked his disciples, 'Who do people say that I am?' And they answered him, 'John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.' He asked them, 'But who do you say that I am?' Peter answered him, 'You are the Messiah.'* **Mark 8:27-29**

“Who am I?” “What sort of person should I be?” These questions have become some of the key questions of our age. We are constantly asked, and we are therefore constantly asking ourselves, what sort of person am I? Think of the standard question any adult asks a child they have just met: ‘What do you want to be when you grow up?’ When an advert comes on TV quite often you’ll see that they are positioning their products for certain types of people who want certain types of lifestyles. “What kind of person are you?” asks the advert, and thus “wouldn’t you be happier if you had our product?” Having answered this most important of questions, we then plan our lives accordingly. If you answer “I’m a family person” you’ll likely choose a job and a place to live which is conducive to a family. If you answer “I’m a wanderer who wants to see the world”, well your choices will be very different. Work out who you are, goes contemporary wisdom, and then plan your life accordingly.

We have arrived at the centre point of Mark’s Gospel as we have arrived at the centre point of Lent. In the first half of the Gospel Mark has been cataloguing Jesus’ sayings and showing Jesus’ actions. Mark identified Jesus as the Messiah in the very first line of his biography and yet there has been no mention of His identity since. It is as if Mark has been piling up evidence, preparing us for this very moment. For Christians, the most important question is not “Who am I?” but rather “Who is Jesus?” Indeed, Jesus challenges the disciples, and through the Scriptures Jesus challenges us, to answer that very question (v29): ‘who do you say that I am?’. Here is the fundamental question which everyone must answer, and having answered, make our life choices in light of that answer. Jesus is about to give His followers some difficult news. And the only way in which they will be able to hear that news and still follow Jesus is if they have answered for themselves this most central of questions. Answer with Peter ‘You are the Messiah’ and the path Jesus will take us on will be tough, but will only serve to strengthen our faith. Answer in any other way and the difficulties to come will be too much to bear and we will fall away. As we battle our way through this penitential season, as the things we have given up start to feel that little too tempting. As prayer, as devotional reading, as gospel-sharing and as generosity begins to feel far too difficult to persevere with, turn back to that monumental question of Jesus: ‘who do you say that I am?’ Having answered that question again, let us pick ourselves up, dust ourselves off and continue following the one who is the Messiah, the Son of God.

*The Revd Michael Print, Vicar of St George’s, Chorley.*

**READ: MARK 8:31-9:1**

*'He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me."'* **Mark 8:34**

A number of years ago a theologian named Kenda Creasy Dean published a book titled *'Almost Christian'* based on a study that she did of teenagers in America. In her research she discovered that there was a clear pattern amongst these young people. Many of them would say they were one hundred per cent committed as a Christian, but had no problem in being really committed to aspects of other religions and humanism, as well as having an image of God as some sort of therapist in the sky who was there to make the pathways of their lives smooth and easy.

On digging deeper she discovered that this wasn't because young people had misunderstood what they had been taught, but because they had actually precisely understood. In trying to make discipleship seem attractive and accessible, genuinely well-meaning people had ended up communicating a gospel that had lost the heart of Jesus' teaching on what it means to be a follower of Him.

I'm always challenged as I read through the gospels as to how difficult Jesus seems to make it for people. And here in this passage we find again that Jesus isn't interested in offering an easy path in order to gain more followers. Jesus was really clear that anyone who followed him needed to learn not only where Jesus himself was heading (namely to the cross), they also needed to learn what it meant to walk in the way of the cross.

In a world whose main message is 'Promote yourself, put yourself first, entertain yourself', Jesus says 'deny yourself and take up your cross'. His message, then and now, is so counter-cultural. But held within it is this incredible paradox that we can only discover when we are prepared to trust Him and commit ourselves completely to following Him – in this seeming devastating loss of self we actually find the way to total freedom and fulfilment.

I imagine that the crowds thinned out pretty dramatically on hearing this message, but those who had spent time with Jesus, had been captivated by His person and had found Him so compelling, for them it was a price they were willing to pay – confident that it was in the place of sacrifice that true joy was to be found. For as the Apostle Paul said: *'whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ.'* (Philippians 3:7-8)

*Ruth Hassall, Lay member of St Thomas', Lancaster.*

## READ: MARK 9.2-13

*'And he was transfigured before them.'* Mark 9:2b

Mark explained, as best as he could, the details of what happened on that mountainside. We refer to it as the transfiguration, whereas a literal translation would be that Jesus was "metamorphosed". Something changed in Jesus' appearance and Luke tells us His face shone like the sun. Matthew, Mark and Luke all record that Jesus' clothes became dazzling white. Peter, James and John not only saw these changes but also heard the voice from heaven say *'this is my beloved Son'*.

What God said underlines things we have read about Jesus earlier in Mark's gospel, such as the spiritual beings who knew Jesus' true identity, and how only God can forgive sins, yet Jesus had authority to do so. John would later explain the significance of what he and the others experienced, *'we have seen His glory, as of the only Son from the Father'* (John 1.14).

As we read about this in Lent and approach Easter, we are reminded of what would happen after Jesus' death and resurrection. In this world those three disciples only briefly saw the true glory of Jesus. But because of Jesus' death and resurrection He could pray for those whom the Father gives Him that they would *'be with Me where I am, to see My glory'*. (John 17.24)

This life can be tough and there may be things for you that are making things especially hard at present. But what lay ahead for those three disciples? They would all see adversity and persecution for the sake of Christ.

James is thought to have laboured for about 10 years before he was executed for his faith, Peter for about 30 years before his martyrdom. John lived to a ripe old age but saw much adversity in more than 60 years as a follower of Christ. Yet all three persevered through the troubles knowing that one day they would see again, for all eternity, what they had seen only briefly on the mountain top. They would see the unveiled glory of the Son of God. Whatever life holds for you, if you trust in Christ, and your life is in His hands, then one day you too will be where He is, and you too will see His glory.

*The Revd David Phillips, Vicar of St James', Chorley.*

*As we read about this in Lent and approach Easter, we are reminded of what would happen after Jesus' death and resurrection. In this world those three disciples only briefly saw the true glory of Jesus.*

## WEEK 4 SUNDAY 14<sup>TH</sup> MARCH

# THE FOURTH SUNDAY OF LENT

### READING: MARK 9:14-32

*[The child's father said] "...if you are able to do anything, have pity on us and help us." Jesus said to him, "If you are able!—All things can be done for the one who believes." Immediately the father of the child cried out, "I believe; help my unbelief!"* **Mark 9:22b-24**

I was recently struck at how lightly we use the words 'faith' and 'believe'. We speak of 'faith communities' and sign letters 'yours faithfully', or maybe even visit the 'Odditorium at Ripley's Believe It Or Not' in Blackpool. Yet what we have faith in profoundly shapes our lives and issues of faith and belief are scattered all over Mark 9:14-32. The disciples' faith is found wanting in verses 14-19. So too is the faith of the sick child's father in verse 22 as he tentatively asks '*...if you are able to do anything...*' Even at the end of the passage the disciples lack the faith to understand what Jesus is telling them about his death, despite Jesus telling them the same thing once before in Mark 8:31-33.

