

Day 1 – Mark 1:1 'The beginning'

The message of Jesus is good news. Indeed, that's what the word 'gospel' means – literally 'good news'. And yet sometimes we can miss the wood for the trees; we can all too easily forget that, at its heart, *this really is good news*. Better than good: it's the best news I ever heard – hopefully it's the best news you ever heard, too.

Faced with a diet of bad news stories, of institutional failings, of personal challenges, of familiarity breeding, if not contempt, then a lack of passion, we get ground down. The world around us feels jaded, too – and maybe that rubs off on us as well.

So, what better tonic than to remind ourselves in this series that Jesus is good news! Mark certainly thinks so – the first thing he tells us in his brilliant biography of Jesus is that Jesus is good news: (v1) 'The beginning of the good news about Jesus.'

Let's not miss that. Mark is very punchy, and gets straight into the action: no genealogies like Matthew; no outline of his historical approach and extended birth narrative like Luke; no high-falutin' reprise of the creation narrative like John – verse 2 gets straight down to it. John the Baptist appears and away we go. Bish bash bosh. It's breathless, it's exciting, it's like a US TV drama cramming three hours of British plot into a 42-minute episode. Jesus did this, and then he did this, and then he did this.... I love it. No messing.

But we start with Mark's two-word summary of everything that follows: 'good news'! And verse 1 also tells us *why*: it's a question of identity. Mark gives Jesus two very important names: he is the Messiah and the Son. And in that short phrase he captures Jesus' dual identity: the anointed human rescuer, promised by the prophets and dreamed of, longed for, by God's people. But not just human: God had also promised that he would come and sort out our mess himself. Jesus is the Son of God: not just divinely anointed, but divinely appointed – the One we've all been waiting for.

Jesus had to be human to represent us. Jesus had to be God to save us and restore us. And this is the good news Mark is going to share with us: the Messiah, the Son of God is here.

It was good news then. It is good news now. May it be our good news this day, and every day. Amen, come Lord Jesus.

Day 2 – Mark 1:1-8 'A voice of one calling'

Of the many characters in the biblical story, John the Baptist has to be one of the best, doesn't he? The camel hair clothing, the diet of locusts and honey... Be honest: you'd travel out into the desert to see what all the fuss was about, wouldn't you? I think I would.

John plays a vital role in preparing the way for the arrival of Jesus – but what is sometimes overlooked is how his ministry, as described in today's passage, connects with the opening verse and Mark's declarations about Jesus' identity. As we saw yesterday, Jesus is both Messiah *and* Son – a human rescuer to draw us back to the Lord, and a divine rescuer to transform our hearts and renew our original calling to live as God's special creation, made in his image.

What brings people out to the desert (v5) is unquestionably a growing excitement that the former might have arrived: the Messiah, the anointed rescuer. Many may have thought it was John himself; he certainly had the right credentials. However, he was always quick to point people away from himself towards Someone Greater (v7). He was the 'voice of one calling' (v3), the fulfilment of several important Old Testament prophecies that the Messiah would have a herald, someone to prepare the way (vv2-3: Mark actually quotes both Isaiah and Malachi, though he only names Isaiah – we'll save that question for another time!).

In preparing for the Messiah, the natural response is to clear the decks spiritually, so to speak – to make a fresh start. The word 'repent' literally means to 'turn around', and although washing with water was a common practice welcoming non-Jews into the faith, it was something of a new development for Jews themselves to be washed as a sign of repentance.

The word 'baptise' literally means 'dip', and of course the early church picked it up as the simple but powerful sign of anyone coming to Christ. But, as John reminds us, there are two baptisms at work: the outward one, and the deeper one – the baptism of the heart. And this is what only the Son can do. A human rescuer can only save us so much; unless the heart is transformed, we'll just keep repeating the cycle of temporary renewal and inevitable decline that characterised the whole history of God's people (and the story of the Old Testament).

So, Jesus is both Messiah and Divine Son. As Son, he has the authority to wash us, not just with water, but with his Holy Spirit. To be a follower of Christ is to be washed like this daily, continually. Take a few moments today to pray for grace to be 'dipped' again with the Holy Spirit, that we might lead the new life that Jesus always calls us into.

Day 3 – Mark 1:9-13 'The Trinity of love'

I often get asked about the Trinity – this uniquely Christian understanding that God is one being with three natures: Father, Son and Spirit. How did we get to this point? Is there a bible verse which gives us 'the Trinity', all neatly packaged up? The truth is that there is no one single verse I can point to, but it's passages like today's which demonstrate clearly how we got from the Jewish idea that 'God is One' to the Christian one that God is One... in Three – and Three in One!

God as Trinity is ultimately something to be experienced, not theorised, and it is through the 'experiences' of the gospels and the rest of the New Testament that the early Christians came to realise this extraordinary truth. We have a 3-dimensional faith, because we have a 3-dimensional God.

Today's reading is Mark's very condensed account of Jesus' baptism and temptation. In Matthew, this is 16 verses; in Luke, 15 – in Mark, just 5 verses. You can feast on the finer points of these stories in the other gospels, but what is notable here is how we see the Trinity of love at work. The Son is joyfully affirmed by the Father in his baptism: (v11) 'You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased.' This Son is then sent by the Spirit into the wilderness (v12). The Trinity at work in unity and mission.

As an aside, it is striking that Jesus' journey into the wilderness is Spirit-led. We often think of wilderness times as times of uncertainty or dryness or chaos, as 'bad' times – but for Jesus at least, the first thing we learn about time in the wilderness is that it was a work of God: he was sent *by the Spirit*.

This is powerful for us, too. We all have wilderness times, and the temptation is to think that somehow we have let God down, or that God is absent. There may be valid reasons why we think like this, but today, let's take heart from this passage that God is at work in wilderness times. If you find yourself in such a time now, ask yourself (and God) the question: where is God at work? Is there anything of this time that might be led by the Spirit? That may only be something you fathom later – but I do believe we can ask the question now. God often does his best work in the desert.

As we reflect on how Jesus' experience can relate to ours, let's also rejoice that, thanks to the work of Christ, we too can be children of God. In other words, what God says to Jesus here is true for us, too. At the heart of a thriving Christian life is the deep realisation that we are our Heavenly Father's precious children. So, today, take a few minutes to receive the Father's affirmation to Jesus as yours: *you* are his beloved child; with you he is well pleased.

Day 4 – Mark 1:14-15 'The time!'

One of many people's favourite passages, including those who would not call themselves Christians, is that famous text from the Old Testament book of Ecclesiastes: (3:1-11 excerpts) 'There is a time for everything... a time to be born and a time to die, a time to plant and a time to uproot.... a time to weep and a time to laugh, a time to mourn and a time to dance... a time to keep and a time to throw away, a time to tear and a time to mend, a time be silent and a time to speak.... God has made everything beautiful in its time.'

It resonates with something that we all instinctively know is true: that time is not just a linear thing, or a convenient way of marking the day – time is also about moments and seasons. The Greek culture of Jesus' day recognised this, too; they had two different words for time: *chronos* was literal, linear time, how we mark the day, how long something takes. The second word was *kairos*, and this means a *significant* time: a moment or season when things are happening, things change.

It is *kairos* time that Jesus refers to in our passage for today, declaring to all who would listen: (v15) the (kairos) time has come! Why? Because 'the kingdom of God has come near.' This is a significant moment, perhaps *the* moment of all moments, the season of all seasons: God is breaking into the world in a new way. Recognise it, embrace it and change – or to put it in Jesus' words: 'repent and believe the good news!'

As we read these dramatic words, perhaps we are reminded of our own *kairos* time: when the good news of Jesus first became real to us, when we believed and turned our life towards Christ. That time may have been a moment: a powerful talk, a miracle, a sudden revelation that Jesus really was the key to life. Or it may have been a season – and *kairos* can mean both moment and season – a slowly dawning realisation as to where (and towards Whom) your life was heading.

Give thanks today for that *kairos* time. The kingdom of God came to near to you – and keeps coming. *Kairos* times can occur throughout our lives. Is now a *kairos* time for you? What is God up to?

Even if you don't sense that this is a significant moment in your life, it remains true that our journey with Jesus involves a daily return to his primary call on our lives, a call proclaimed here to all who would listen: today, I believe the good news. Today, I turn my life towards Jesus. Today, the time has come – thank you, Lord Jesus, that your kingdom is near.

Day 5 – Mark 1:16-20 'At once'

'I will make you fishers of men, fishers of men, fishers of men, I will make you fishers of men, if you foll-owwww meeeee.' Perhaps some of you remember that old Sunday School bible chorus – and apologies for the non-inclusive language, it was of its time! I certainly remember singing it... and no doubt will now be humming it all day. As you will, too.

Today's passage is another of those iconic stories of Jesus that are among the best-known of all the gospels. Jesus walks by the Sea of Galilee and calls his first disciples, two pairs of brothers: first Simon and Andrew, then James and John. Now that his public ministry has begun, and the 'time' has been declared, he starts to gather his core team.

It's likely that Jesus would have known some, or all, of these four for a long time. This area of Galilee is not that large, and Capernaum was the 'local centre'. Those who fished the lake would have provided food for much of the local population, so it's hard to imagine that Jesus wouldn't have bumped into Andrew or Simon or James or John (or all of them) on a regular basis.

In other words, it may not be a spontaneous decision on the part of Jesus; but *today*, he calls them. And what he calls them to is the natural outworking of the proclamation of Jesus' 'good news' message of the last verses: we are not just to believe, but to follow. Repentance means a change of life – our direction is now towards Jesus, and this means active following.

What struck me this time I read it, though, is how the response of the first disciples matches Jesus' declaration that this is a *kairos* time. The good news is now embodied in flesh – and *now* is the time to follow. Not tomorrow; *today*. Simon, Andrew, James and John are perfect examples of what it means to really absorb the fact that 'the time has come!' If this really is that time, then we respond to the call: (v18, v20) 'At once they left their nets and followed him... Without delay he called them, and they left their father Zebedee.'

A wise old pastor once said to me: 'Don't get used to saying no to Jesus.' He was referring not just to our initial decision to follow, but also to our willingness to keep being obedient to him through our lives. Every so often Jesus puts his finger on something and invites us to be obedient. Each time, we can choose to say yes or no – Jesus doesn't force us. But in these *kairos* times, today's passage encourages us to keep saying yes to Jesus. 'Come, follow me,' he beckons – take a moment to hear that call again, and to say 'yes'. We do so, knowing that we journey together, and that Jesus journeys with us all the way.

Day 6 – Mark 1:21-28 'I know who you are'

A few years ago, my wife and I got hooked on a Spanish TV series: called 'I know who you are', it tells the story of a lawyer who suffers a car crash and wakes up by the roadside, having suffered total memory loss – he has no idea who he is, or why he is there. As the plot unfolds, the amnesiac appears to be a thoroughly decent chap, unluckily surrounded by a dysfunctional family; but the drama of the series is that, as he regains his memory, we learn that all is not what it seems. In fact, *he* is not what he seems: he is, in fact, a cad, and those who know who he is also know the bad things he's done.

'I know who you are' is an unsettling drama – but it's also an unsettling thing to say to most human beings. The phrase is rarely a compliment, used rather to indicate awareness of things we'd prefer people didn't know. Many of us carry that sense that, if people only knew who we were, what lies behind the respectable mask...

Jesus, of course, carries none of this baggage. When the unclean spirit in today's passage says, 'I know who you are,' this spirit is not referring to anything dark or deceitful. Quite the reverse: this spiritual being knows that Jesus is the Lord, the chosen one promised for centuries – or, as the spirit puts it: 'the Holy One of God.'

It is fascinating that the second being to recognise Jesus' identity – after John the Baptist – is a demonic spirit. And Jesus' stern response should not be seen as either insecurity or cover-up; he has nothing to hide! But he is very early in his ministry; if the rumour mill starts too early, Jesus will end up with a target on his back. John's gospel tells us that, straight after he fed the 5,000, 'they wanted to make him king by force'; and the same could happen here. We know that Jesus quickly becomes a threat to power – but his ministry needs time to grow. And so, he delivers the man of the spirit, and leaves people to wonder.

What we do see clearly in this story is that Jesus is qualitatively different to all other leaders of his time. What he possesses is innate authority – and it's worth noticing that real spiritual authority does not come from a title or a uniform or a reputation, but is something much deeper. Jesus has none of the outward trappings, but his words and actions immediately convey it. And the result is amazement (v22, repeated v27): just who *is* this man??

We know who he is – and our Lord has all authority in heaven and earth, exercising it now for the sake of his people, including us. We may feel weak or inadequate, but in Jesus' name we carry his authority with us. Now there's a thought to lift our hearts at the start of this week. May God grant us grace to believe it, and to live as those in whom the Holy One of God abides, by his Spirit. Amen!

Day 7 – Mark 1:29-39 'Why I have come'

After yesterday's dramatic encounter in the synagogue, the narrative picks up speed. We'll see this more than once in Mark's gospel – the action comes thick and fast, so 'as soon as they left the synagogue...' (v29) they're onto the next encounter: in this case, a pastoral visit with Jesus' new team, helping (and healing) Simon's mother-in-law.

All through this section, we see demonstrations of Jesus' authority: first in his teaching (v20), then in his authority over demonic spirits (v25), now over illness (v31) – and, at this point, it's open season, such that everyone in the vicinity with ailments, either physical or spiritual, comes to find him and seek healing (v32). Notice that it's after sunset – traditionally nothing happens after sundown, but we need to remember that illness or spiritual oppression was understood in that culture to be a sign of being out of favour with God. Many of these people would have been ostracised from the community, perhaps even seen as 'cursed', so they might have been fearful of being out in public during the day.

So, they come to Jesus at night, and Jesus heals 'many who had various diseases' (v34). Note the expansion of his ministry, as well as the breadth of his authority being demonstrated. Once again, though, he is not ready to be seen as the new king, the Holy One of God, so he commands the spirits to be silent.

So far, so good – however, at this point the narrative takes a twist. Far from encouraging further crowds Jesus takes himself off to pray (v35). When challenged by his friends, he also reminds them of the true nature of his mission: he is not just here to work wonders, important though those are in establishing and demonstrating his identity and authority; he is here to declare the good news of the inbreaking kingdom of God. 'The time has come!'

Thus, he moves on 'throughout Galilee, preaching in their synagogues and driving out demons.' (v39) Jesus can't be caged. The people of Capernaum desperately wanted an in situ miracle worker – and who wouldn't? – and Jesus is more than happy to bless them for a season, to begin sharing his good news there. But his vision is bigger, his mission is wider and greater.