The ancient Christian Creeds set out what Christians claim to believe. The people of the early Church weighed and tested each word of the Creeds carefully over many years, often choosing to make bold claims about God that left them open to being mocked by the world around them. All these centuries later it is much too easy for us to pick up these hard-won words and say them without actually believing them, without putting them into action in our lives. The Apostle James reminds us that faith without action is dead: our lips can say the words of the Creeds but do our lives live them out? For example, if we really believe that the Father created heaven and earth what might that do to how we care for creation? Or if we really believe that Jesus gave up the glory of heaven to save us through His death on the cross what might that do to how we view giving up our rights for the sake of others? Or if we really believe that the Holy Spirit is the giver of life what might that do to the myth of self-reliance that is so dominant in the world around us and in us?

The Creeds give rise to a long list of such questions and I can't help wondering if Jesus gets as exasperated with our lack of faith today as he was with his first disciples in Mark 9:19? Of course, we don't need to get despondent but we do need to get serious about our faith and what we believe. This Lent, even this day, take some time to pray through the Nicene or the Apostles' Creed, asking God to help you put these bold faith-filled claims into action in your life. Like the sick child's father in this passage, come to Jesus with whatever faith you have, however little that maybe, and cry out "I believe; help my unbelief!"

*The Revd Nick McKee, Director of Vocations.*

**READ: MARK 9:33-37**

*‘But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another about who was the greatest. He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, ‘Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.’* **Mark 9:34-35**

Not for the first time the apostles have been acting like school children bickering in a playground over whose dad is the biggest and the best. In the verses preceding this passage the apostles have witnessed some truly awesome events:

The Transfiguration; the healing of a boy possessed by a spirit; Jesus foretelling his passion, death and resurrection.

Incredible events whose significance they have failed to grasp—or maybe have chosen not to grasp. Perhaps they are enjoying too much the kudos and limelight of being in Jesus’ gang, being recognised by thousands, enjoying the adulation associated with this great preacher and miracle man? Perhaps there’s something of an ego trip going on as they jostle to be seen walking by the side of Jesus?

Whatever’s happening, they are soon brought down with a bump by Jesus who makes it clear that nothing of what He is doing or saying is about them. It’s not even about Him. It’s about God the Father, the source of all being who is revealed by the person of Jesus through His words, actions, and attitudes. In this passage Jesus teaches the apostles about humble service of God and humanity. As Jesus responded to the will of His Father, so He gives the apostles—and us—the example to do likewise. And he will repeat His message in the most dramatic and powerful of ways when he washes their feet during The Last Supper.

*When we put  
God first, our egos  
should diminish.  
When we put God  
first, we should put  
others first.*

When we put God first, our egos should diminish. When we put God first, we should put others first. When we put God first, we should respond to the cry of the poor, the needy, the lonely, the downcast. When we do that, we will reveal and welcome the loving and active presence of God, and by doing so we will make him known.

*The Revd Shaun Baldwin, Vicar of St Aidan’s, Bamber Bridge & St Leonard’s, Walton-le-Dale.*

**READ: MARK 9:38-50**

*'Whoever is not against us is for us.'* **Mark 9:40**

The missionary Jim Elliot wrote, 'He is no fool to give what he cannot keep to gain that which he cannot lose'. He would later be killed by the very people he sought to share God's love with. He understood that to live for Jesus meant being prepared to lose everything else. Few of us may be asked to make the ultimate sacrifice for the gospel but we are called to live lives of daily sacrifice.

The disciples did not understand that Jesus' mission was one of humility and sacrifice. Instead they were looking for status, riches and power. Note John's words in v.38, *'we tried to stop him, because he was not following us'*. The disciples had forgotten that they were called to follow, not to be followed, and as a result were attempting to deny the fruitful ministry of another. Jesus however affirmed the ministry of the other man declaring, *'whoever is not against us is for us'*. Whilst Jesus drew the disciples into His ministry they sought to exclude. They wanted present glory that fades but Jesus promised that when we serve one another our eternal reward is secure.

How often are we like this? How often are we tempted to dismiss the work of a brother or sister in Christ as a result of pride thinly disguised as righteous indignation? How often do we respond badly because someone else did it better (or perhaps not good enough)? And how many fellow Christians have we caused to stumble as they have trustingly sought to learn from us what it looks like to live for Jesus in the messy moments of life?

Do we understand how serious this is? Jesus did. He gives some pretty graphic solutions to sinful failings (verses 42-47). Was Jesus advocating capital punishment and dismemberment? No! After all, change comes not from outward appearances, but rather begins in the heart. These illustrations are given to highlight the seriousness of our sin, particularly when it leads others to stumble. We are called to a life of peace yet so often we promote the opposite.

So what does this mean for us? Jim Elliot had it right: we are called, not to live a life of prideful one-upmanship bent on our own glory, but rather a life of sacrifice lived in service to others and for the glory of God.

Ask yourself this: 'Am I doing this for God's glory or for my own?'

*Janet Thorp, Pastoral Intern, St Andrew's, Leyland.*

**READ: MARK 10:1-12**

*‘Jesus said to them, ‘Because of your hardness of heart he [Moses] wrote this commandment for you.’* **Mark 10:5**

As we continue our journey through Lent we are reminded in today’s passage about the dangers of being hard of heart in our relationships with each other.

In our friendships and family groups we all fall short of what God hopes for in those relationships. Human bonds of love and fellowship can so often appear to fall apart and we so often find it difficult to live with the people around us.

We see it time and again: as children, sibling rivalry expresses itself all too often in physical ways. And I guess many of us have been on the receiving end of a youngster’s tantrum and told that they no longer care about us. But children also have the uncanny ability to resolve those breakdowns in relationship and all is better in just a few moments’ time!

As adults things are not always quite so easy. If we are not careful we can allow ourselves to fall out with each other, whether within our families or as friends, such that we place almost insurmountable difficulties in the way of reconciling those relationships. And I suspect that some of those difficulties of common living have been highlighted over the past year when we have found ourselves faced with lockdown and with only those closest to us for company.

In this passage we hear Jesus speaking a little about those human relationships: specifically the relationship of husband and wife, but with words which are equally relevant for all of our relationships. And He warns us about our hardness of heart (v.5). It is this that manifests itself in the sin of pride: we can find ourselves too proud to seek reconciliation and forgiveness for the ways in which we contribute to the difficulties in our human relationships.

Jesus himself sets aside His own pride in willingly going to the cross for our sakes. As we are warned against that hardness of heart in our reading today, let us this Lent seek ways in which we might soften those hearts and temper that pride. In order that the reconciliation that Jesus wins for us on the cross, and passed to us through our relationship with Him, may be reflected in our resolve to be reconciled with those around us so that we might truly be agents of his love in the world today.

*The Revd David Arnold, Vicar of Adlington St Paul.*

**READ: MARK 10:13-31**

*'People were bringing little children to him in order that he might touch them; and the disciples spoke sternly to them. But when Jesus saw this, he was indignant and said to them, "Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs".'* **Mark 10:13-14**

Today's passage is comprised of two familiar stories. First there's the account of Jesus welcoming the children, followed by the story of the rich young ruler who is likely to have witnessed Jesus' response to the disciples when they tried to stop parents from bringing their children to be blessed by Him. Their behaviour seems a little strange since it was customary at that time for Jewish rabbis to bless children. Perhaps the disciple's mindset was to protect Jesus so he could focus on 'more important work'. However, Jesus harshly points out that it was not Him that required protection! Instead, it was the children themselves because the disciples were creating a barrier that was stopping them from coming to Him.