This little episode in Capernaum is a pivotal moment in his ministry, setting Jesus' course. It reminds us that Jesus is not an insular saviour, who only cares about a certain group of people. His love and message reaches out to all. He takes the good news out to the world, to as many as will receive it. Wherever you are reading this today, we are the beneficiaries of this Saviour, who knows who he is and why he has come: drawing the whole world into his good news. That is why he came.

Day 8 – Mark 1:40-45 'The source of compassion'

'I am willing.' One of Jesus' most beautiful sayings, and oft-loved by preachers through the generations. It is a word to us: if you've ever wondered if Jesus gets bored of your prayers, or of you; if he tires of your problems, or your requests; if you've messed up and wonder if he can make you clean again – hear his voice today, as true now as it was in our passage 2,000 years ago: 'I am willing.'

Let's spend a moment today reflecting on where Jesus gets his compassion from. We get compassion fatigue so easily; just how does he manage it? This little story has so much in it, but it gives us some powerful pointers, which reveal the heart of Jesus' ministry – and also point the way for us to become more like Jesus, too.

First, Jesus sees individuals. As we've observed, his ministry (in the second half of Mark ch1) is taking off: large numbers of people are coming to him to be healed (v32), and having begun in Capernaum, he is doing the same in many places (v39). In other words, he is ministering to dozens, or hundreds, of people. But he never loses sight of the one. 'People' are not just one blob of humanity – each person matters. This *one* man with leprosy comes to him and gets Jesus' full attention (v40).

Second, Jesus lets the man's story touch him. He is not in 'professional mode', performing a task or a routine. The English translation of v41 is 'Jesus was indignant' or 'moved with compassion' – but the word is a bit more earthy than that. It literally means 'his guts moved'. Jesus finds the man's situation gut-wrenching. It makes him physically sick with emotion to see this precious child of God in misery. That is how our troubles and our pain affect Jesus.

And what made Jesus so cross is that the man expected to be fobbed off. He must have come to plenty of rabbis and had a negative reception – so his default approach is to prostrate himself and beg: '*if* you are willing.' It reminds us that true compassion is often controversial. It offends polite society. It means receiving, welcoming and serving people whom others avoid, who are not like us. The received wisdom of the day is that this man with leprosy should be kept away from society. To touch him would not just make you ceremonially unclean and needing to perform rituals of washing, but put you at risk of infection, too.

Jesus breaks all polite boundaries by touching the man – and of course, his power to cleanse works in reverse: far from the man 'dirtying' him, Jesus instead makes the man clean – whole, and healed. The scandal of this encounter is why Jesus has to stay away from people for a while. It's not just that he has the weight of messianic expectation on his shoulders (v28, v37) – many would now see him as a potential leper, or at the very least as a controversial figure whom it would be risky to be seen with.

Not that this matters to those who need him. They still come (v45b). And we still come today. Jesus never runs out of compassion. Whatever is in your heart, take it to him. And may we, too, be filled with compassion for others, seeing them as Jesus sees them.

Day 9 – Mark 2:1-5 'True friendship'

If you ever attended Sunday School, you're very likely to be familiar with this story! As one of the most visually striking stories in the life of Jesus, it's a favourite with Sunday School leaders everywhere. The little Israelite house crammed full of people; the friends battling their way up the steps on the outside of the property... then removing the branches which acted as a de facto roof; and ultimately lowering their friend down through the ceiling, right next to Jesus.

Tomorrow, we'll think about Jesus' encounter with the man himself – but today, let's give a moment's reflection to the unsung heroes in the story: his friends. Note that it was *their* faith – not the man's – that touched Jesus' heart (v5). Not to mention the huge physical effort needed to climb up on the roof, then make a hole, then manoeuvre their friend safely and slowly down to the ground again: that is friendship in action.

Ultimately, though, what we learn today is that the greatest gift of true friendship is to bring someone to Jesus. It's what Andrew did with his brother Simon (John 1:42): a simple invitation which not only changed Simon's life but changed the course of history. It's what the paralysed man's friends do here. They didn't have to preach, promote or pray out loud; they just had to make the introduction, to bring him to the gathering.

Some of us may be called to bear witness with our words, and certainly we can all pray for our friends in our personal prayer time. But what's so encouraging about this first part of the story is that, even if words are not your strong suit, and we feel inadequate to give wise answers to hard questions or to share inspiring stories about your faith, we can *all* invite someone to something.

That's what the friends did, and it was enough. Jesus did the rest; he did – and does – do the heavy lifting in the story. It is not our job to 'convert our friends': we can safely leave that to Jesus. What we can do is make the introduction, invite them to a gathering, and then keep praying and trusting that our great Lord does the rest.

So why not spend a few moments today praying for a few people you love, and also for courage for yourself: to know when, and how, to do what the man's friends did today. It might not feel like a lot – but in God's economy, it may very well be more than enough.

Day 10 – Mark 2:1-12 'Our greatest need'

In his 1943 paper 'A Theory of Human Motivation', American psychologist Abraham Maslow proposed a hierarchy of human needs. These were arranged in five ascending tiers, beginning with basic Physiological Needs (food and shelter) and culminating with the highest tier of 'Self-Actualisation'.

The theory has been widely adopted and much of it makes intuitive sense. But there's one huge gap: despite the many needs mentioned – and breaking the model down in detail, more than twenty are listed – forgiveness is missing.

How do we know this is a fatal flaw in the model? Because Jesus thinks it is. As we pick up the story from yesterday, the paralysed man has been brought to Jesus by his friends, who've made considerable efforts to get him there. His greatest need is obvious... isn't it? 'When Jesus saw their faith, he said, "Son, your sins are forgiven."' (v5)

Sometimes followers of Jesus are accused of over-spiritualising things, of ignoring practical needs and making everything about 'eternal' stuff, as if this life doesn't matter. And we have to admit that sometimes those critiques are valid, not least because Jesus does not ignore the man's practical wellbeing. He ends the encounter by healing the man, thereby blessing him both spiritually and physically. It follows, then, that this is our model, too: we care for the whole person.

However, we must also beware the opposite temptation: of being so caught up with physical and material things that we ignore the state of a person's soul. From Jesus' perspective, this would be a grave mistake. His assessment of the man's greatest need was to be right with God first – and then to be healed physically.

As he makes this point to the Pharisees, he also points them (and us) towards the source of this forgiveness: none other than Jesus himself. What Jesus claims here would be blasphemy... unless it was true, and he really was the divine son, with the authority to forgive everything that separates us from God.

As we reflect on this story today, let's bring our deepest need to the Lord; and let's do that with a heart full of joy – because we too can know, like the man in our story, that our deepest need has been met. We have been forgiven, for all eternity – praise God!

Day 11 – Mark 2:10-12 'This amazed everyone'

Today is a brief moment to recap, by reflecting on the final half of the last verse of our week: 'This amazed everyone and they praised God, saying, "We have never seen anything like this!"'

Three times in this opening section of Mark, the people are 'amazed' – by Jesus' teaching (1:22); by his command over the unclean spirit (1:27); and here, by the dramatic healing of the paralysed man (2:12). They can't help but praise God, and cry out that they've never seen anything like it.

I want to keep being amazed by Jesus. I've been a Christian a long time, and seen many wonderful things. Jesus has changed my life so much – but, sometimes, I can lose sight of the wood for the trees. I can forget all the Jesus has done, I can let the amazing become... well, commonplace, unremarkable. I can domesticate my faith, even let it shrink.

Mark wants us to start our understanding of Jesus by being amazed by him. The intensity of his narrative creates this sense of wonder, as Jesus moves from one thing to the next to the next to the next, all with authority (the other 'a' word we see a lot in this opening section).

Take a moment today to put yourself in the crowd – perhaps re-read the opening section of the gospel in one go. Let yourself be amazed again. And may all of us keep being amazed by 'the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God' – and may that, too, turn out hearts to joyful praise. There is simply no-one like Jesus.

Day 12 – Mark 2:13-17 'Good news for everyone'

'Let me tell you how it will be: it's 1 for you, 19 for me.' So sang the Beatles as the first lyrics on their iconic 1966 album 'Revolver'. The opening song is 'Taxman' and is essentially a rant about the 95% top rate of income tax for high earners in the UK, which of course included all four of the Beatles, who by this time were multi-millionaires. Apart from being a great song and an interesting perspective on the current debates about taxation, it's a salutary reminder that tax officials have never been very popular!

However, if we moan a bit about HMRC today, it's nothing compared to the status of 'taxmen' in first-century Israel. This is because Israel was part of the Roman Empire, which meant that tax collectors were effectively Roman state officials; to a devout Jew, whose homeland is sacrosanct, the Romans are usurpers and anyone who works for them – especially 'one of their own' – is at best a collaborator and at worst a traitor.

This sense of national betrayal was augmented by the fact that many tax collectors took a cut for themselves, so they weren't just traitors, but corrupt and greedy ones at that. So it is, frankly, scandalous that Jesus goes up to a tax booth (v14) and invites the chap sitting there to follow him. In today's terms, we would definitely be talking about 'reputational risk' and 'bad optics' for the Jesus movement!

But that's the point: what this simple episode tells us is that Jesus' kingdom is for *everyone*, and wide open to all who would be a part of it. When we talk about those on the outside, we don't just mean those who are poor and exploited, but also those who are ostracised for other reasons. Jesus' arms remain open for them, too.

And so, Levi – who becomes Matthew, one of the twelve apostles and the writer of the gospel – joins Jesus (v14), and, in overflowing gratitude at his welcome into the fold, invites Jesus to his house (Luke tells us that it was a 'great banquet'). Not surprisingly, this party is attended by lots of other outsiders: not just his tax-collecting friends, but others who are also referred to by the religious elite rather dismissively as 'sinners' (v30). And Jesus is *there*: no doubt welcoming and blessing these 'sinners', too.

...all of which prompts Jesus to reply to his baffled (or outraged?) questioners: it's not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick (v17). Levi knows his moral failings and gratefully receives a second chance and a new life. We, too, are given that same invitation by our loving Lord Jesus – who knows what we're like, but invites us anyway! May God grant us all grace to keep saying 'yes' to Jesus – and cause you to give heartfelt thanks that Jesus' arms still extend in welcome to you, too.

Day 13 – Mark 2:18-22 'The shock of the new'

We're currently in the midst of redecorating some rooms. We've lived in our home for ten years, and over time numerous walls have got marks which need a bit of touching up. The problem is that, even if we had bought some new paint which exactly matches the colour in theory, we all know what happens when a dab of fresh paint is applied to a wall which was painted a few years ago. The slight fading of the colour over time means that the new dab of paint will stand out worse than the slight mark it was covering over! Better to repaint completely – a completely fresh start.

Jesus refers to something similar in today's passage: or rather, two examples which would be easy to recognise among his hearers. You don't sew a new patch on an old piece of cloth, he says, and you don't put new wine into an old wineskin. Try either of those things, and disaster awaits.

The underlying issue here is that Jesus appears to be breaking all the religious rules – at least, as far as the Pharisees' understanding of their religion went. In the previous episode it was: 'Jesus, why are you eating with all the wrong people?' Today, it's: 'why aren't your disciples fasting enough?' Tomorrow, we'll see them asking another question: 'why are you breaking the Sabbath rules (as we understand them)?'

At this point we need to be clear that Jesus is not de-bunking the law. Elsewhere, he is very clear that God's law is good and right, and is not being re-written. Rather, he is challenging their *human interpretation* of the law.... and also making the point that, when God breaks in and does a new thing, suddenly our eyes are opened to new ways of understanding God's will and ways. Jesus is the 'new wine', and it's simply too vibrant, too fresh, to be held within the old wineskins.

This is 'the shock of the new.' For the generation of religious leaders in Jesus' day, brought up to revere the old ways, this radical new inbreaking of the kingdom of God – the kingdom which, after centuries of expectation, has now 'come near' – is all a bit hard to take in. But what Jesus wants is for his listeners to open their minds, to be willing to embrace the reality that something new and incredibly exciting is happening.

It would be easy for us to judge them for it. But, if we're honest, we can also see ourselves in those leaders. Let's resolve to stay open to whatever God has in store for us. It might not be revolutionary, as it was for Jesus' contemporaries; but there's always more to learn about Jesus, new ways to grow in our relationship with him. Even if you're teetotal, this kind of 'new wine' is for all of us! And may we drink deeply of it today, and in this season.

Dear Lord, of you three things I pray: to know you more clearly, to love you more dearly, and to follow you more nearly, day by day. Amen.

Day 14 – Mark 2:23-28 'Sabbath – back to basics #1'

It's easy to miss the wood for the trees. We all do it at times – and it's just as likely to happen in matters of faith, too. What is the point of the Sabbath? That's the million-dollar question for us today and tomorrow: why did God command every human to rest for one day in every seven? What is 'the wood for the trees' here?

The theological answer goes back to creation: God rested on the seventh day, so that forms the pattern for us, too. However, it's worth noting that God's Sabbath post-creation doesn't end; there isn't a second week, as it were! Rather, from that point, he invites all of us into his rest. One day we'll enjoy that eternally – but for now, we're invited to sample it once a week.

If that's the 'big picture' reason, the Ten Commandments give us the practical reasons: the point of having a day's complete rest every week is: (a) for worship and time with God, and (b) for justice and fair treatment – if we rest, then others can rest, too. The particular people mentioned in both Exodus and Deuteronomy are household servants, whose conditions are dependent on the goodwill of others – and God reminds his people quite pointedly that they knew what it was like to have been slaves, so they of all people had good reason to respect a weekly Sabbath rest for their workers.

But what is the definition of 'work'? This is where the human debates and interpretations come in – over the years, lots of things got added to the definition of work, including almost all forms of preparing food. This is why the Pharisees challenge Jesus' followers about eating grain which they had to pick off the plant. The act of picking constituted 'work', according to the complex regulations they had devised for the Sabbath (as an aside, had it already been picked it would have been fine!).

It's a classic 'wood for the trees' moment. Human regulations make great servants but lousy masters – and, in their noble quest to try and obey the law, the Pharisees had lost sight of the *point* of the law in the first place. Jesus replies by reminding them that the greatest Jewish king there'd ever been did something much 'worse' (vv25-26) – so maybe they needed to revise their thinking!