It might be the case that we adopt a similar attitude to the disciples and create barriers by disregarding children's ministry, believing that all of the important work with regards to faith formation takes places when we reach adulthood. Contrastingly, recent research suggests that the majority of Christians come to faith before the age of eighteen, with a large proportion doing so before the age of five. When we reflect on this alongside the passage, we see how important it is to ensure our children have the opportunity to know and love Jesus. It is difficult to read these verses without picturing the children gathering around him and this small segment of the Bible clearly indicates how easy it is to come to Jesus as a child. He is what they need, above anyone or anything else. This highlights a second lesson that we can take away from this story, which is a reminder that children are far more aware of their needs than we are as adults. We know that small children are reliant upon their parents to fulfil their most basic needs and that, without adult intervention, they are completely helpless. As children grow, they naturally seek to become independent and self-sufficient. However, Jesus reminds us that even as adults we must be completely dependent on Him - without Him we too are helpless.

Picking up on the last part of the Bible passage, it is striking that if a rich man does come to Christ he must come in exactly the same way as the poorest, or even like a child. He must acknowledge his complete and utter need and accept the gift of life that is received by welcoming Jesus into his heart as Lord and Saviour. So, let us not only honour and serve the children in our communities well, but also watch them intently since Jesus says, *'whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.'*

*Sarah Earnshaw, Diocesan Children's Work Adviser.*

**READ: MARK 10:32-34**

*'They were on the road (way), going up to Jerusalem, and Jesus was walking ahead of them; they were amazed, and those who followed were afraid. He took the twelve aside again and began to tell them what was to happen to him...'* **Mark 10:32**

In today's passage Jesus speaks for a third time about his looming death and gives yet more details of the dreadful event that awaits him. (Compare with 8:31 and 9:30-32) The description of the conversation has the feel of an eye-witness account: Jesus is recalled resolutely striding ahead along the road followed by the twelve and then, maybe further back, other disciples. Then Jesus breaks the journey and takes the twelve to one side and predicts what will happen. (Possibly it was Peter who described the scene to Mark when years later he sat down to write this Gospel.)

Almost certainly it's significant that all three prophecies of Jesus' passion were made when on the move with His followers. Each time we're told that they were on 'the way' in 8:27, 9:33,34 and 10:32. It's not that Jesus just happened to be on the road when he spoke - He was on a journey. He was intentionally fulfilling the Father's will that He should go to Jerusalem and face betrayal, rejection, mockery and death – but rise on the third day.

And it's apparent that the disciples don't quite know what to think as they make the journey with Jesus. They're increasingly unsure they really want to be there – 'they were amazed, and those who followed were afraid.' They were amazed at Jesus – that He should show such determined courage in the face of the hostile reception that was awaiting him in Jerusalem. But at the same time they were afraid – to some extent afraid for Him - but mostly afraid for themselves. They realised that there was a distinct possibility that they would get caught up in the trouble that was brewing.

And so as Jesus makes his way to Jerusalem we see Him both on His own and yet with others! But that's how it always is. Jesus must face the cross on His own because He alone can save. As the hymnwriter C. F. Alexander puts it in her hymn 'There is a Green Hill Far Away':

'There was no other good enough to pay the price of sin.  
He only could unlock the gate of heaven, and let us in.'

But at the same time we must follow him to the cross. At times you're probably a reluctant, uncertain follower along the way. Both daunted by the world's opposition to Jesus and not a little bit resentful of the demands of self-sacrifice He puts on you? But follow you must – how can you turn back from one so amazing?

*The Revd Canon Mark Jones, Vicar, St Leonard's, Padiham and St Margaret's, Hapton.*

**READ: MARK 10:35-45**

*'For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.'* **Mark 10:45**

James and John have still not got it! Three times now Jesus has told His disciples that He is headed to Jerusalem not in pursuit of praise and recognition but to suffer and die. Again and again, He has taught the shocking truth that it is not those with power and status who do well in the Kingdom of God, yet the disciples are still seeking their idea of greatness.

Our self-seeking human nature cries out for power and glory. As Jesus reminds His disciples in v. 42, worldly leaders often seem to let power go to their heads. The size of their egos and their lack of humility astonishes and angers us. Yet, if we search our own hearts, are we that different? Like James and John don't we want to be those who get special treatment, praise and recognition, be it in our families, at work, or even in church?

This is not the way of God's Kingdom, however, and we see that in the actions of its King. Jesus' sole ambition is to carry out God's plan to rescue His people. He knows He is headed to Jerusalem to be mocked, shamed and killed and yet He keeps going. There will be no greatness and glory for Jesus as He endures the way of the cross, but He has in mind the purposes of His Father and His amazing love for His people. Jesus came not to demand recognition and earthly authority but to be a servant (v.45). His ultimate act of service is just around the corner: Jesus, the promised Messiah, will rescue His people by humbly laying down His life. His sacrificial death will pay the price demanded by God for our rebellion against Him (v.45). We are those for whom the highest price has been paid. Any "greatness" we could achieve pales into insignificance when compared to a life serving King Jesus. Let's ask Him to help us to make that our sole ambition today and every day.

*'There in the garden of tears  
My heavy load he chose to bear  
His heart with sorrow was torn  
'Yet not My will but Yours,' He said*

*This is our God, The Servant King  
He calls us now to follow Him  
To bring our lives as a daily offering  
Of worship to The Servant King.'*

(From *'The Servant King'* by Graham Kendrick)

*Carolyn Bullock, Lay-member of St Paul's, Withnell.*

## WEEK 5 SUNDAY 21<sup>ST</sup> MARCH

# THE FIFTH SUNDAY OF LENT

### READ: MARK 10:46-52

*'[Bartimaeus] cried out even more loudly, 'Son of David, have mercy on me!' 49 Jesus stood still and said, 'Call him here.' And they called the blind man, saying to him, 'Take heart; get up, he is calling you.'* **Mark 10:48b-49**

Jesus is trying to convince a sceptical audience by word and miracle that He is the Messiah, the Son of God. That was hard enough. But then He had to teach them that He was going to suffer, be betrayed, tried, and crucified. That didn't make much sense. Earlier in Chapter Ten, Jesus has told His followers about His coming suffering (10:32-34) and that being a leader is about service rather than glory - and He used Himself as an example, giving His life as a ransom for many (10:45). The following chapter 11 sees Jesus setting off for Jerusalem to die.

The verses for today about the healing of the blind man Bartimaeus come in the middle of all this and Mark is keen for his readers to see their relevance to the whole story. At one level it was another sign of Jesus' authority. He had power to heal and so was not just another travelling preacher doing the rounds: He gave a man the gift of sight. At a different level, by placing the story here, Mark wants his readers to learn that spiritual sight is essential if a disciple is going to understand both the divinity and the suffering of Jesus, especially on Passion Sunday today.

I love the phrase 'Jesus stood still'. It reveals His compassion for an individual who was calling out to Him. He always has time for those who call out to Him for the right thing, a cry for mercy. The blind man needed many things but he asked for mercy. That's the most important prayer to pray, acknowledging our need of His forgiveness, if we are to have spiritual sight. Lord, have mercy on me a sinner.

Bartimaeus also called out to the right person - Jesus is the One to go to. So many turn in the wrong direction when He is the One who says 'what do you want me to do for you?' (10:51) It's a contrast with the same question Jesus asked James and John a few verses earlier in verse 36: '*what is it you want me to do for you?*' They wanted glory and were told they were going to have to suffer. Bartimaeus asked for the right thing and was granted both physical and spiritual sight.