He finishes with something even more controversial: this is not just about a true understanding of Sabbath, but also a true understanding of *who* gave the Sabbath to us – in claiming to be Lord of the Sabbath, Jesus is making a clear reference to his divine identity. For us, though, today and tomorrow are a healthy reminder of the importance of rest – and also of remembering that it's the spirit of the law that matters most. Jesus desires our hearts, not anxious rule-following. May God grant us all grace to enjoy our Sabbaths wisely – and may Jesus be the Lord of our Sabbaths, too.

Day 15 – Mark 3:1-6 'Sabbath – back to basics #2'

If yesterday's story needed a bit of explanation – why was rubbing grain an issue? – today's passage is rather more straightforward. We're still looking at Jesus' encounters with the Pharisees regarding the Sabbath, and the fundamental question we posed yesterday still applies: what is the point of the Sabbath? Why did God give it to us? And, therefore, how can we use it wisely?

Yesterday, the disagreement with the Pharisees centred around complex rules regarding what constituted 'work' when it came to preparing food. Today, it is more direct: Jesus is asked to heal someone on the Sabbath. Bearing in mind that he's in the synagogue (i.e. worshipping the Lord, as the Sabbath is designed for) and he's not getting paid to heal anyone, it almost beggars belief that this act of kindness could be classed as 'work', and therefore breaking the fourth commandment. But there it is – that's why he's under scrutiny.

Jesus' reply once again gets to the heart of what we might call the spirit of the law. Can it possibly be wrong to do good on the Sabbath? Surely loving our neighbour in simple but practical ways is *exactly* the sort of thing God would encourage us to do?

It's a healthy reminder to us that we, too, can use our days of rest in a number of beneficial ways. Generally, as a society we're paying a heavy price for abandoning our commitment to a day of rest for most of the country at the same time, and it's right to keep challenging ourselves to find ways to make sure we rest appropriately...

...however, rest does not have to mean total inactivity – that's the trap the Pharisees had fallen into. Serving in the worshipping community on the Sabbath is a good thing to do; doing something simple which blesses another human being on our Sabbath – if it isn't our paid employment – is a good thing to do. If it restores our wellbeing (and many of us find simple acts of blessing restorative) then it's using the Sabbath as it should be used.

As we reflect on Jesus' life-giving teaching over the last couple of days, take a moment to review your 'Sabbaths'. Are there any changes Jesus is prompting you to make? Whatever your reflections on that question, pray today for a renewed commitment to practising healthy Sabbaths, that it might command a blessing for you, and those around you.

Day 16 – Mark 3:6-12 'The wrong side of history'

In the early nineteenth century, Holy Trinity Clapham was probably the most interesting church in the country to attend. As many of you may know, debates over the slave trade dominated the public discourse at this time, dividing national opinion – and this church in Clapham was the epicentre of this division. The leading lights of those proposing the abolition of the slave trade were known disparagingly as the 'Clapham Sect', because many of them lived locally and worshipped at Holy Trinity. On the other hand, many wealthy traders with interests in the Caribbean also lived in this genteel corner of south London. And, at Holy Trinity on Sunday, there would be a literal division on show: abolitionists would sit on one side of the church, pro-slavery campaigners on the other. (One can only imagine what coffee and chat was like after the service!)

The fact that we may find it hard to fathom why the debate over slavery took so long to resolve is indicative of which side 'won' – the tide of history turned against those who saw slavery as acceptable, and now it is more or less taken for granted amongst developed nations that slavery is an abomination.

But we should not forget how powerful the urge to maintain the status quo was. Those who promoted the benefits of slavery were popular and well-regarded for a very long time. That they proved to be on the wrong side of history was by no means assured. Indeed, it is sobering to reflect that, in the end, what brought about the abolition of slavery in Parliament in 1833 was a bill which remunerated slave owners (and not the slaves themselves) for their 'loss'.

In today's passage we see a similar polarisation starting to develop around the identity and ministry of Jesus. Thus far, Jesus has been attracting plenty of attention, and numerous questions from those unsure about what this 'new' thing really was. However, after Jesus directly challenged the Pharisees' theology of the Sabbath, suddenly their mood turns from one of bemusement or suspicion to outright opposition. They start to wonder if it might not be better to do away with Jesus entirely (v6).

This is one of those moments when the section breaks in our modern English bibles aren't totally helpful. Verse 6 is very much a 'link' verse between the two sections, and arguably fits better with vv7-12, because it shows how Jesus now sits between two very polarised groups of people. On the one hand, the religious elite want to kill him (v6). On the other, he is a cult hero with much of the rest of the population, who follow him everywhere (v7), including many desperate for miracles of healing (v8). Indeed, Jesus is a little concerned for his safety, as the crowd are getting difficult to manage (v9).

It's easy to look back now and judge the Pharisees for being on the wrong side of history. But let's not forget, firstly, that most of those following Jesus here also turned against him eventually; and secondly, that we all find it hard when our much-loved traditions are being challenged. There is a mini-Pharisee inside all of us – may our gracious Lord grant us all grace to see both Jesus and ourselves clearly, that we might continue to be on the right side, not just of history, but of his story.

Day 17 – Mark 3:13-19 'The team'

Things work better in a team. It's pretty much universally true: in companies, in organisations, and certainly in churches. We need people to journey with, to share life with, and also to work with.

Jesus might be the Son of God, with all the authority in the universe and a mission to save the world – but even he doesn't plan to do it alone. He needs a circle around him: and so, he heads up a mountainside, spends the night in prayer (which we learn in Luke) and then chooses twelve (v14). Presumably these are all people who've been part of his team for some time, and we've met five of them already: the fishermen Simon (Peter), Andrew, James and John; as well as Levi – now with a new name, Matthew, to reflect his restored identity as a follower of Jesus.

Neither Jesus nor the gospel writers reveal how he made his choice – but today we get a special insight as to what being part of the team means: 'that they might be with him, and that he might send them out to preach and to have authority to drive out demons' (vv14-15). Notice how relationship is the priority: first and foremost, their calling is to *be with Jesus*.

That's true for us, too. Before we are given useful work, what Jesus desires is simply that we want to be with him. From that, everything follows. We may not have the big calling of these twelve – and the word apostle means 'sent one', so the clue is in the name! – but whatever Jesus calls us to do will flow of out spending time with him, getting to know him, enjoying just *being* with him.

In the future, these twelve will continue the work after Jesus goes back to heaven, so there's a long-term plan here. In the medium term, they will also get the chance to cut their teeth doing what Jesus does (see, for example, Luke chapters 9 and 10), all the while being mentored by Jesus. But let's note, even then, that he sends them out in pairs: it's still about team and relationship. The God who is relationship within himself – Father, Son and Spirit – has fashioned us to work in a similar way.

You may still be in paid work, or retired; you may be part of clubs or voluntary organisations; you may have a good group of friends that you journey with; you may be part of a group at church. If any of those apply to you, give thanks today for your 'teams'. And re-commit to the joy of just being with Jesus – and from that, may all that God has for you flow, and grow.

Day 18 – Mark 3:20-30 'Unforgivable?'

Many people will do anything to avoid giving God the credit! It's just human nature. I remember a miraculous healing at the prison twenty years ago, when an inmate's blood pressure plummeted overnight – he went from permanent tinnitus to the BP of a fit young man in his 20s (he was an ex-smoker in his 50s) in a matter of hours. The GP who saw him that morning put it down to his medication starting to work – the same medication he'd been taking daily for ten years!

Today's passage is rather more sinister. Having fired questions at Jesus for some time, trying to work out who he is and what he's about – the section of the gospel from 2:1-3:6 – a group of them have now moved from curiosity to suspicion to outright opposition. They will do *anything* to find an explanation for Jesus' spiritual power – a way out, if you like, from confronting the implications of acknowledging that this power must be from God.

And so, they hit on (what they consider to be) a plausible conclusion – Jesus must be harnessing evil spiritual power. He must have sold his soul to the devil. Jesus immediately points out the obvious flaw in this argument: (v23) 'how can Satan drive out Satan?' It makes no sense! Instead, he points out the alternative answer: the 'strong man' (the devil) who runs the house (this world) has been tied up, so Jesus can 'steal' people out from under his nose (v27).

It's a very candid, but a brilliant, analogy. And it recognises the sobering reality that there is a spiritual battle for our world. The devil wants to keep as many as possible from finding their way back to God. Indeed, we can see his strategy even in the way that the Pharisees – supposedly the religious leaders – try to discredit Jesus, in order to keep people from coming to him. The devil's work is rarely dramatic – far better to undermine, distract, discredit...

Verse 29 is one of the most discussed in scripture; but the key lies in the text itself. The only unforgivable sin is to ascribe the work of God to the work of the devil – in other words to reject Jesus completely, and thereby cut yourself off from the perfect love, grace and goodness of God. That is what it means to 'blaspheme against the Holy Spirit'.

The good news for us today is that the strong man is bound by Jesus. As followers of Christ, we come under that covering. It's not a charm, or a guarantee of an easy life. But we can trust in the power of the One who decisively defeated the devil on the cross, and continues to plunder his house whenever he wishes, for the sake of his people, even now. Amen!

Day 19 – Mark 3:20-21,31-35 'Who is my family?'

As some of you know, many years ago I studied art history; my particular area of study was the Italian Renaissance – or as my friend bluntly (but not entirely inaccurately) put it: 'brown pictures of Mary.' It's certainly true that, next to Jesus, there are far more pictures of his mother Mary than of any other subject in the Renaissance period. Two particular favourites of mine can be seen in the National Gallery in London, both by Leonardo da Vinci: the 'Madonna of the Rocks' and his preparatory drawing of 'The Virgin and Child with St Anne'. (Both, admittedly, very definitely 'brown pictures of Mary!')

Mary is venerated in many branches of the Christian faith, and rightly so. She is, by any account, a remarkable woman. Chosen to bear the Saviour of the world, she accepts her costly calling with unusual faith and humility – as we read every year in the Nativity Story. We also read, at the end of that story, Simeon's prophetic words that 'a sword will pierce her heart' – and as Jesus died almost alone on the cross, Mary was still there, with him, experiencing the unimaginable grief of a mother.

But even Mary, great as she was, had a moment of doubt. She had nurtured and cared for her extraordinary eldest son for thirty years; she saw him grow in 'wisdom and favour'; she knew the prophecies that the Messiah was to fulfil. Nevertheless, as Jesus begins his public ministry in these early chapters of Mark, as he astonishes the crowds and also makes enemies of powerful people, she's confused. She wonders what on earth Jesus is doing? In today's reading, she takes her other children to find Jesus and get him out of the public eye again. As far as they can fathom, Jesus has gone mad: (v21) 'He is out of his mind.'

After another interlude (yesterday's passage) where Jesus is once again confronted by the Pharisees, Jesus' family arrives again, and the crowd lets Jesus know they are here (v32). Let's not be too hard on them at this point: it's easy with hindsight to judge them, because we know the end of the story. To a respectable family, who've spent years navigating the gossip surrounding Jesus' birth, the overt enmity of high-ranking religious leaders was a new source of shame in that culture – another social scandal, another set of wagging tongues and sly looks to manage in the marketplace.

Little wonder they wanted to get Jesus out of the limelight. But Jesus is having none of it – indeed, his reply is provocative. Who is his family? Anyone, Jesus says, who does God's will (v35). It's worth noting that Jesus is not being disrespectful to his kin; he is simply reminding his hearers, and all of us, that God is doing a new thing. The saving work of God is now reaching out across borders, across family ties, to all who would receive it.

There is a happy ending to this part of the story. We know that Jesus and Mary were soon reconciled, as she travels with him in the last week of his life. We also know that two of Jesus' brothers – James and Jude – became leaders in the early church. James plays a big role in Acts 15, and Jude wrote one of the New Testament letters.

We, too, can rejoice in this wonderful truth – that Jesus welcomes all of us into his family. May that thought lift our hearts today; and perhaps, too, we could pray that the Lord gives us an opportunity to bless one of our 'family' this week.

Day 20 – Mark 4:1-12 ‘Puzzling it out’

Most of us love a good puzzle. I certainly do – and I’m not just talking about jigsaws, but all types of head-scratchers. Perhaps it’s Sudoku for you, or crosswords, or logic problems... or a good old-fashioned crime drama. Agatha Christie remains the best-selling author ever – apart from the Bible – because we love a good puzzle. And the dramatic success in 2022 of the mobile app Wordle over shows that this fascination is as strong as ever.

Today we start a section in Mark’s gospel containing a number of Jesus’ wonderful parables. It is commonly thought that one reason Jesus’ parables were so effective is because they earthed theological ideas in everyday matters: Jesus talked about God and life in the language of farmers and fishermen – the world of the people he lived among. Of course, this is true.

What is less well known is that Jesus didn’t necessarily do this to make his teaching easy to understand. It might be earthed in everyday life, but it was still meant to be something of a puzzle. Something to make us scratch our heads and wonder what it means. Something, even, that might remain veiled to those not prepared to look closely – he said as much at the end of today’s passage: ‘To those on the outside everything is said in parables, so that they may be ever seeing but never perceiving, and ever hearing but never understanding.’

It might come as a shock to hear Jesus apparently wanting people to be puzzled. Surely a great teacher would want things to be clear? Aren’t simple soundbites better than slippery stories? Why make things difficult?

The answer is that Jesus wants us to *seek* him – to have hearts and minds that go beyond surface thinking and feeling, to yearn for deeper things, real connections. Life is complex, and full of mystery. Simple answers offer short term benefits but are rarely satisfying for a whole life. Jesus wants us to puzzle it out: to wrestle with the big questions of life and faith.

So he tells parables: teasers, puzzles, always asking the bigger questions – what is life *really* about? How do we live fruitfully for the *whole* of our lives? Where do we get distracted, or misled? And what is a truly good heart?

When I really think about it, these are the questions I really want answers to. Perhaps you do, too. That kind of deep truth doesn’t come quickly, or easily. But when it is revealed, it is like pure gold. Take a few moments today to ask God to reveal more of that deep truth to you – that the Word might fall on rich soil in our hearts. And may Jesus continue to amaze us, that we might worship him afresh today.

Day 21 – Mark 4:13-20 'Good soil'

As winter beckons, many of us lucky to have gardens or allotments will start to think about what we'd like to grow next year. Over the next few months, there will be prep work to do, getting the ground ready for planting and (hopefully) the abundance of spring and summer to come.

Nowadays, gardening is for most people a leisure activity: even those with allotments rarely grow food because they have to. But in the culture of Jesus' day, as it still is for many places around the world today, the growing season was vital for their life and future. Most families would only eat what they – or their fellow villagers – could grow. Preparing the soil and sowing the seed was part of the fabric of life.

But what about the soil of our *lives*? What makes for abundant growth and fruitful harvest? Conversely, what stifles growth and leaves us choked with weeds?

Today's passage is one of Jesus' most famous parables, and we're also fortunate that it's one which he explains to us. At one level he does the hard work for us! And yet, the real value of this timeless story lies in what we do with the meaning. In just a few verses, Jesus presents us with a vision of how to live – and also how not to live – a fruitful life. He gets to the heart of what real 'success' is, and how we sustain this kind of fruitfulness long-term.

And it is all a matter of what we do with God's Word in our lives. Let's note that this Word (seed) is inherently fruitful. As long as the soil is good, it will multiply the benefit '30, 60 or a 100 times'. It is powerful and amazingly abundant. But it can be rendered ineffective by other factors, and it is these that form the real challenge of the parable.

For the Word to bear fruit it needs to go deep into our hearts – if it stays shallow, it won't withstand troubles in life. It can also be choked: either by worries, or by the distractions of wealth and the pursuit of other dreams or pleasures.

Life is a long journey, and the great treasure of this parable is that it brings us back to first principles; it makes us take a fresh look at where we are now. Is anything 'choking' us? Are we going deep or staying shallow? God is good, and merciful, and he is well able to 'restore our soil' – and our soul! Give thanks for the work of the Word in your life; and pray for it to become ever more fruitful – just as it's meant to be.

Day 22 – Mark 4:21-25 'Close attention'

Back in the day when I worked for a market research company, detail was a key part of my job. Often the client paid thousands of pounds for one set of results contained in one book of tables, so it was vital that every figure was checked and double-checked to make sure it was correct. Similarly, whenever we submitted proposals for new projects, we all proof-read each others' documents, to make sure it was both clear and easy to read – as well as containing no spelling mistakes!

I can't say that I ever enjoyed this type of work, though I learned to do it thoroughly, and get a sort of weird pleasure in spotting a missing apostrophe or a figure that was 1-digit out. I do remember once, though, getting the all-clear from a colleague on a proposal of mine only to discover when we'd won the project that the price I'd included was wrong (which the colleague couldn't have known) – and we were obliged to run the project at a loss! It pays to pay close attention.

And if that's true in our workplaces, it's also true when it comes to the most important piece of writing of them all – the text of scripture, and in particular the teaching of Jesus. Here we find the key to life, both now and in eternity: no wonder Jesus tells us to 'consider carefully what you hear' (v24). He's just shared one of the greatest stories ever told – the parable of the sower – which has implications for every single one of us. But, he counsels, are we listening carefully enough?

Jesus' encouragement to us today is that close attention to him is always rewarded: 'with the measure you use' (i.e. the effort you invest in your faith) – 'it will be measured to you' (v24). Just as the parable reminded us, how we sow determines what we reap: and seeking Jesus brings rich reward in a life full of faith, hope, purpose and gratitude.

Conversely, Jesus warns against a sense of complacency or entitlement – which is perhaps especially important to heed if we come from a strong Christian background, or have been fortunate to be part of great churches for most of our lives. Verse 25 could effectively be paraphrased: 'Don't take your spiritual heritage for granted. I will bless those who continue to seek me.'

Today, let's give thanks for the freedom we enjoy to be able to study the Word, and for all the many tools available to help us go deeper in Scripture. And let's pay close attention to whatever Jesus is saying to us at the moment: for that attention is always repaid by our generous Lord – helping us to grow, and to bear fruit for his glory.

Day 23 – Mark 4:26-29 'All by itself'

One of my favourite times of year is Harvest. I usually have opportunities to take assemblies and acts of worship in the local schools – as I do presently – and one of the things I like to do is to show the children a pumpkin seed. 'What do you need to make this grow?' I ask them. Lots of hands enthusiastically shoot up, and the answers are shouted out: sun, soil and rain. A bit of dirt, a bit of water, some rays – and hey presto, in a few months a tiny seed multiplies a million times to become an enormous fruit.

Modern science is very good at explaining the 'how': but sometimes we just need to take a breath and marvel at a miracle. We can throw in some pesticides and whatnot, but for millions of years these dull little beige seeds have always known how to do it! All by themselves, they grow.

And that, says Jesus in today's reading, is what the kingdom of God is like. The Word of God has power in itself: it grows, it multiplies, it changes lives and communities – all by itself (v28). Of course, we have to co-operate, as the parable of the sower makes clear: but ultimately this is God's kingdom, and God is the One who makes things happen.

This God is also in the 'harvesting' business: these seeds don't just grow for their own sake, but to produce a crop (v29). This is the harvest of changed lives: the fruit of renewed human beings whose seeds go on to change other lives. It's a wonderful image of abundant life, and all the more important to grasp in our current culture. It is easy as followers of Jesus to feel 'left behind', in an isolated minority.

But that is not how God sees it. The kingdom is constantly at work; the Word still has the same inherent power, because the same God empowers it. And this kingdom work keeps on reproducing 'all by itself'.

Today, let's give thanks that, despite everything, God is still very much at work. And take a few moments to reflect: where do you see the kingdom particularly growing? Pray for that process to continue: that a bumper harvest might be the result.

Day 24 – Mark 4:30-34 'The mustard seed'

If you ever have the chance to visit the Mount of Olives just outside Jerusalem, you can sit on a stone wall directly in front of a large mustard plant, about 30 feet wide. It's quite something to see the very things that Jesus uses as part of his teaching right there in front of you, and – although I've never been to Israel – I recently read the account of someone who sat on this very wall, and studied a tiny black mustard seed, marvelling at the huge bush it grew into.

There's more: if you sit on this particular wall, you can not only see Jerusalem, but also, in the far distance, the mountain on which King Herod built his palace (Herodium) and the Dead Sea beyond it. Now imagine Jesus telling his disciples that with a mustard seed of faith (picked from the bush he was standing next to) you could tell a mountain to throw itself into the sea! The image of divine authority making mincemeat of worldly power and ambition is brilliantly illustrated, right there in front of your eyes.

We don't know if this was where Jesus first uttered this amazing teaching (although he was in Jerusalem at the time – Mark 11:22-23), but the teacher leading this particular expedition (Ray van der Laan) went on to say this: 'That is the most feared plant in all Israel, the mustard plant. It's feared because once it takes root it can't be destroyed. You can try to burn it out, stomp it out, tear it out, but eventually it takes over everything in its way... The mustard seed is the kingdom of God! Once it gets planted, nothing can stop it!'

And *that* is the point of this short but powerful parable. The mustard seed is a great image, in both directions. It reminds us that much of the time we feel small and insignificant: Christians are now a small minority in this country, and we can often wonder how much effect we really have.

And yet, this seed has great power: it grows and grows, and ultimately nothing can stop it. We can believe this because it's not down to us: it is the Kingdom of *God*, the almighty creator and ruler of the universe, the eternal I Am, the one in whom all things live and move and have their being. This God is pulling the strings, and this is the source of our confidence.

Today, let's choose to place our trust in the Jesus who declares these things: and let's dare to believe that this glorious kingdom will keep growing: both in our lives, in those around us and across our broken world.

Day 25 – Mark 4:33-38 'Quick to forget'

This is, as they say, a passage of two halves. Sometimes the headings we put into our bibles, dividing up the text, aren't always that helpful, and this might be one occasion. What we see here is the beauty and the beast of our discipleship.

First the beauty: time spent in the presence of Jesus. What a lovely phrase this is: 'when he was alone with his own disciples, he explained everything.' (v34) What any of us would give for that kind of bible study, with the Saviour himself! It would be life-changing.... wouldn't it?

Fast forward a couple of hours: 'Teacher, don't you care if we drown?' The warm glow of time with Jesus faded rather quickly for the disciples, didn't it, as the waves got bigger and the heart rate quickened. But that's what makes them such good examples: they are so like us! Take heart – Jesus is a Saviour for *real* people.

If you're anything like me, it doesn't take very long to slide from the mountain-top of exultation to the valley of despair. I can praise God in the morning, and throw up my hands later in the day. And Jesus pinpoints that the issue is not the danger they were in, but how quickly they doubted God's goodness and love: 'Don't you care...?'

It can be hard to trust God in the tough times. Perhaps hardest of all to trust his complete goodness, in all circumstances. And we may not see the immediate answer in our lives that the disciples did: but our God does not change. He is good, and always good. He loves us, and still does. And may this loving God grant us grace to keep trusting him, whatever we face at present.

Day 26 – Mark 4:35-41 'Who is this?'

I stand amazed in the presence of Jesus the Nazarene...' So goes the grand old hymn, which has reminded me that it's too long since I've chosen to sing it in church! But it touches on a deep truth: how important it is to continue to be *amazed* by Jesus.

'Who is this?' the disciples utter in total amazement, 'even the wind and the waves obey him!' (v41) This passage begins what Mark describes as 'a day in the life of Jesus'. Over what appears to be one 24-hour period – Mark 4:35-5:43 – Jesus demonstrates his authority over the four things human beings have no ultimate control over: nature, the supernatural, sickness and death. After just one of these outstanding miracles, the disciples are moved to cry out: 'Who is this?' Imagine what they were saying by the end of the following day!

Familiarity breeds contempt, as the old saying goes. And it's possible for this to happen in our spiritual lives, too. Deep truths which made our spines tingle when we first came to faith seem almost normal now. Great answers to prayer get forgotten, the marvellous privileges of being part of a dynamic community for faith taken for granted.

It can happen to all of us: so, this is why today's passage is so valuable. Yes, we can admire it as a great miracle, an event in history which changed some people's lives. But let's also personalise it: let's see it as an encouragement to keep being amazed by Jesus. May the disciples' awe be ours.

Today, take a few minutes to remind yourself of some things about Jesus which amaze you. And if it takes longer than you hoped, ask Jesus to show you. At the heart of every person of dynamic faith is that childlike sense of wonder: the great saints of old were mostly just normal people who kept being amazed by Jesus. May their faith be ours: and may we, too, keep being amazed by Jesus the Nazarene.

Day 27 – Mark 5:1-10 'Unexpected wisdom'

One of the most popular films of all time is Forrest Gump. One of the reasons for this is the homespun wisdom of Forrest, and in particular his mama. The film is punctuated with such pearls, though of course the most famous is: 'Life is like a box of chocolates: you never know what you're gonna get.' Although actually, with a box of Chocolate Brazil Nuts, you *always* know!

Wisdom is often found in the most unlikely places. Much as we like to think that it's only clever adults who have a monopoly on wisdom, the reality is very different. A great friend of ours who was considering mission work was pointed towards the country where she eventually served by the spiritual intuition of a child she was teaching. She was so overcome she sought further direction from one of our ministers, who confirmed exactly what the child had said. God can speak through anyone!

Yesterday we saw the disciples' awestruck confusion at what they had just seen and experienced. Jesus had just done something that only God could do, prompting them to cry out: 'Who is this?' At this stage they weren't sure. Someone special, certainly – but was Jesus more than that?

We get an answer in the very next passage (today's reading), albeit from a most unlikely source. Having crossed to the Eastern side of the shore of Galilee they are immediately accosted (v2). The man who approached them – who had never met Jesus before – knew *exactly* who Jesus was, albeit for somewhat unsettling reasons. He was a tormented soul, and whatever it was that possessed him – which the text clearly indicates was a demonic spirit of some sort – spelt out Jesus' identity for everyone to hear: 'Jesus, Son of the Most High God.' (v7)

Tragically for this man, the demonic oppression he was afflicted with had tortured him for many years, leaving him wild and friendless – and we'll see how Jesus heals him tomorrow. But today, let's note the heavy irony that the very first person to truly grasp the identity of Jesus was this spiritually tormented loner. It took the disciples many months more to manage that, and many of the most educated religious people in his culture never got it; but this chap did.

I trust the Lord preserves all of us from torment of this kind – but let's keep our eyes open for wisdom in unexpected places. God is able to speak in surprising ways: how might he do that for you today, or this week?

Day 28 – Mark 5:11-17 'Hot to handle?'

Today's passage is an unsettling one, especially to our modern sensibilities. First, we rarely talk in the West about spiritual beings like demons – although in much of the world such things are still treated as a part of life. Second, we find the idea of the drowning pigs abhorrent. What are we to make of it?

Two bits of context are important – they might not explain everything, but they help to set a backdrop for what's going on here. First, the ancient world did not have the same emotional attachment to animals as we do. Farm animals were treated well (because they were incredibly valuable commodities), but were there for human usage and sustenance. The loss of these pigs was a financial disaster and a spiritual judgement, but not an emotional trauma at that time.

Second, the keeping of pigs was forbidden to Jews. Pigs were an 'unclean' animal, so the fact that these farmers were keeping a large herd of them was a sign of the poor state of their spiritual health. This part of Israel had been colonised around 700-500BC by other peoples who had mixed their religious practices with the Jewish inhabitants, leading to a hybrid form of religious observance which broke many of the orthodox Jewish laws.

So, when Jesus gave permission for the demons to enter the pigs, he was cleansing the people of two unhealthy influences: spiritual beings *and* idolatrous practices. This is why the people were afraid rather than angry. They knew they were doing wrong, and Jesus had called them on it.

A wise commentator once said that Jesus came to comfort the disturbed and disturb the comfortable – and this is exactly what we see here. A tormented man is healed and restored. An apathetic population is challenged.

Jesus is many wonderful things: but he is never safe! Let's continue to be amazed by Jesus. If we need to be challenged by him, let's be brave to hear it. And if we are disturbed today, may his wonderful grace grant us deep comfort and rest.

Day 29 – Mark 5:18-20 'Go and tell'

Not many of us are good evangelists. Most of us are frightened at the prospect of having to 'defend the faith', and frankly terrified at the thought of 'leading someone to Jesus'. Some of us have had bad experiences – others are keen to avoid that being the case!

The good news of today's passage is that we don't have to be Billy Grahams or J Johns. We just need to tell our story. The man in today's passage has known Jesus probably for about an hour. That's it. He has been excluded from all polite society for many years, so probably knows very little about religious belief or practice. And he's just found a real spiritual friend for the first time in his adult life – and this friend is immediately being forced to leave by rest of the population.

In other words, he apparently has very little to offer the kingdom of God. Not surprisingly, he's desperate to travel away from this place with Jesus. But Jesus says no – not because he's unfriendly, but because he knows that this man has something very precious: his story. His story is enough. God has done something wonderful for him, and the best way for him to practise his new-found faith is simply to tell his story with the people that know him. After all, the change will be obvious!