Bartimaeus cried out at the right time: Jesus was passing by Jericho and for the last time. If Bartimaeus had said 'I'll wait till He comes back' it would have been too late. Now is always the accepted time. Might it be for you, for me, to have another encounter with the risen Jesus today, so He might give '*sight for the inly blind*'?

*The Rt Revd Julian Henderson, Bishop of Blackburn.*

**READ: MARK 11:12-19**

*'And when the chief priests and the scribes heard it, they kept looking for a way to kill him; for they were afraid of him....'* **Mark 11:18a**

Speaking truthfully often leads to opposition, and no more so than when the opposition has something to lose. As we have seen in our reading of Mark's Gospel, Jesus has always spoken truthfully and now, with His arrival at the centre of power, His truthfulness is about to lead to opposition.

A few years ago we planted a cherry tree in a large pot in our garden. Each year it has produced pretty blossom whose petals are blown away in the wind and then the tiny green emergent fruit drops off so, no cherries but plenty of leaves. It's under threat of being replaced by a Victoria plum. I can sympathise with Jesus in wanting a fig but, to be fair, it wasn't even the season for figs although it seems the amount of foliage on the tree indicated it should be ready to bear fruit, as with our cherry. The lesson here for us, I think, is that if we indicate in a spiritual sense the readiness to bear fruit, then we should be sure to come up to expectations or face the consequences. However Jesus has more on his mind than the fig tree.

Jesus arrives in Jerusalem to see out the last few days of his life. At Passover when He was twelve He described the temple as *'my father's house'*. Once again there were many travellers to the temple and so it must have been much busier and noisier than usual. It was a Jewish tradition to offer a sacrifice in the temple and, whilst this might be grain or wine, a dove as a blood atonement was one of the cheapest compared with a lamb or calf. Money for these purchases had to be changed into coinage that was acceptable in paying a temple tax. This kind of trading in the outer courts was generally accepted as normal. Can you imagine what the entrance to our churches would be like if we had to do the same, with the stacks of merchandise obstructing our entry and the noise of the animals as a background to prayer? Jesus' intervention may have been unexpected and unwelcome by the buyers and sellers but He is able to exert the authority to achieve His goal. He restores the temple to its proper purpose as a house of prayer which seems to have a good effect on the crowds who are 'spellbound' at his teaching.

However, the chief priests rightly understand Jesus' implication that the fruitless fig tree is like their fruitless lives and it is now made clear that the chief priests are seeking a way to kill Jesus. We know that he will become the sacrificial lamb, the final sacrifice. And so, next time you celebrate Holy Communion, focus on the words which include all of us: 'we remember his offering of himself made once for all upon the cross'.

*Lynn Packer, Lay member of St James', Brindle.*

**READ: MARK 11:20-26**

*'Jesus answered them, 'Have faith in God. Truly I tell you, if you say to this mountain, "Be taken up and thrown into the sea", and if you do not doubt in your heart, but believe that what you say will come to pass, it will be done for you.'* **Mark 11:22-23**

Have you ever wondered what might be achievable if you had greater faith? It's likely that most Christians who try to take their faith seriously have pondered this question. What if I could really believe? What if I could banish my doubts? What if I could really entrust myself to God's Providence?

In today's passage Jesus focuses our attention on just this issue. Earlier in the chapter He has cursed the barren fig tree (verse 14) in the hearing of his disciples. Then He entered the Temple and drove out the money-changers, overturning their tables, cleansing the sacred space of its misuse for commerce and calculation and restoring it to its sacred purpose (verses 15-19). Then the disciples 'saw the fig tree withered away to its roots' (verse 20). It had become a symbol of the Temple: fruitless and worse and taken back to its very roots.

Jesus goes on to teach His disciples about the importance of faith in God. His power to curse the fig tree derives from His faith in God the Father, and He asks the disciples to consider what would be possible if their faith was similar. He is insistent upon the certainty that prayers will be answered, an insistence which is a distinctive part of his teaching (see Matthew 7:7-11; Luke 11:9-13).

The passage is completed by Jesus telling the disciples that, when they pray, they must also forgive others in the knowledge that they, too, will receive forgiveness from God.

Those who follow Jesus must have faith, pray and forgive—the right disposition towards God and our neighbour. These are the means, taken together, whereby the followers of Christ may share in the relationship with the Father that the Son enjoys. Jesus wants us to share his filial relationship with his heavenly Father. He is our moral and our ontological exemplar, who gives us the means to become more like him through our participation in the life of his Church as we are nourished by him in word and sacrament.

*Those who follow  
Jesus must have  
faith, pray and  
forgive—the right  
disposition towards  
God and our  
neighbour.*

*The Revd Canon Stephen Jones, Vicar, Christ Church Carnforth.*

**READ: MARK 11:27-33**

*'Again they came to Jerusalem. As he was walking in the temple, the chief priests, the scribes, and the elders came to him and said, "By what authority are you doing these things? Who gave you this authority to do them?"'* **Mark 11:27-28**

You know that hindsight provides near perfect vision and the temptation is always to view passages like Mark 11:27-33 from a vantage point far removed from that of those who actually experienced the events described. Prejudiced by what follows in Mark's Gospel, and following a well-worn path, it is so easy to read those terrible future events back into this short narrative, in which the wholly good Jesus is confronted by the wholly bad chief priests, scribes and elders, who clumsily look to help him condemn himself.

For me, time worn paths invariably lead to much visited and comfortable places and I have a suspicion that unless I stop trying to mentally defend Jesus, who needs no help from me here, and develop some empathy for the chief priests, the scribes and the elders, then I will miss the point of what it is that Jesus is trying to teach me and them. After all, if I had actually been there as an Ordinand, wouldn't I have been far more likely to be with the temple contingent? Poring over scrolls and commentary and learning theology from my elders would I have been dismissive of an itinerant, blasphemous rabbi from the troublesome north?

It may be hard to admit but the person I most resemble in this cast is not Jesus. Unlike me, Jesus is uninterested in having to continually prove who he is and he doesn't care that this is my temple, my environment, where I have authority, responsibility and power. Yes, briefly he toys with me and the authority games I like to play just enough to reveal my incompetence, then simply refuses to participate at all - he's not going to jump through my hoops then, today or tomorrow. Maybe when you have been given all authority in heaven and on earth (Matthew 28:18) the who and what of authority will always be so much less important than the how.

How I use authority is different to the way Jesus uses it. I selfishly use it to support and promote my own prejudices or to assuage and reduce my own fear, to plug holes in my insecurity and anxiety by abusing those who I deem inferior, different or challenging, while promoting those who are useful or share the same point of view. Such actions deny the source, strength and purpose of any authority I claim. Jesus on the other hand uses his authority to cleanse and heal, comfort and correct, building his Kingdom among the comfortable and the desperate, the hapless and the ambitious. How will you use your authority today?