This is great news for us, too. We all have a story of faith. Perhaps not as dramatic – but every bit as real, because it's ours, and we've lived it. Take a few moments today just turning over some key moments in your story: times when God has been there, answered a prayer, changed something in your life, brought you a friend when you needed it, given you a task which you undertook for his glory – and more besides.

That is your story. No-one can argue with it, because it's yours. And if you can sometimes share that with someone, that's great! It's all Jesus asked of the man in the passage. It's all Jesus asks of you.

Day 30 – Mark 5:21-30 'Priorities'

I wonder if you're the sort of person who likes being sidetracked? I sometimes do – usually when I'm forcing myself to attend to something I don't want to be doing! Then an interruption is most welcome. There are other times, though, when I find the appearance of the unexpected something of a trial. I'm making great progress with my to-do list, then suddenly...

Knowing what to do with an unexpected interruption is very much a matter of judgement. There are times when it's definitely best not to be distracted. On the other hand, there are also times when the interruption has something of God about it.

Jesus is a fantastic example of how to deal wisely with distractions. When it interferes with his core mission, he refuses to get sidetracked. However, I am also frequently challenged by how relaxed Jesus was about changing his plans if it meant being able to love or serve or bless someone else. Jesus was able to see God's hand at work in those 'interruptions' – and perhaps, like me, you'd like to have that kind of wisdom to be able to do that, too.

For example, in today's story, Jesus changes tack no less than twice in just a few verses. He is teaching by the lake when Jairus arrives – and on hearing Jairus' story immediately sets out to help him. But he is then stopped again, by a woman who suffered with bleeding. What does he do?

The woman's need is more important than his to-do list – he stops, and tomorrow we'll see how important this encounter was. But today, let's reflect on how Jesus is able to turn so many unexpected situations to good – to use every encounter as an opportunity to bless, to be fruitfully distracted in the service of the kingdom of God.

Perhaps, today, take extra care to notice the 'distractions' of your day – and ask if God might be in any of them? And if God is – who knows how much good you might do by being 'distracted'?

Day 31 – Mark 5:25-34 'Full healing'

What is healing? It's a question that has particularly occupied our attention in recent times; whilst all of us have to navigate health issues at various points in our lives, a pandemic brings those into sharp focus. It also begs deeper questions – coronavirus is bad enough in itself, but what about other things that get damaged along the way: emotional wellbeing, friendship circles, livelihoods?

Most of us know that Jesus was able to effect many miraculous physical healings – but today's passage also reminds us that Jesus saw healing in a much broader dimension. In fact the word for healing and the word for salvation in the New Testament is *the same word: sozo*. It gets translated 'saved' or 'healed' according to context, but its root meaning is 'made whole'.

Wholeness is a big target to aim at. True wholeness means wellbeing on multiple levels: physical, emotional, mental, relational, and yes, spiritual. None of us quite get there this side of heaven: but in our story Jesus looks beyond physical healing. The miracle is remarkable enough in itself: the woman just touches the hem of his cloak and is healed: that is some healing power! But her condition has meant she has been 'unclean' for many years: effectively an outcast in society, unable to associate with others much of the time. That is why she tries to stay hidden, and is so backward at coming forward.

For her to be healed only physically is not enough. She might tell people what had happened, but for an internal, 'hidden' issue, maybe the community wouldn't believe her? Maybe she remains unwelcome? Jesus understands this: and so, he stops. And in discovering the woman's identity and affirming her publicly, he's not embarrassing her, he's *restoring her to the life of the community*. 'Your faith has made you whole,' he says to her – not just physically, but relationally too. Now she can hold her head high, now she can make friends again, now she can offer her sacrifices and worship at the synagogue once more.

Jesus comes to make us whole (to 'save' or 'heal' us) in every way. Let's be bold to pray all kinds of healing for ourselves, and for others – how could Jesus restore you, or someone you love today?

Day 32 – Mark 5:35-43 'Talitha koum!'

Today our 'day in the life of Jesus' finally comes to an end. And what a day it's been! He's been across the lake, calmed a storm, freed a tormented man, got kicked out of the area in a matter of hours, restored a woman who had been suffering for years... and missed a chance to heal Jairus' daughter. Or has he?

Jesus' unprompted stop to bless the woman has an unfortunate side-effect: the girl he was going to pray for has just died. So, what happens now? 'Don't be afraid,' Jesus encourages the grieving Jairus, 'just believe.' (v36)

What happens next is the greatest miracle of them all – a resurrection from the dead. In Mark's narrative this is the final piece of the puzzle, indicating who Jesus really was. Only God has power over life and death!

But it also highlights Jesus' compassion, and his faithfulness in fulfilling what he undertook to do. Jesus had made a commitment to Jairus' family, and he wasn't going to let them down. This faithfulness surprised some (v35) and made others laugh bitterly (v40): it was a set of reactions he would have to get used to over the next couple of years.

And his reticence about wanting people to know what he had done (v43) is not false humility or fear, but simply an awareness that people had all kinds of (wrong) expectations about who the Messiah would be: and it was too early for all that. But it didn't stop him blessing *this* family on *this* day.

Jesus is faithful. His faithfulness to God won our salvation. His faithfulness to us is our hope, peace and joy. These things are in short supply at present: indeed, it may be one of those seasons when *only* Christ can give them to us. Pray for grace to receive Christ's faithfulness to you – and for all Christians (especially in the troubled parts of our world) that they too would be upheld miraculously by our Lord's faithfulness to them.

Day 33 – Mark 6:1-6 'Isn't this...?'

Do people change? It's an age-old question, and one which has invited great debates over the years. I think most of us would love to believe that we can, and do – but you'll find plenty of cynics who'll tell you that people don't, or can't.

The answer to the question, as is so often the case, is 'yes' and 'no'. There are fundamental things about ourselves which we can't change, including some basic personality wiring and our human temptation to be selfish (or to use the biblical language, our capacity to sin). These things we carry with us, they are part of what makes us both wonderfully unique and universally human... but in other ways, people can, and do, change. It *is* possible to grow and flourish, to develop capacities we didn't realise we had, or traits we lacked when we were younger.

In 2003 Paula Radcliffe set a record for the women's marathon which stood for nearly two decades – until Brigid Kosgei bettered it in 2019, it was over a minute quicker than any other woman had ever run the marathon. By any measure it was a remarkable achievement: and yet, this is the same Paula Radcliffe who finished 299th at the World U13 cross country championships fifteen years before that. By sheer hard work and dedication, she took a reasonable gift and turned it into a world beating one. She changed.

And in today's passage, Jesus returns to his home town – the place where he grew up, where the older folk might still remember him as 'little Jesus with the grubby knees.' And they just can't get their heads around the authoritative public figure they see before them: 'Isn't this...?' In fact, their scepticism is a form of inverted snobbery: 'Isn't he the carpenter's son?' – in other words: 'Do people like *that* really become rabbis and prophets?'

For Jesus it was a case of familiarity breeding contempt. And much ink has been spilt on verse 5: is Jesus' capacity to do miracles really linked to the amount of faith we have? Or to put it another way, is our capacity to be healed really all about us, rather than God? I think not: Jesus makes it clear later that faith the size of a (tiny) mustard seed is enough: it's not so much that he physically couldn't do miracles, but that he couldn't sanctify their contempt of him. And as far as we know, Jesus never returned to Nazareth after this sad episode.

Let's never make God too small! Whilst we all need to stay close to Jesus, and to be at ease in his presence, let's remember who he is. We need a big Jesus today: in our lives, in our world. And the good news is that this Jesus is plenty big enough: big enough not just for our salvation, but for all we need in the spiritual life. May God open our eyes to the awesomeness of Jesus once again.

Day 34 – Mark 6:6b-11 'Nothing – and everything'

Many of you will know the name Brother Andrew (who was 'promoted to glory' in 2022): he was a missionary to Eastern Europe during the days of communism, and became famous for the book 'God's Smuggler'. One of the most memorable chapters of that book for me – which is one of my favourite Christian autobiographies – is the one titled 'The Game of the Royal Way.'

It describes Brother Andrew's evangelism training in the mid 1950s in Scotland. Naturally, a key part of their training was to go out and 'do the stuff' – on the streets, door-to-door, meeting anyone and everyone. In order to do this, each student was given just £1 in money (which was much more than then it is now, but probably equates to about £100 in 2022), which had to last them the whole period of their placement – I forget the exact length, but it was 4-8 weeks, something like that.

Even better, they had to return the pound at the end! All of which meant that they had to live by faith the entire time, trusting the Lord to provide day by day: 'nothing for the journey... no bread, no bag, no money in their belts... no extra shirt.' In short, they had to do it just like Jesus, who in today's passage sent his disciples out in this very way. Go with nothing, Jesus says – and I will make sure you have *everything* you need.

The life of faith is a life of adventure with God. And whilst in our modern world most of us have insurance policies and savings accounts and all kinds of ways of giving ourselves a 'cushion', we still occasionally get reminders that much of our assumed security is an illusion. In the end, we rely on God.

The great news is that this God can be trusted. The apostles find this out – we'll see the postscript to this story in a few days' time – and we too will have stories of God's faithfulness. Times when we came with nothing, and God provided everything. Why not take a few moments today to give thanks for those occasions?

There is a great ending to Brother Andrew's training. Just as he was about to run out of cash a couple of days before the end of his placement, he finds a silver coin in the gutter. What a 'coincidence'! However, he then bumps into a friend who is down on his luck, and is prompted to trust God one more time – so gives this last coin away. He heads straight back to his lodgings and bumps into the postman delivering that day's mail. In it was a letter from his aunt with £1.50 in it... 'The game was over. The King had done it his way.'

Day 35 – Mark 6:12-16 'Who are you?'

Just who is Jesus? This is the most important question any of us will ever face. And it's been the most important question for 2,000 years – ever since the life of Jesus himself, in fact. As the disciples are sent out by Jesus and start to do amazing things, even King Herod starts to wonder. Was he a prophet? Was he Elijah returned to this world? Or John the Baptist, raised from the dead?

We'll see tomorrow why Herod had special reason to fear the latter – but today, let's remind ourselves how important it is to give time to this question. Who is this rabbi who speaks with authority, who heals people, who has power over nature, over the supernatural, even death itself?

The seasons of Lent and Advent – which is not too far away now – are traditionally the seasons when we take time to re-consider this question. We re-fix our eyes upon Jesus, 'the author and perfecter of our faith'. We reflect on his miraculous coming into the world, his life, his death – all of which rests on his *identity*.

But it's a question which remains relevant every day, and every season – because, if Jesus is who he really says he is, then that has huge implications for our identity, too. I've deliberately cut across the modern bible's chapter headings today because this passage is about two identities. There is Jesus' – and then there are his followers'. Very early in the life of the church, followers of Jesus became known as 'Christians' – little Christs, little Jesuses. Yesterday the disciples were sent out by Jesus to do what he did: which is exactly what they go and do (vv12-13). We may not see quite such dramatic examples in our lives, but the principle is the same. We are called to live like Jesus – to be Christians, 'little Christs'.

So, it turns out that who Jesus is really matters. Sadly, Herod never got it; but we have – and through him we've become his adopted sisters and brothers, bearing the family likeness. Pray for grace today to live like Jesus lives, and for God to graciously provide all that we need for whatever we face, both today, and this week. Amen.

Day 36 – Mark 6:17-29 'Nothing changes?'

Today's passage makes for unsettling reading. It was once wisely observed: 'Power corrupts – and absolute power corrupts absolutely.' We can see this writ large, both in our current world and also in the venal figure of King Herod, who sits at the heart of our reading.

All the traits of corrupted power are there: living as if the rules of decent behaviour don't apply to him (vv17-18); rough treatment of critics and anyone who dares to oppose him (v17); an ego which can't be seen to lose face or risk losing power (v26).

And yet, this same ruler was strangely drawn to the wild holiness of John. He protected this man from those who would do him harm and even had regular sessions of 'spiritual direction' – although the radical change of life which John would no doubt have described to him made no sense to his ears!

This passage is a sobering reminder that those who wish to challenge corrupt power risk paying a heavy price. And that, too, remains part of our world today – not least in the countless other untold stories of faithful Christians in many countries around the world, who suffer quietly and unheralded for their determination to follow Christ, whatever the cost.

I am challenged, too, to reflect that such challenges do not only happen in other parts of the world. In days gone by, I used to be much bolder at lobbying and advocating for issues of justice and righteousness here in the UK. I wrote regularly to my MP when I lived in London and Bristol, among other 'acts of advocacy'. Have I just mellowed or just got less brave? It's hard to say – but I am inspired and challenged by the bravery of John, as well as by my fellow sisters and brothers whose living witness speaks loving truth to power.

May God grant both them – and us – grace to live righteously; and be willing to hold human power to account, whenever the Lord calls us to act.

Day 37 – Mark 6:30-34 'Leadership 101'

In recent decades, much time has been spent evaluating Jesus as a leader. Not all of this has been helpful – but there is much gold to mine here (and not just for 'leaders' but for all disciples); and if nothing else, it is right to remind ourselves frequently that Jesus is an inspirational figure.

Today's passage highlights four core parts of Jesus' leadership. First, he trusts people with responsibility, but takes time to support them in what they're doing. As we saw a few days ago, the disciples were sent out to 'do the stuff' – today, they return and Jesus gathers them together to review what's happened (v30). It's great management, and a model for us in terms of how we grow as disciples and organise our church communities.

Second, he prioritises time to reflect and renew spiritual life. When it got too busy, Jesus calls them away for rest and restoration (v31). Jesus was no workaholic!

Third, Jesus was always motivated by compassion (v34) – not by success, or targets, or a predetermined plan. Although it meant further disruption, he retained a tender heart which always put people first and projects second.

Finally, he was able to be flexible – in this case, starting up an impromptu teaching session because so many people had gathered (v34). As we'll see in the next couple of days, it also became an invaluable learning experience for his disciples too.

Usually I like to focus on one thing each day – but today I'm leaving that to you! Here are four beautiful nuggets of wisdom from the life of the Saviour: which is God particularly directing you towards today? Take a few moments to offer that in prayer, and invite the Spirit of Jesus to make it real in your life.

Day 38 – Mark 6:35-38 'Give what you have'

In a season dominated by so much bad news, last week's brilliant MK Can fundraising initiative was a rare bright spot. The people of Milton Keynes gave remarkably generously, more than 100,000 cans were donated to the Foodbank, and, at a personal level, it was very uplifting for many of us to be part of something special.

Today's bible story is so well known there's really nothing new to be said about it. But sometimes that's OK: sometimes all we need is to revisit the familiar but beautiful truths we've always known. And one of the great lessons of this story – which, apart from the resurrection, is the only miracle which appears in all four gospels – is this: *give what you have*. That's all that God asks. You may have a lot, you may have a little: all that matters is that you give what you have.

When Jesus challenges the disciples: 'You give them something to eat,' their instinctive reaction is to think about what they ought to provide. If there were this many people, that would require this much bread and therefore money. And of course, they feel totally overwhelmed. There are thousands to feed!

But they've misunderstood Jesus' point: all he's asking is that they give what they've got – and he will do the rest. As it turns out, what they've got is one packed lunch: but in the economy of God, that's enough.

As we look at our news screens it's easy for us to feel overwhelmed; to feel that giving what we have makes no difference whatsoever. But this is not how God sees it. God is able to multiply all our small offerings, for his glory and for the provision of those we seek to bless.

Let today's passage encourage you: all that God asks in any situation is that you give what you have. And may God multiply all that we give in this season, and thus reveal his glory.

Day 39 – Mark 6:39-44 'The green grass'

Sometimes it's the little details that matter. When I was licensed by the bishop to this parish, I had to affirm in his presence that I would render him due obedience 'in all things lawful and honest'. Unfortunately, on the printed licence what he and I actually signed was that I would obey him in all things 'awful and honest'. It's only one 'l' – what's the big deal?!

Over the last 150 years it's become common to doubt the historicity of Jesus' miracles. Lots of scholars will talk about them being useful 'myths', or that there was some scientific explanation for them. My view has always been that everyone has a problem with miracles until they see one themselves! And when you've seen one, you don't have a problem with miracles anymore.

So, I don't need persuading to believe that Jesus really did feed thousands of people with one packed lunch. I suspect most of you don't, either. But it's very useful that Mark includes one small word that is nearly always overlooked in any discussion of this story – and that is the word 'green'. Jesus instructs his disciples to make people sit down 'on the green grass.'

Probably part of the reason this makes no impression on us in the UK is that this sounds like a tautology. Of course grass is green! What other colour would it be? But in the semi-arid country above the Sea of Galilee, most grass was yellow or brown. (Turns out the grass is not always greener, after all.) Jesus specifically chooses a lush area to seat people, before he blesses them with this amazing miracle.

The fact that Mark includes this tiny detail makes it much more likely we are receiving the account of an eye-witness who was really there. There's no reason to include it, otherwise. Tradition holds that Peter was the apostle who provided much of Mark's material – who was indeed one of the disciples arranging the seating of the hundreds and fifties. Recounting his memories years later, it was still striking to him that Jesus wanted people to sit on the *green* grass.

We worship a real God who meets real people (like us) in real ways. Give thanks for the ways in which this real God has met you. And why not pray for the blessing of more real encounters – both for you, and for others.

Day 40 – Mark 6:45-52 'Take courage – it is I.'

It must have been quite a sight to see Jesus walking across the lake that night. If I had been one of the disciples, I think I would have been terrified, too! It's hard to know their state of mind after the extraordinary day they'd had, watching Jesus feed thousands of people – elated? Exhilarated? Perhaps just a tad freaked out? Mark (probably briefed by Peter, as we described yesterday) records that 'they had not understood about the loaves.' (v52) In other words, they were most likely confused, overwhelmed even.

And here they are, in the middle of the night, battling with the wind that had suddenly whipped up. They were 'straining at the oars' (v48) – and then, exhausted and sleep-deprived, they see a ghost! Actually, not a ghost – Jesus. Walking on the water. Wait... what?

Why does Jesus meet them like this? On one level, we don't know for sure. The implication is that they were in a moderate amount of danger – this is, to some degree, a parallel story to the storm they encountered at the end of Mark chapter 4. This time, Jesus is not in the boat, and so he comes to meet them, to encourage them, to calm their fears. And the miraculous method was another way of pointing them towards who he was – even if they didn't get it yet.

We may feel at the moment that the wind is against us, too – that we are straining at oars of life. If that's you, then Jesus meets you today – he passes by, gets into your boat and says 'Take courage! It is I.' Perhaps you're feeling defeated – take courage. Perhaps you're losing hope – take courage. Perhaps you're not sure what or how to pray – take courage.

What Jesus offers us is not a right answer or a helpful technique but *his very self*. 'It is I.' He comes to en-courage (literally awaken courage in) us, to take away our fears, just as he did for the disciples on the lake. May this Jesus draw close to you, and give you renewed hope today.

Day 41 – Mark 6:53-56 'They ran to Jesus'

Many years ago, I heard a story which I think relates to Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the courageous leader of the Confessing Church which opposed the Nazis in Germany, and who suffered greatly for his resistance. He was once invited to speak to a gathering of students, during which event one particularly cocky young chap got up and asked why anyone would bother going to church anymore. Bonhoeffer eyed this young man for a moment, and then simply replied 'Do you not *run* to church?'

Mark chapter 6 begins and ends with a tale of two contrasts. We began with Jesus visiting his home town and encountering the sort of passive-aggressive contempt manifested by the young student in our story. People *thought* they knew Jesus – and couldn't imagine him as the person he had already become. 'Surely we're not getting excited about this?' would be a paraphrase of verses 2-3.

What a contrast with our passage today. Away from his home town, Jesus is seen completely differently: people are desperate to meet him. They come from all over, bringing anyone who needs healing. They are so enthusiastic for an encounter with Jesus, they're even prepared just to touch the edge of his cloak. To get that close is enough!

Mark simply summarises the contrast in two words: 'They *ran*.' I find this inspiring and challenging. Normally I only run to church because I'm late! Would I run just because I want so much to meet Jesus?

Lord, grant me that first love again. Help me to run to meet you this day. To be in awe of all you are and all you do. That's my prayer – could it be yours, too?

Day 42 – Mark 7:1-8 'The rule of the heart'

When I was a curate, I needed to gain experience of leading worship at other churches. One local church offered me a memorable such experience! The motto on their news sheet was 'proudly using only the Book of Common Prayer since 1798', and before I was able to take a service there, the minister met me to talk me through what was required in terms of the way the service was to be conducted.

Although pre-pandemic we had a monthly Book of Common Prayer service in our church, and many of us love and appreciate the beauty and depth of the language, this was another level altogether! Every part of the service had a tightly defined set of movements or rituals to observe, co-ordinated with the liturgy. I carefully wrote them all in pencil in my copy of the Prayer Book – I still have them to hand even now, just in case – and thankfully survived the experience!

We humans love making rules for things. And don't get me wrong, there's nothing wrong with rules in themselves. We couldn't play sport if we didn't have them. Or conduct an orchestra. Or organise any sort of meeting or society... the list goes on.

The thing is: rules make great servants, but lousy masters. The risk with rule-making is that the rule obscures the reality. And what Jesus is challenging here is not rules in themselves, but *priorities*. Jesus wants life and behaviour to flow from our hearts. Out of the heart the actions follow. What he criticises the Pharisees for is that they are great at following rules, but haven't attended to the motive *behind* the rules. Ceremonial washing is meant to symbolise what God is doing in our hearts: but – as Jesus points out quite bluntly – what's the point of clean hands if your heart is 'dirty'?

What the Pharisees needed was we might call 'open heart surgery'. And that remains true for all of us, too. What is God doing in your heart at present? Today, let's pray into that, giving thanks that our faith is not a set of rules – but a life-giving journey of the heart.

Day 43 – Mark 7:9-13 'Finding a way out'

I wondered if you've tried an 'Escape Room'. They're all the rage at the moment – you can either do them in person or online, and the idea is that you are 'trapped' in a room, but by solving clues and puzzles, you find a way out. We bought one for our daughter's birthday a couple of years ago, and she and her friends had a great time across a whole evening trying to solve it. They were still going at midnight (online, not stuck somewhere remote in the dark!) and eventually found their way out.

Escape Rooms are fun for the puzzle solver – but we can apply the same sort of logic in other parts of our life; for example, when it comes to awkward laws and rules. We know what we *should* do, but can be very inventive in finding ways to wriggle out of it.

The reason I do my own tax return each year rather than pay for someone to file it for me is because just before we left theological college we were given a presentation by a firm of tax accountants – who shall remain nameless – proffering their services, and also giving us some handy tips. This included the advice that if we bumped into a parishioner we knew in the supermarket car park, we should stop and have a chat with them, because we could then call it a 'pastoral visit' and claim the travel for our family shopping trip on church expenses. I kid you not – this was really said to a bunch of hyper-keen ordinands who thought they were at college to dedicate their lives to God! Some of us practically choked on our coffee... I don't think the firm made many new clients that day.

It sounds laughable to write the last paragraph, but such things are often uncomfortably closer to the bone than we think. I suspect we all have our blind spots. The particular issue Jesus challenged in today's passage related to the use of money, too: in this case, a rule called 'corban' which some Pharisees were using to avoid offering financial support to their parents. In effect they found a loophole to avoid the more challenging consequences of obeying the Fifth Commandment. Even worse, they cloaked it with a spiritual veneer: it's 'money for God'. To which Jesus said: 'I think God would like you to make sure your parents had a roof over their head.'

The great news of the gospel is that we worship a God of amazing grace and (thankfully) immense patience. We all do this kind of thing from time to time – but there is always hope! This God is slowly changing us from the inside out. If the Lord prods you today about something, offer it back to him, pray for grace to change: and also give thanks that God is still cheering you on.

Day 44 – Mark 7:14-23 'The monster within'

We're blessed to have some apple trees in our back garden, and – despite my total lack of gardening skills – these trees have proved very fruitful (pardon the pun) over the years. Nowadays we turn most of them straightaway into juice (and you'll see why in the next paragraph) – but in years gone by, we would fill up large plastic tubs with our produce, and store them in the cool of the garage to eat through the winter.

I remember about 3-4 years ago wanting to start a new tub of apples around December-time. We'd just finished one box, and there was a big sealed tub ready for consumption. I'd filled it myself and was looking forward to starting the new batch. However, when I opened it, what I found was, frankly, a gooey mess. Virtually the whole tub was rotten. One apple in the middle had gone bad weeks earlier, and ruined the rest.

'A rotten apple spoils the barrel,' is a popular old saying for good reason. It is quite literally true. But it's also a fair reflection of the human condition. Think of an entire classroom affected by one disruptive child, or a whole street where neighbours live in fear of one violent family. We see it in our hearts, too. It is easy to allow rotten things to dwell there – the sort of things Jesus talks about in verse 22 of today's passage: malice, deceit, envy, slander.... rotten apples poisoning the barrel of our hearts.

Over the last two reflections we've looked at how Jesus has challenged the Pharisees for fixating on exterior regulations rather than internal values, with the effect that they find themselves trying to wriggle out of the more demanding of these 'rules'. Today, he draws his teaching together by calling us to pay attention to the true source of our righteousness (or unrighteousness). The heart of the matter, he says, is the matter of the heart. It's what comes out of the *heart* which determines the kind of life that we live. So, the wise follower will pay most attention to what's going on in their inner life.

It's worth clarifying that, when Jesus says that it doesn't really matter what goes into to you (v15), he was referring specifically to what we eat, which was the presenting issue. There are plenty of other passages in scripture cautioning us to be careful about what we consume in other ways: i.e. spiritually, or with our eyes or minds. But, as far as food goes, what Jesus says here would have been truly shocking (radically liberating!) to his hearers, having grown up with stringent regulations to follow.

For us too, let's stay determined to keep our hearts clean. We know how easily the rot sets in – let's pray for Jesus' life-giving Spirit to wash us clean and keep transforming us, daily, from the inside out.

Day 45 – Mark 7:24-30 'Heavenly leftovers'

Growing up in a family of six, mealtimes were always a bit of a scrum. First to finish got first dibs on the leftovers, so the three teenagers tended to eat quickly! It was rare for there to be anything left, but if that ever happened, what found its way into the fridge was sure to be gone by the morning.

Looking further back into my childhood, my dad – following the example of my nan – was a great one for 'bubble and squeak' i.e. frying up leftover veg the following day into a sort of patty. We all loved it: I suspect we often looked forward to bubble and squeak more than the original meal! These were leftovers which were every bit as good as the first offering.

Today's passage is perhaps the theological equivalent of 'bubble and squeak'. Jesus meets a gentile (non-Jewish) woman, who comes to him seeking healing for her daughter. Jesus replies that God's blessings are meant primarily for the Jews: and I like to think that, here, he says what he says with a wry smile on his face. 'Dogs' was a derogatory term for non-Jews: it's hard to imagine Jesus using this in a prejudicial way – more likely he was testing her to see what she said.

And her reply was brilliant: 'even the dogs get the crumbs from under the table.' Jesus loves both her faith and her quick wit: 'For such a reply you may go; the demon has left your daughter.'

There are several examples in the gospels where Jesus blesses or heals people who were not Jews – demonstrating not just that the gospel is for everyone, but, even more wonderfully, that non-Jews can receive the *same* blessings as Jews, the historic chosen people of God. Or, to put it another way, the 'bubble and squeak' enjoyed by the Syro-Phoenician woman was now every bit as good as the original meal!

This is good news for all of us reading this reflection today. Thanks to Christ, we share in the same inheritance – good news for the whole world. Indeed, with the pouring out of God's Spirit on all people, what we get is not just 'crumbs', but the fullness of God's blessing – the indwelling presence of God and what St Paul calls 'every spiritual blessing in Christ.'

And may that glorious truth raise our faith to approach Jesus confidently: to seek him for all that we need today, and to trust that he gives us, not just crumbs, but the fullness of his blessings.

Day 46 – Mark 7:31-37 ‘Everything well’

A minister friend of mine who spent some time in America loved to tell the story of a preacher he knew who had a healing ministry. Whenever he gathered people for an evening meeting which offered prayer for healing, this preacher would turn up on stage (and yes, there was a stage) wearing a brilliant white suit and carrying a huge black leather bible under his arm. At the point of offering prayer for any who sought healing, he would throw the bible dramatically down on the stage, stand on it (a literal interpretation of ‘standing on the word of God’, I think), and in a loud voice declare healing for whatever ailments were being addressed.