*Simon King, Blackburn Diocesan Ordinand.*

**READ: MARK 12:1-12**

*'But the tenants said to one another, "This is the heir. Come, let's kill him, and the inheritance will be ours." So they took him and killed him, and threw him out of the vineyard. "What then will the owner of the vineyard do?"* **Mark 12:7-9**

I used to think babies were ugly little things. Cramped up faces, not much hair and a lot of noise, yet everyone around me described them as cute. I remember very clearly, on one occasion, not joining in with the gurgles and chirps of delight at the new-born baby at our gathering. Everyone turned around and stared at me and the child's father directly asked me if I found his precious new child "cute"? Emboldened to be true to myself, I said "No, not really". The next hour was the one of the most unpleasant of my life. Wherever I was in the room I could feel the heat of a father's rage at my failure to acknowledge his new-born. As you can imagine I have never made this mistake again.

Our passage for today gets right to the heart of God as Father whose Son has been dishonoured. I have learnt that a new-born baby should be honoured and welcomed with affirmations of wonder. How much more should God's Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, be honoured and wondered at. Jesus tells this prophetic parable that gets right to the heart of the difference between religion and faith. The vineyard represents God's people and God is the man who has made the vineyard and given it all that it has. The servants are the prophets who God sent to His people in the Old Testament calling the people to worship God, act justly and do mercy. Again and again the Old Testament people of God rejected the prophets - they were happy to do outward religious activities but failed to love God and neighbour. But Jesus is God's Son who surely would now be honoured. Yet what have we been seeing? The religious leaders of Jesus' day reject him; and this prophetic parable of Jesus lets us know what they will do. They, shockingly, will kill God's Son.

The one whom the God the Father delights in is dishonoured by the religious people. Understandably God cannot let this slide by easily - hence the reaction in verse 9. If it was bad to dishonour my friend's new-born, how much more to reject God's eternally precious Son? Our response to Jesus has eternal significance. Religion and religious activity can miss the wood for the trees. The whole point of what we do as church is to honour the Lord Jesus and to rejoice in His presence.

Today, let us refocus our lives into relationship with the Lord Jesus. Today, let us reshape our worship, that encountering the Lord Jesus might be at the heart of all we do. Let us honour God's Son today.

*Joe Houghton, Lay member of St Andrew's, Ashton-on-Ribble.*

**READ: MARK 12:13-17**

*'[Some Pharisees and some Herodians] came and said to [Jesus], "Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not? [...]" Jesus said to them, "Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's."* **Mark 12:14,17a**

Early in my career a colleague and I were sent by the company we worked for to be part of a project team in a Government laboratory. As a member of the team I was totally committed to the work we were doing, but I was always aware that my ultimate loyalty lay with my employers. That experience always comes to mind when I read this passage.

The incident took place in a land under Roman occupation. The Romans were efficient administrators and talented engineers but the Pax Romana, the peace of the empire, was established and imposed by the brutal efficiency of the Roman army. It was maintained by taxation, slavery and ruthless suppression of dissent. Like other people living under occupation, the Jews reacted in various ways. Some, like King Herod and his supporters, collaborated with the Romans. And others, like the Pharisees, resisted the invaders as much as possible, aiming to maintain the purity of their own religion and culture.

An unholy alliance of collaborators and resisters set out to trap Jesus by asking what He thought about paying taxes to the Romans. If He said, 'Yes', he would be discredited as a traitor to his people. If He said, 'No', He could be betrayed to the Romans as a rebel. He actually said neither but asked to be shown a coin, used to pay the taxes, with its image of the head of the Emperor Tiberius. All pious Jews would have hated this coin because it bore a graven image, forbidden by the Law of Moses, of a man who expected to be worshipped as a god. They couldn't avoid using the Roman currency, but I can image them giving their hands a good scrub after touching it.

Jesus' response, like all His teaching, emphasised the basic principles of the Jewish Law as opposed to nit-picking obedience to it. Real freedom lay in obedience to God which, most of the time, was not in conflict with obedience to the Emperor. The citizens of the Kingdom of God were not to accept the values of Rome, nor to stand aloof, but to be deeply embedded in the world around them to illuminate its darkness, and to counter its corruption (Matthew 5:13-16). St Paul tells us: 'Do all things without murmuring and arguing, so that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, in which you shine like stars in the world' (Philippians 2:14-15).

How else will people learn about the love of God? Pray for the following grace: to show the love of God in your life today.

*Richard Carter, Lay member of Lancaster Priory.*

## READ: MARK 12:18-27

*“In the resurrection whose wife will she be? For the seven had married her.” Jesus said to them, “Is not this the reason you are wrong, that you know neither the scriptures nor the power of God?”* **Mark 12:23-24**

In 1954, the film ‘Seven Brides for Seven Brothers’ was released. Set in the 1850s, it tells the tale of seven brothers from a farming family whose lives are changed when Milly marries Adam, the eldest. The tale is absurd in places but eventually, through Milly’s tutelage, Adam’s younger brothers have their perspectives challenged and are better prepared to meet partners of their own.

I remember my Dad showing me this film and pointing out how the camera work was ahead of its time with innovative use of widescreen. The director wanted to shoot the entire film using the latest widescreen technology. Unfortunately, the studio had a more limited vision and missed an opportunity to reach beyond what they knew.

In today’s reading a group of Sadducees approach Jesus with an odd tale of their own concerning seven brothers. Sadducees did not believe in the resurrection of the dead and only accepted the authority of the first five books of the Hebrew scriptures. The Sadducees’ tale sets up a scenario for Jesus, based on the Law of Moses, intended to make the idea of resurrection seem ridiculous. Seven brothers have, in turn, married the same widowed woman. The Sadducees ask whose wife she will be in the resurrection. Jesus doesn’t pull His punches in response. About marriage in eternity they are wrong. About the dead being raised they are quite wrong. The problem is that they know neither the scriptures nor the power of God.

Like all of us, the Sadducees wear their cultural blinkers as they attempt to make sense of the scriptures. There’s no critique of the practice of marriage on which their scenario is based. They seem to assume it to be immutable that human beings can be owned by another. They show no awareness of the limits of their perspective and miss an opportunity to see beyond what they know.

Jesus, however, is able to point to life beyond death right there in their limited understanding of the scriptures. He quotes what God says to Moses in Exodus. Here is God speaking from God’s perspective with a wide-angle lens on the scriptures and the greatest vision for all creation. Perhaps Jesus is inviting all of us to expand our screen width today and to recognise the power of God to transform what we think we know, even that which is right in front of us.

*The Revd Matt Allen, Director of Training.*

# HOLY WEEK SUNDAY 28<sup>TH</sup> MARCH

## PALM SUNDAY

### READ: MARK 11:1-11

*‘[Jesus] said to them, ‘Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately as you enter it, you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden; untie it and bring it. If anyone says to you, “Why are you doing this?” just say this, “The Lord needs it and will send it back here immediately.”’* **Mark 11:2-3**

Have you noticed how much of today's reading is off-stage, out of the spotlight? We can remember Palm Sunday for the 'on stage' drama in the spotlight. Jesus enters Jerusalem on a colt. The long-awaited coming king (prophesied in Zechariah 9.9f). And the crowd go wild. The first truly public recognition of 'the coming kingdom of our ancestor David!' (v10)

And yet the spotlight of Scripture is different. What seems more important in the remembering of the event, was the behind the scenes details. Jesus knows where the donkey is. He predicts with meticulous detail how His two disciples should find the colt, speak to the owners, who miraculously lend it for 'the Lord needs it'. Even when Jesus isn't present His words carry authority.

In our celebrity culture of social media likes we can mistake where God puts his spotlight. Even at this most public 'triumphal' entry (to quote the heading for Mark 11 in my Bible, not a word found in the text itself!), the spotlight of the Spirit falls on the obedient, unnamed people behind the scenes.