It takes all sorts, doesn’t it? But whilst we might feel a little uncomfortable with this particular expression of ‘kingdom ministry’, it is true that when it comes to healing prayer we often rely on *methods*. The modern church loves novelty, and also loves technique – two dominant themes of the culture around us, which we’ve adopted perhaps a little too uncritically into our worshipping life.

What I find amazing about Jesus’ healing ministry – alongside the very fact of the marvellous miracles themselves – is that with Jesus there is no ‘method’. He does it a different way every time: sometimes he touches people, sometimes he doesn’t. Sometimes he’s right there with the person, sometimes he prays remotely. Sometimes there’s a large crowd, sometimes it’s only for a few to witness. Sometimes he’s in a synagogue, sometimes a house, sometimes the open air. And on this occasion, he sticks his fingers in the man’s ears and then puts spit on his tongue! (Just to reassure you, if you approach me with an ear problem, I will probably stop short of jamming my fingers into your lugholes! Though don’t rule anything out...)

And yet... ‘People were overwhelmed with amazement. “He has done everything well,” they said.’ (v37) This wonderful acclamation at the end of the passage makes it clear that what Jesus does well is the *fruit* of what happens, not the method or technique. The method varies every time: there’s no obvious pattern, just a heart open to the Lord’s leading and a life willing to be used by God.

Jesus does everything well. It’s a remarkable thought, isn’t it? It’s not often the way we talk about Jesus – but it’s true. We don’t always understand the how and the why, but we can marvel at the outcome. Today, let’s seize faith to believe that Jesus continues to do all things well. And let’s pray for healing for any who need it, taking heart from the fact that what we say and how we do it doesn’t matter – what matters is the One to whom we offer it, the One who does everything well.

Day 47 – Mark 8:1-13 'Groundhog Day?'

I don't know if you've seen Bill Murray's classic film, which is the title of today's reflection. It details the story of a chap whose life is on endless repeat. Whatever happens on any day, the next one begins exactly as before. It's very funny, and perhaps a bit unsettling, too.

With Jesus, of course, every day is different – but this passage has a 'groundhog day' feel about it. It feels like we've seen both episodes (vv1-10, vv11-13) before. First there's the miracle – it reads very much like the feeding of the 5,000 a couple of chapters previously. If so, why is it here? The answer, I believe, is in verses 11-13.

This episode, too, is all too familiar – opposition and unbelief from the Pharisees. It's bizarre, isn't it, how Jesus is asked for a sign *just after* he's demonstrated one of the greatest 'signs' you could imagine – the miraculous feeding of thousands of people from practically nothing. If that sign wasn't enough, would anything be enough?

...which is the point, really. The Pharisees were determined not to believe in Jesus because he threatened their privileged position. It doesn't matter that what he represented had been demonstrated time and again to be both true and real – Power loves to find a way to hold on to power, as is sadly only too evident in the world at present.

But it reminds us why Jesus appears to 'repeat' miracles. We are slow learners! I certainly am – and we'll see tomorrow that the disciples were, too. It's the human condition. Ultimately, though, I'm so grateful that we worship a *patient* Saviour. Today's miracle reassures me that Jesus is not just compassionate, but wonderfully patient with us.

May that thought comfort our hearts today, and give us grace to pray with renewed hope in Jesus' transforming love and wisdom, both in our lives and in the lives of those we pray for.

Day 48 – Mark 8:14-21 'Use your loaf'

I must confess I love a good pun! Thankfully, Jesus does, too. Squeezing through eyes of needles, having ears to hear, finding planks in eyes... set in context, these are all meant to bring a smile to our faces. And we saw a few days ago how Jesus responded positively to a witty riposte from the Syro-Phoenician woman. Jesus has a great sense of humour, and I think that's a lovely facet of who he is.

And, today, getting into the boat at the start of our passage and watching the disciples fretting about their lack of bread, Jesus – still thinking about the most recent encounter – decides to make a bread-based contribution, which was part joke and part serious contribution: 'Watch out for the yeast of the Pharisees.'

Yeast is a powerful substance. A little goes a long way, and transforms what it is mixed with. This can go in one of two directions: here, a small number of powerful people have acted as a corrosive influence on a whole culture. But it can work the other way, too; elsewhere Jesus suggests that we can have a similar influence: a little yeast changing a culture for the better.

Either way, as the disciples scratch their heads at Jesus' sharp wit, Jesus prods them to think more deeply about what they've just seen and experienced. In the spirit of pun-ning, you could say he tells them to 'use their loaf'.

There's no substitute for experience – in the spiritual life, as in all other elements of life. But experience needs to be reflected upon, absorbed, internalised. As Plato observed: 'The unreflected life is the un-lived life.' We are all called to use our loaves: to keep growing in wisdom as we journey with Jesus.

What has God been showing you recently? Take a few moments to reflect on this: and pray for grace to learn and grow through it. Nothing is ever wasted!

Day 49 – Mark 8:22-26 'Seeing clearly'

This passage initially reminds me of an event we run for older children at Easter, called Easter Cracked. It's great fun, and a brilliant way of introducing the Easter story – as part of this event, I usually have to dress up as 'Mr Easter Egghead', which involves donning a ridiculous costume, complete with super-thick specs. The children all shout and laugh as I stagger up the aisle to ask them lots of questions – but truthfully I can't do much else but stagger: the specs are so thick I can barely see! I feel like the chap in the middle of today's passage: everyone just looks like trees wandering around. Less egghead, more egg-eyes – get the yolk?

Today's miracle follows hot on the heels of several others, and bears closest comparison with Jesus' healing of a deaf and mute man at the end of chapter 7. There's more saliva involved: but before we get caught up with the yucky details, Mark has a deeper purpose here. This miracle is more than just a wonderful story of transformation, though it is that: it is a parable in itself. What happens to the blind man in Bethsaida mirrors what is happening in the disciples' consciousness.

Like a good game of football, Mark is a gospel of two halves. In the first half, Mark encourages us to ask: who is Jesus? In the second half, the underlying question changes to: why did Jesus come? As we near the end of the first half, questions of identity have come to the fore. Jesus is rejected at Nazareth, demonstrates his divinely royal authority feeding the 5,000 and declares the Jewish food laws fulfilled (though we don't know why yet). The pointers are all there....

....but still the disciples don't get it. This is clear from the episode in the boat in the previous reflection. Jesus' conversation with the disciples bears a whiff of exasperation: 'Do you still not understand?' (v21)

So, we come to today's miracle: this is one of the very few miracles of Jesus which takes place in stages: the man's sight is partially restored first, before being fully restored. Why is that? It's not because Jesus was having an off day, and certainly not because his technique was 'wrong'. No – this is really a parable of the disciples' understanding of Jesus' identity: they are starting to perceive, albeit a bit fuzzily... and then in the next passage (tomorrow) one of them finally gets it! 'You are the Messiah.' Bingo! Finally....

Let's not be too hard on the disciples: they are so like us! For many of us, our understanding of who Jesus is came equally slowly, perhaps even more so. But let's thank God that we (finally) got there – and let's also pray to keep growing in understanding: for the more we know, the more we will love; and the more we love, the more we will live.

Day 50 – Mark 8:27-33 'What kind of Messiah?'

'The wrong kind of leaves on the line.' As a London commuter I used to get the train into work every day. When you use a train several hundred times a year, you get used to delays! This quote is one of the best known reasons given for a train being held up; to be honest it wasn't announced to the passengers on a train I was sat on, but was reported in the local paper as the best excuse of the year – it's become something of an urban myth or legend!

We might laugh at the wrong kind of leaves – but I'm sure all of us can relate to the frustration of finding that we've got the wrong thing for the job. A bayonet light bulb when we needed a screw-in; a flat head screwdriver when we needed a Phillips, and so on.

Sometimes, having the wrong thing for the job is more serious, especially when it comes to people in positions of influence. Perhaps the most important job in all of human history is on the line in today's reading. God's people had been waiting hundreds of years for a special, anointed rescuer, called 'Messiah'. Many prophets had testified, and periodically the people got into a frenzy of excitement over a potential contender.

Jesus' ministry had got everyone talking: could this be The One? The real Messiah, come to set God's people free? We saw in our last reflection how Jesus was starting to wonder if anyone around him would finally see... and here, at Caesarea Philippi, Peter has his moment of inspiration, and, at last, utters those famous words: 'You are the Messiah.'

In Matthew's version of this story, Jesus praises Peter at this point for sharing what Jesus considers to be a moment of divine revelation. He then goes on to say what Mark also records here, to give the Messiah's job description: to suffer unjustly, be executed, and then rise from the dead.

To which Peter immediately interrupts: but Jesus, you've got it all wrong. This isn't the Messiah's job description: the Messiah is a great military leader who'll defeat our oppressors and liberate the land. This is the Messiah we need for the job!

We know the end of the story. It turns out Jesus was just the right Messiah for the job, a job far bigger than Peter imagined – that of liberating the human race from our universal oppressors: sin, evil, Satan and death. But today, let's not lose sight of just how radical a message this was; and also to receive this healthy reminder that we can all be tempted to make Jesus fit our expectations. Sometimes, the message of the gospel is not always what we want: but it is always what we need! And may the living Christ be all you need today.

Day 51 – Mark 8:34-38 'The upside-down kingdom'

Growing up, one of my absolute favourite sets of books was the Mr Men series. I'm sure many of you love these books too! There were so many great characters: Mr Happy, Mr Tickle, Mr Bump – I wonder what's your favourite? I also liked Mr Topsy-Turvy. As the book begins: 'Everything about Mr. Topsy-Turvy is upside down, or inside out, or back to front. He's a funny sort of fellow.' His front door is upside-down, as are his curtains... and so it goes on.

Whilst we can laugh at the absurdity of the world in which Mr Topsy-Turvy lives, there are times in our lives when things feel turned upside down – and it's a lot less comfortable. For many of us, the years of pandemic may have felt like that, and every time our news screens are filled with images of a devastating earthquake, we see horrifyingly literal images of life turned inside-out.

All of which lends an uncomfortable context to these words of Jesus. For in this short but challenging passage, Jesus indicates that living in the kingdom of God turns everything topsy-turvy. In essence, we lose our lives to save them. How? By following the upside-down Messiah.

Just as Jesus proves he is God's chosen one, not through power and success but through the opposite – apparent weakness, betrayal and death – so we prove we belong to Jesus through leading a life of humility and service. We may not carry a literal cross, as he did, but, through a life of humble service, we imitate our Lord's example.

To coin a phrase: it's life, Jim, but not as we know it. And yet, it is the path to eternity. We only keep what we give away: in other words, it is in this upside-down approach to living that we find true life. It sounds crazy – but, through the centuries, millions of followers of Jesus have discovered that it really is true, it really works. For the Christ who died was also the Christ who was raised to life. It is not 'death' for its own sake, but in order that Jesus' new life might truly flourish in us!

Whatever cross you feel that you carry today, pray for grace to bear it. Jesus carries it with you, and his ultimate purpose for you is life, and life in all its fullness.

Day 52 – Mark 9:1-8 'A glimpse of glory'

I wonder how you picture Jesus? Most of have a mental image of a chap with a beard and long hair, oatmeal-coloured tunic and deeply compassionate eyes. Perhaps not too far wide of the mark – but even if your image is different, it is probably a very human Jesus.

And that's a good thing: God became one of us, and Jesus' humanity lies at the heart of our good news. It helps us relate to Jesus as a friend, and also to follow him, because we can visualise him as a human who was wholly obedient to God.

But there is another side to the story. Jesus is also the Son of God, who carries the glory of heaven. When St John saw him in heaven, in the famous vision which begins the book of Revelation, Jesus' appearance was so glorious, so dazzling, John could do nothing else but fall on his face in awe and worship.

This is the Jesus we will all one day meet, and I hope that we will all experience that same sense of joyful awe at the experience. But a few human beings were fortunate to see it when Jesus was on earth – and the story of that experience is our passage for today. Peter, James and John were taken by Jesus up a high mountain, and there Jesus gave them a glimpse of glory: 'there he was transfigured before them. His clothes became dazzling white... Then a cloud appeared and covered them, and voice came from the cloud: "This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him."'

Wow! It must have been overwhelming; in fact we know it was, because Peter starts gibbering about shelters for Jesus' heavenly guests. For a few minutes they got a vision of the divine Son, of Jesus as he really is, carrying the majesty of God himself.

It is good to imagine a human Jesus. But there are times when we need to remember how glorious Jesus is. A human Jesus helps us to pray for ourselves. A divine, glorious Jesus helps us to pray for the world, inspired by the knowledge that we worship an awesome God. May the glory of Jesus fill your heart today, and increase your faith to pray, in the precious name of the Divine Son.

Day 53 – Mark 9:9-13 'The prophetic pacemaker'

In the sport of cycling, one of the strangest – but most enjoyable – events is the Keirin. This is effectively a multi-lap sprint on the track, but what makes it unusual is the 'dernity': a motorised bicycle which sets the pace at the front of the race. For the first few laps all the competitors have to follow the dernity, which increases its speed gradually until the official start of the sprint, when it quietly steers off the track, allowing the sprinters to race each other.

Today's passage is really about another pacesetter: in the prophetic writings of the Old Testament – especially the prophet Malachi – the Messiah is promised a 'dernity', if you like: one who will come and set the pace for his ministry and prepare the people for the race to come. This person is Elijah – one of the greatest prophets, who is promised to return before the Messiah arrives.

The supposed wait for Elijah to return became one of sticking points among those who did not wish to acknowledge Jesus as the Messiah. As they saw it, how could he be, as Elijah had not appeared yet? It's not surprising, then, that, after seeing Jesus meet with Elijah, Peter, James and John felt moved to ask Jesus about it. Did this mean that this prophecy was fulfilled?

Jesus' answer is effectively 'yes, and no'. Yes, Elijah has come; but not on the mountain just now – rather, John the Baptist is the 'Elijah who was to come'. Although Mark does not refer explicitly to John here – Matthew does in 11:14 of his gospel, quoting Jesus directly – Jesus does talk about John's treatment at the hands of his opponents: 'Elijah has come, and they have done to him everything they wished' (v13). For the detail of that story, which we looked at a couple of weeks ago, head back to chapter 6.

In what sense does John the Baptist 'restore all things'? My sense is that what Jesus means here is that he paves the way for Jesus: John exercised a powerful ministry of repentance, during which thousands of people dedicated themselves back to God. This 'set the pace' for Jesus himself.