This reminds me of an interchange in Lord of the Rings. JRR Tolkien served during the First World War. His books bring a subtle critique of the power structures of that time. He has a scene in Lord of the Rings where Gandalf says to the hobbits about the rival wizard Saruman: *“Saruman believes it is only great power that can hold evil in check, but that is not what I have found. It is the small everyday deeds of ordinary folk that keep the darkness at bay. Small acts of kindness and love”.*

We want the grand plan, the great system that will trump all others. The fortified city that is unshakable. The celebrity king arriving on the red carpet. Jesus chooses a different spotlight (see also Luke 17.20-21: *“The coming of the kingdom of God is not something that can be observed, nor will people say, “Here it is” or “there it is” because the kingdom of God is within you”.*)

Jesus chooses to make His home within fragile, fickle human hearts. Behind the scenes. Hidden away. In the details. With the yeast. With the mustard seeds. This is where the coming kingdom has its greatest potency. Take time to offer your fragile heart into His off-stage spotlight today.

*The Rt Revd Jill Duff, Bishop of Lancaster.*

**READ: MARK 12:28-44***‘Which commandment is the first of all?’* **Mark 12:28**

Mohandas Gandhi once said, ‘Happiness is when what you think, what you say and what you do are in harmony’. In other words, happiness comes through not simply talking the talk, but through walking the walk. Words and deeds.

Throughout Jesus’ earthly ministry we see how He uses words to powerful effect. But His words are always backed up with actions too. Jesus models for us what true discipleship should look like. What He says and what He does are inseparable.

Today we begin Holy Week. We journey to the cross with Jesus. Sharing in the final thrilling events of his life here on earth. In the days to come we see Jesus talking the talk and walking the walk—a journey that would take Him to the cross. This was a journey of supreme love and self-sacrifice.

In today’s passage from Mark 12, Jesus is tested with a question that many scholars through history had struggled with. What is the absolute essence of the Law? What is the first (and most important) commandment? The Law at the time was made up of hundreds of rules and there was also a lot of commentary on it. In his answer Jesus goes straight to the heart of what matters: love of God and neighbour.

It was out of love for God and his creation that Jesus willingly submitted Himself to death. In His ministry He had spoken repeatedly of the need to offer love and forgiveness. Jesus spoke of how He had not come to abolish the Law but to fulfil it; He embodied this. His is a life that exemplifies what it means to give and not count the cost, to serve even the unlovable; for it was not the healthy that needed a doctor, but the sick (cf. Mark 2:17).

Love of God and love of neighbour. These cannot be separated one from the other, as Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI reminds us in his encyclical *Deus Caritas Est*: ‘The unbreakable bond between love of God and love of neighbour is emphasised... to say that we love God becomes a lie if we are closed to our neighbour or hate him altogether.’

*‘God of love, we say that we love you, yet so often we do not love our neighbour:  
the person who is homeless or hungry, the foreigner or the immigrant.  
Help us to overcome our prejudice and to live in love, through Christ our Lord.’*

*The Revd David Craven, Parish Priest, St George’s, Preston.*

**READ: MARK 13**

*Therefore, keep awake—for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn, or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake.’* **Mark 13:35-37**

Destruction, distraction, deception, darkness, delay and death. These things seem as common today as when Jesus issued this warning to His disciples in Mark 13. While the disciples are caught up with being impressed by the wrong things, Jesus points to a coming time that will bring great suffering, persecution, and false claims. He is pointing to the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple, which would happen within their lifetime. The heart of the nation and centre of worship that was so highly prized would shortly be desecrated and destroyed. Jesus repeatedly warns his disciples in the face of all that is approaching: “*Beware, keep alert.*” He likens this to the necessity of a doorkeeper staying awake to keep watch for the return of the master of the house. How easy it is as time drifts by for eyelids to droop, for heads to nod, for weariness to turn to sleep. We see this happening to the disciples only a few days later in Gethsemane when asked to watch and pray. Jesus knows our human frailties when faced with distraction or delay and so he repeats his warning to be alert: “*what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake.*”

Who is this ‘all’ that Jesus is speaking to? It certainly could mean all who would be in Jerusalem as impending disaster approached. But it is included in Scripture for our instruction, so perhaps we are included in this ‘all.’ We are not faced with the imminent destruction of Jerusalem like those in the first century, so why do we need to stay awake, and what does it even mean to do so? The answer lies not in impending destruction but in a promise of great hope: the return of Christ. Jesus uses the analogy of birth pangs in v.8, signalling that the end of the story is not pain but life and joy. Yes, there is great pain and suffering, and we see that all around us in famine, war, pandemics, family breakdowns and the spreading of deception. But we are not to become so distracted by the pain that we miss what is coming: the joy of new life. Much like a woman in labour should not fall asleep before the arrival of her baby so we are urged to stay awake. Living ‘awake’ of course doesn’t mean that we don’t need physical rest, but that we live ever ready and expectant for the return of Christ and the life and hope He brings. Let’s pray for God’s help to stay awake and alert, relying on the Spirit to keep our eyes fixed on our hope in Christ.

*Amy White, Lay Training Officer.*

**READ: MARK 14: 1-11**

*'But Jesus said, 'Let her alone; why do you trouble her? She has performed a good service for me. For you always have the poor with you, and you can show kindness to them whenever you wish; but you will not always have me'.'* **Mark 14:6-7**

The opening and closing verses of this passage speak of brutality and treachery. The Chief Priests and Scribes looking for a way to have Jesus arrested and killed and Judas, sneaking off to betray Him to those same Chief Priests. Jesus, of course, knows full well what is going on around Him. The scriptures are being fulfilled.

Yet, at the heart of the passage is a scene of great tenderness. The woman, unnamed in Mark's Gospel, approaches Jesus with a jar of nard oil which she breaks open and pours over His head. She doesn't just use a little of the oil. By breaking the jar she is committing to use all of it. An extravagant gesture as the cost of the nard is revealed to be over three hundred denarii, which, at the time, would have likely been a labourer's wage for a year. Those present, including the disciples, made their objection to this apparent waste loud and clear. The oil could have been sold to aid the poor – surely Jesus would agree with them? But no, instead, He scolds them, saying that they will always have opportunities to help the poor but that He will not be with them for much longer.

At first glance it's hard not to agree with the disciples. How many people could have benefitted from the sale of that precious oil? But Jesus points to the fact that the poor are always with us...as true now as it was then...and He points to the woman's act of self giving love that demonstrates her devotion. Quietly and carefully she has anointed His body ready for burial.

We can imagine how crestfallen the disciples must have been to be rebuked in this fashion. To be told that their apparent concern for those in need was, on this occasion, wrong and that a woman's 'wasteful' act had Jesus' approval. After all, hadn't He always demonstrated to them the need to help the poor?

We are instructed to love our neighbour as ourself and to love one another as Jesus has loved us. This is the second great commandment, and, intrinsic to that, is the need for us to give generously. The only commandment which is placed higher than this is to love God with all our heart, soul and mind. We are always to be mindful of the poor, the weak and the abused but we must also give of ourselves completely to God and by giving generously of ourselves to Him we become more generous to others. Just as the unnamed woman gave of her precious oil we must offer what is most precious to us to God.

*Lindsay Mason, Lay member of St Chad's, Poulton-le-Fylde.*

**READ: MARK 14:12-68**

*'And he said to them, 'I am deeply grieved, even to death; remain here, and keep awake.'... 'Keep awake and pray that you may not come into the time of trial; the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.'* **Mark 14:34 & 38.**

If God is Trinity (Father, Son and Holy Spirit as one God), as He is, and we are made in His image, as we are, it makes sense that we are in some sense Trinitarian too. The Bible seems to be consistently clear that: 1) we are Spirit beings 2) we have a soul and 3) we are in a body:

*"...May your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ."* <sup>1</sup> Thessalonians 5:23b.

Because of the Resurrection hope that we have, in particular focus now as we approach this Easter weekend, we can look forward to the day that we will be given renewed Resurrection bodies, just like our Lord.

In our passage today, and in particular in the first of the two verses highlighted above, we see Jesus in all his human-ness agonising in the depths of his soul as our salvation literally hangs in the balance. Let us thank God for our Lord's words: *'...yet not what I want, but what you want,'* which mean that we can be here today! He then returns to Peter to find him sleeping and effectively tells him that he's a great guy: "the spirit indeed is willing" but that he needs to control his body: "but the flesh is weak!"

This Easter weekend may we recommit ourselves once again to keep Jesus' command to *'keep awake and pray.'* May we realign our human spirits with God's Holy Spirit who dwells within us. May our frail human bodies, in spite of all their weaknesses, be sustained by the body of Christ whom we meet in the Eucharist, instituted here in this very passage. May He cause us to submit to the combined power of our souls and spirits, aligned with the Spirit of Jesus, that we may yield to the will of our Father in heaven.

A word of encouragement to us all as today's passage closes with Peter broken and weeping: if God can use a triple-denier of Christ and turn him into the "rock on which He built His church" what's stopping you? Commit to cultivating a healthy soul this Easter-tide. Keep on reading God's Word daily beyond this season, stay plugged into the Church of Jesus Christ and remain prayerful at all times, so that Jesus finds us awake at our posts when He returns.

*Christian Pountain, Head of RE, St Christopher's CE High School.*

**READ: MARK 15:1-41**

*Then Jesus gave a loud cry and breathed his last. ... 'Truly this man was God's Son!'*

**Mark 15:37, 39**

Today we tread on holy ground as we follow Jesus to the cross. This is the darkest day: the pinnacle of human sin and blindness in executing the Son of God. Yet also the most glorious day, GOOD Friday, as He willingly gives His life as a ransom for many. So as to not get lost in the detail we're going to pick out six contrasts or ironies.

First, the judge of all gives no answer to the charges against Him. With a word Jesus could have silenced his opponents and walked free. Instead He shocks Pilate as He goes like a lamb led to the slaughter.

Second, the innocent one is condemned and a murderer goes free. Barabbas is guilty and deserves condemnation and Jesus is totally innocent. Yet they trade places as the crowd buy for Jesus' blood and the people-pleasing Pilate sends the Prince of Life to his death.

Third, the king of all is taunted for being king. The cruelty of the soldiers is chilling as they take a bleeding man, who has endured a flogging, as their plaything. They bow before Jesus as a joke, not knowing that before him every knee will bow.

Fourth, the saviour of the world is mocked for not saving Himself. There is no other way - this is the purpose of his coming. In order to save others He must not save Himself, but they cannot see it because they will not believe.

Fifth, the perfect Son of God is godforsaken. Like the plague of darkness on Egypt all those years ago the judgement of God on human sin is made visible. But the judgement doesn't fall on the Jewish leaders, Pilate, Barabbas, or soldiers – it is Jesus who cries out in tortured agony. The sin is ours but the suffering is His as he dies for us in our place.

Sixth, the hardened centurion involved in Jesus' death sees him die and believes. This is the high point of Mark's gospel, the third declaration that Jesus is God's Son by this surprising witness. The torn temple curtain shows all can come in, even this centurion, through Jesus' saving death.

So, the question for us is what do we see in Jesus' death? If we see the Son of God, our saviour, dying for our sin then come to him in faith with all praise, worship, and adoration.

*The Revd Jonny Lee, Assistant Curate, St Andrew's, Ashton-on-Ribble.*

**READ: MARK 15:42-47**

*'Then Joseph bought a linen cloth, and taking down the body, wrapped it in the linen cloth, and laid it in a tomb that had been hewn out of the rock. He then rolled a stone against the door of the tomb. Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Jesus saw where the body was laid.'* **Mark 15:46-47**

How are we to worship after Good Friday when everything seems to have ended? Perhaps the mysterious figure of Joseph of Arimathea can help us.

In Mark's Gospel, Joseph is presented simply as a devout Jew, hurrying to do a good deed for a stranger - providing a proper Jewish burial for Jesus in the three-hour window between his death and the start of the sabbath. As a respected member of the Jewish community, Joseph was trying to fulfil the commandment in Deuteronomy (21:22-23), that anyone executed by hanging on a tree should be buried the same day.

Joseph's act of charity towards Jesus comes with considerable risk - being associated with a man executed as 'King of the Jews' - and yet he 'went boldly' to Pilate to ask a favour. The Romans did not often allow respectable burial to executed criminals.

As readers who know how the story ends, we can see the seeds of Resurrection even here. Jesus's death inspires a risky act of love, an act of love for someone who appeared defeated, humiliated, failed. And yet, as part of this ritual of burial, hurried as it is, we see Jesus robed in linen, nodding towards the role of High Priest he has fulfilled on the Cross (see Leviticus 16.3-5). John, in his Gospel, makes this association clearer, but the implication is still here in Mark - Jesus enters the tomb vested as Aaron the High Priest was vested when making the sin offering on the day of Atonement.

So how might we worship after Good Friday? Like Joseph of Arimathea by acts of love and service which involve real risk and no promise of reward.

Although he doesn't know it, Joseph, burying a disgraced criminal and risking ritual impurity, is actually vesting the High Priest of the New Covenant, the one who laid down his life so that, in Him, all might be made alive. As we follow Jesus, boldly, but in uncertainty, we pray that our acts of service, too, might bear fruit to eternal life, when we see not in dark reflections but in the brightness and clarity of the Resurrection life.

*The Revd Chris Dingwall-Jones, Assistant Curate, St Peter & St David, Fleetwood.*

## READ: MARK 16

*'...and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.'* **Mark 16:8**

The most difficult part of writing a novel is how to end it. A skilful writer will draw together all the threads of the story, answer all your questions, resolve every issue and do so with an ingenuity that leaves you fully satisfied. Our long journey through Mark's Gospel reaches its end today. Many scholars think that the Gospel finishes at verse 8 and that verses 9 to 20 are a later addition. If that's the case, then what is the culmination of our long adventure? 'They were afraid.' The women go to the tomb, the body is gone, they are terrified. And that's it! The end! It's not quite JK Rowling!

But actually that ending carries the most profound insight. The Resurrection is not about Easter eggs, flower arrangements and affable cheeriness. It is about life and eternity. It is about agonising sacrifice and desperate pain. It is about blood and nails, death and entombment. It is about the bizarre mystery of a missing body. These women have seen the cost of human redemption. No wonder they were terrified. Only later would the women realise quite had happened, and then they would indeed tell their story. 'He is risen. He is not here,' says the angel. Jesus is alive!

Jesus is alive, and so everything is changed for ever. Jesus is alive, and so His saving work is complete and, by sharing in our death, He has drawn us from death to life. Jesus is alive, so sin is destroyed and we are no longer captive to its power. Jesus is alive, so our lives have purpose and we have a future. Jesus is alive, so we mean and sinful creatures, dragged from the dust of death, can glory in the new creation. Jesus is alive, so everything is transformed.

This Easter, let us stop to realise afresh the price of our redemption. There is nothing cheap, easy or inevitable about what Jesus has done to set us free. Think back through the Gospel you have now read. Remember the frustration and the pain that Jesus has endured: the sin, the faithlessness, the misunderstandings, the lies, the whipping, the thorns, the nails and the blood-stained wood. Think of the cries of agony of a man hung out to die, abandoned by His friends, pleading with His Father. Easter does not erase that costly work. It fulfils it. It demonstrates its hard reality. For this is what God has done for us. No wonder the women were afraid. And we too should be afraid for our awesome God has stooped down and set us free.

But like them our fear can swiftly turn to joy. And then what do we do? Well of course, we tell. We tell everyone! For Jesus is risen and we are saved through him for ever. All the world must know that Good News. Jesus is alive. Alleluia. Amen.

*The Rt Revd Philip North, Bishop of Burnley.*

# WHAT'S NEXT?

We really hope you've enjoyed walking through Lent with this booklet. If you're wondering how you can continue with this pattern of daily reading there are a whole host of resources available to you. For ease of access, many resources are now available either online or as apps. A few suggestions are:

## DAILY PRAYER

<https://www.churchofengland.org/prayer-and-worship/join-us-service-daily-prayer>

Daily Prayer is available free as an app or on the Church of England Website and gives complete services for Morning, Evening and Night Prayer in both contemporary (Common Worship) and traditional (Book of Common Prayer) forms.

## LECTIO 365 <https://www.24-7prayer.com/dailydevotional>

Lectio 365 is a devotional resource that helps you pray the Bible every day and is inspired by Lectio Divina, a way of meditating on the Bible that's been used by Christians for centuries. Written by leaders from the 24-7 Prayer movement, and produced in partnership with CWR, this resource helps you engage with Scripture to inspire prayer.

## BIOY <https://www.bibleinoneyear.org>

With Bible In One Year each day you will receive a Psalm or Proverbs reading, a New Testament reading and an Old Testament reading. It also provides daily audio and written commentary to walk you through each day's reading, to provide fresh understanding of the texts.

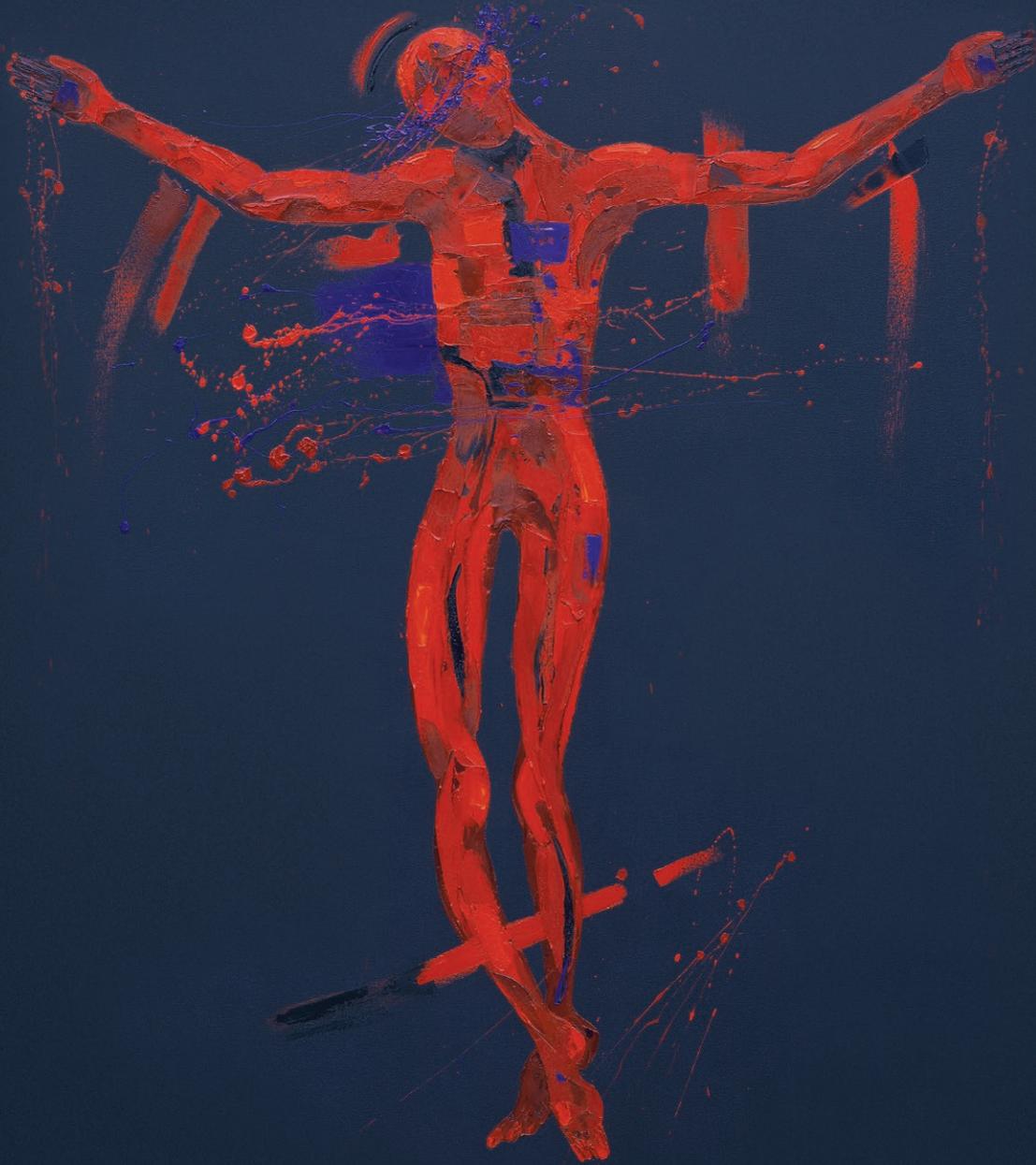
## SACRED SPACE [www.sacredspace.ie](http://www.sacredspace.ie)

Sacred Space is inspired by the spirituality of Saint Ignatius of Loyola, and gives a thought for the day, a daily Bible passage and some guided reflections.

## BIBLE PODLETS <https://www.bdeducation.org.uk/podcasts/bible-podlets/>

Bible Podlets is a Bible study and discussion podcast for primary aged children to do with adults. Each episode has fun games/activities, an engaging Bible reading in the form of a news story and deep discussion with places to pause and talk together about the topic. Discussion notes are available to download from the Resources Area of the website.

Alternatively, if you would prefer a hard copy resource, Christian bookshops hold a large stock of Bible reading material, from daily reading notes to study books on particular themes or books of the Bible.



©PENNY WARDEN



*All Scriptural texts in this booklet are taken from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible.*

*Designed by Morse-Brown Design.*

*We are delighted at being able to include some images of Penny Warden's 'Stations of the Cross', a series of 15 oil paintings on display at Blackburn Cathedral. Many thanks to Penny for giving us permission to use them. Visit: [www.pennywarden.com](http://www.pennywarden.com).*