Today's passage might seem more of a theological 'box-tick' – another prophecy fulfilled! But Jesus' fulfilment of prophecy is a powerful testimony of who he was and what he came to do. It validates all the great prophecies which rightly stir our hearts: salvation, freedom, justice, peace and the coming kingdom of God. Give thanks that Jesus is *everything* he claims to be; and may this Jesus refresh your heart and walk beside you this day.

Day 54 – Mark 9:14-29 'I do believe – help my unbelief!'

'There are moments, sure, when you think: is there a God? Where is God? ...I love the psalms, if you look at Psalm 88, that's full of doubt.' It may come as something of a relief to know that this quote comes direct from the Archbishop of Canterbury, at an interview in Bristol Cathedral in 2014. At the time, the media got into a bit of a lather about it, as the media usually does; all the Archbishop was really saying was that none of us has a perfect faith, and doubt is not the opposite of faith, but rather a part of the process.

Today's passage is a beautiful illustration of this. It's a much-debated story, and this brief reflection is not the place to dwell on the finer points: whether the boy had some form of spiritual oppression, or epilepsy, or both; whether Jesus' indication that healing in this case could only be effected by 'prayer' means a fundamentally different approach to healing for specific issues, and so on. These are all important questions, but today I want to focus on the personal aspect of the story: the meeting of the boy's father with Jesus.

You can imagine the desperation this man feels. He carries the chronic grief and worry of seeing his son afflicted with a serious condition, and at the point he meets Jesus, the additional acute pain of seeing the disciples fail to achieve any measure of healing. Everything looked hopeless... but there was still a mustard seed of faith there: 'If you can do anything, take pity on us and help us.'

Jesus' reply is both a rebuke and an encouragement: 'everything is possible for one who believes.' This prompts one of the great cries of scripture, and one which encapsulates the human condition: 'I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!'

We humans are all a fragile mixture of faith and doubt. We do believe: and yet we also find so many reasons to question, so many obstacles getting in the way. In one sentence, the father in this story beautifully expresses the spiritual journey we all experience. And the good news is that *this is enough for Jesus*: he responds immediately, heals the boy and teaches the disciples afterwards.

We would all love to possess great faith – and that's a good thing to aspire to. But sometimes it's good to remember that Jesus receives us *as we are*, with our blend of faith and doubt; Jesus answers our half-baked prayers, makes his home with us anyway and gently beckons us on. We rest, not on our great faith, but on his great faithfulness.

A propos of which, I'll leave the last word to the Archbishop – in that same interview – and may God give us grace to face our doubts and trust his faithfulness: 'It is not about feelings, it is about the fact that God is faithful, and the extraordinary thing about being a Christian is that God is faithful when we are not.' Amen to that!

Day 55 – Mark 9:30-34 'Get the message?'

'For those of you watching in black and white, the yellow is just behind the blue.' That famous piece of commentary usually finds its way into TV blooper shows, and highlights how easy it is for something that is clear to the speaker to be veiled to the listener.

Today, Jesus tells the disciples a second time what is going to happen to him. The first time had not gone very well, as you'll remember: Peter got cross and told Jesus off for not being the sort of Messiah he was supposed to be. In reply, Jesus had challenged Peter's preconceptions. Clearly this was a conversation Jesus needed to re-visit; so, after the recent encounter with the father and his son, he takes the opportunity to say it again.

This is very sensible: research has shown that any piece of communication needs to be heard at least three times to stick; similarly, I was taught at college that, when writing an essay, you should say what you're going to say, then say it, then summarise what you've just said. We'll see in a few days that Jesus also needs to say this vital message three times.

So here, today, is Big Conversation Number 2. Sadly, the disciples are still none the wiser – worse, they are now afraid to ask; worse yet, they were caught arguing about who is the greatest, which betrays a total misunderstanding of what Jesus said to them last time!

Again, we must marvel at how like us the disciples are; but we are also encouraged at Jesus' wonderful patience with weak, slow, unsteady people – in other words, with almost all of his followers. Tomorrow we'll see how this time he deals with their confusion much more gently. Today, though, let's admire not only Jesus' patience, but what he was willing to do for us – and that, despite knowing all that this would cost him, he went ahead anyway. Truly we worship an amazing Saviour.

Day 56 – Mark 9:33-37 'Meeting Jesus unexpectedly'

The Christian writer and activist Shane Claiborne – whose book 'The Irresistible Revolution' is a great read, and highly recommended – tells the story of his time working with Mother Teresa's charity in India. He used to help regularly with the lunchtime food project which provided a hot meal for the destitute of the city, and was struck by the behaviour of one of the other helpers, who regularly gave an extra generous portion of the curry that was usually offered. When Shane queried whether it was right to load up the plates when so many were coming to be fed, the helper replied: 'Of course I give out an extra helping – after all, Jesus will be coming to eat it today.'

Claiborne was profoundly moved by this reply, and the truth of this helper's remark is borne out by today's passage. We pick up where we left off yesterday, as Jesus gently challenges the disciples about what true devotion to their Lord consists of – not prestige or privilege, but humility and service.

To make his point, he gives them an example: calling a child to him, he declares: 'Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me.' This might seem innocuous enough to our modern ears: children now have a special role in our culture, a place which is furthermore protected by law. But this is very far from the situation in first century Israel. Children had no such place, no such protection; they were seen as the property of their parents, so for Jesus to give them special honour was, quite simply, a radical notion. In effect, he took 'the least' in his culture and said: if you welcome them, you welcome me.

In the following chapter of Mark, Jesus took this idea even further, commending child-like faith as the only way we can enter his kingdom. But today, let's marvel at this quiet revolution Jesus begins with this seemingly small gesture. Future generations of Christians came to understand that Jesus was, by this simple act, declaring that *all* people were equally valuable to God; and that, whenever we give our time, attention and blessing to anyone considered to be on the margins, we are, in some marvellous way, meeting Jesus himself.

I, too, had such an encounter in Bristol ten or so years ago. Helping on a soup run I had the same experience as Claiborne, that profound sense that I was meeting Jesus in the homeless men and women I served that day. Perhaps you have, too. And may today's lovely story encourage us all to keep reaching out to those in need: for it is there that we might, miraculously, meet Jesus himself.

Day 57 – Mark 9:38-41 'Not one of us'

This might sound a bit obscure, but let me begin today by talking about 'Bounded Sets' and 'Centred Sets'. What are those, you may be thinking? A bounded set defines clearly who is 'in' and who is 'out'. A certain set of beliefs or behaviour draws a clear line around the set to determine who gets to be 'in'. Fans of a sports team would be a great example of a bounded set: you have to prove your devotion to be counted as 'in', and only these true fans have the right, for example, to criticise the team – which most fans then do, endlessly!

A centred set is different. There is no line which marks who's in and who's out, the only measurement is how near or far you are from the centre. So, everybody is welcome, and the 'set' remains open and fluid.

So, what sort of 'set' is a church community? Is it a bounded one or a centred one? Are people 'in' or 'out', and if so, who gets to decide? Questions like this have dominated much church thinking over the centuries, in one shape or another. Sadly, many churches have created whole systems to define who is 'in' or 'out'. It might be conformity to a set of extra beliefs (beyond the creed), or more likely of behaviours – attendance this often, actively doing *this* thing or actively avoiding *that* thing, and so on.

Bounded sets do give us a sense of security, of who is 'one of us'. We humans generally like them: but the problem is that this is not how Jesus sees it. Jesus worked with a 'centred set' mentality – in other words, his only concern is how close you are to him. You can move closer, or further away, but this side of the grave you're never 'out', never beyond his love and grace.

So, when the disciples tell him about someone doing work in his name, whom they stopped because 'he was not one of us', Jesus challenges them. Let it go, he tells them, because 'whoever is not against us is for us.' The kingdom of God is always bigger than we think: God is always at work in surprising ways, and in even more surprising individuals. Sometimes people we didn't expect become great allies for the Christian community – what are often called 'people of peace'.

Today, let's pray for God to continue that work in surprising places and people. Perhaps you know one or two you might especially commend to God. And let's give thanks that the kingdom of God is always bigger than we think!

Day 58 – Mark 9:42-50 'Stumbling blocks'

The great Christian leader and writer John Stott once wrote a book called 'Christ the Controversialist'. The basic point of the book is that Jesus said many hard things. Much as we like to picture him as 'gentle Jesus meek and mild', we also have to acknowledge that Jesus upset a lot of people, and challenged ungodly attitudes – even among his own disciples – very directly at times.

Today's passage is a prime example. You won't find this text appear in anyone's 'favourite passages' list! Its message appears uncompromising and overly harsh. But, before we consign it to the 'not one to read again' pile, let's look more closely. People make two big mistakes when reading this passage – the first, historic one is to take the bit about self-mutilation literally. Jesus used figures of speech all the time: what he's talking about is a *mindset* – thankfully! But what is the origin of that mindset?

Here's where the second mistake comes in – and this is one of those places where all the little headings and breaks we put into the biblical text are sometimes unhelpful. Verse 42 does not begin a new conversation, or new section of Jesus' teaching; we are still in the *same* conversation Jesus began with his disciples back in v33. This is clear from the fact that Jesus refers to 'one of these little ones' in v42 – he still has the child in his arms (which he refers to in very similar terms) from v37!

What Jesus is primarily addressing from v33 onwards are the twin evils of pride and the spiritual 'club mentality' – the sort of us-and-them, in-or-out, with-us-or-against-us thinking that cripples so much of the witness of the kingdom of God. And Jesus warns that if people are blocked from entering the kingdom because of either of these mentalities, exhibited precisely by those claiming to be part of God's kingdom, then God will take that very seriously indeed. If you consign people to the spiritual rubbish dump, Jesus warns, (and the word for hell is 'gehenna', which was the dump outside Jerusalem where rubbish was continually burned), then a perfectly righteous God might just do the same to you. It would only be fair, wouldn't it?

Tragically, we only have to look at church history to see that there have been many occasions when this warning of Jesus has been ignored – and the damage it has done to the credibility and impact of the gospel has been incalculable.

As Jesus talks about how important it is to rid ourselves of these kinds of attitudes, he then goes on to make the more general point about how determined we should be to address anything in our inner lives that stops us from following him. 'Whatever it is, cut it off,' he says – but the primary thrust of this teaching is about all forms of 'spiritual superiority' thinking which shut people out from the good news of God's love.

He finishes by taking them back to their argument about who was the greatest: 'have salt among yourselves and be at peace with each other' – in other words, don't start dumb conversations! Our relationships with each other should be about mutual encouragement ('salting') and promoting unity and togetherness. As we reflect on this tough passage today, may the Lord grant us all grace to examine ourselves honestly – and may he heal all that holds us back from running our race with freedom, humility and joy.

Day 59 – Mark 11:27-33 'By what authority?'

Questions, questions.... Some of you will know that before I was a vicar I worked for 12 years as a market researcher. Many might consider that a good way to describe my old job would be as a 'professional nuisance'! However, if I was asked to describe my work, I would often answer that I was paid to ask questions.

There's an art to a good question – and without good questions, we couldn't get the good answers our clients were paying lots of money for. In today's passage we fast forward a couple of chapters to the day after Palm Sunday. This allows us to focus on the events leading up to Easter over the next couple of weeks, but to give you a very brief recap of the two chapters I've skipped (with apologies):

Jesus reaffirms the value and holiness of marriage; he upends prevailing social prejudices by blessing children (considered to have no status) and challenging one of the wealthy elite; he continues to try and tell his disciples about his impending death and resurrection, and teaches them that true greatness and leadership is found in humble service; he is acknowledged as 'Son of David', i.e. the coming king, first by a blind man and then by the crowds in Jerusalem; and he prophetically chastises his own people for their lack of fruit as God's chosen ones, whilst encouraging his disciples that even a small amount of trust in God is enough for God to do great things.

....after which he arrives back in Jerusalem (today) – now surrounded by large crowds wherever he goes – and faces four loaded questions from the religious leaders, many of whom are by this time dead set against him. It's important to note that, in Mark's gospel, Jesus began his public ministry with four questions from the religious leaders, who at that stage were genuinely baffled by his approach: check out Mark chapter 2, especially verses 7, 16, 18 and 24.

So, here, the wheel comes full circle with four more/final questions – only this time, they are not so innocent; rather, designed to try and catch Jesus out, and give them a pretext to get rid of him. As we'll see over the next few days, Jesus is far too wise to get trapped, so eventually they resort to good old fashioned bribery and betrayal to get the job done; but today, their opening gambit is to try and undermine the basis of Jesus' authority (v28).

Jesus, though, is having none of it, and fires a question right back: was John's baptism divinely blessed or just human? The Pharisees know they can't reply without discrediting themselves, so they refuse to answer – meaning Jesus can do the same. It's Round 1 to Jesus – but there are three more to come! Today, though, with the narrative gaining intensity as Jesus moves towards Easter, let's give thanks for how brilliant Jesus is. We often underestimate his intellect: but Jesus is not just the most loving or compassionate human there's ever been – he's also the smartest.

And may this brilliant Jesus be all you need today.

Day 60 – Mark 12:1-12 'None so deaf...'

Deafness is a condition which runs in my family. I am very thankful that thus far it has missed my generation: but I know firsthand how isolating it can be. I do remember my nan, though, often giving my grandad a gentle telling off when he had ignored something his wife had clearly told him which he definitely didn't want to do – 'There's none so deaf as those who will not hear,' is what she would say.

I'm sure many of you can relate to that! Even if someone you love has great hearing, it's amazing how often they fail to hear something they don't want to. I may even be guilty of it myself on *very rare* occasions (my wife would be nodding her head vigorously at this point).

Today's parable is a perfect illustration of my nan's homespun wisdom – only the stakes are much higher. Many centuries ago God had chosen the descendants of Abraham to be his special people: he loved them and looked after them, gave them a land and his blessing, and in return a set of instructions for how to live. However, the story of the Old Testament catalogues how often God's people failed to listen, how easily they turned away from him.

Jesus describes this refusal to consistently love and obey God in a very pithy tale. A vineyard owner leaves his precious vineyard in the hands of tenants. These tenants are supposed to harvest the fruit, but every time harvest season comes around the fruit never finds its way out of the tenants' hands. He sends servant after servant, but each time the servant is badly treated and driven away.

It's a clear reference to Israel's failure to live in covenant relationship to the master (God) – they were supposed to produce fruit which blessed the nations, but instead they kept it to themselves, and ignored the prophets (servants) who called them to change. So God sends one last emissary – his own son. What would the tenants do to him?

We know the end of the story – and, fascinatingly, so do the religious leaders. Even though Jesus is challenging them not to go through with what he knows is in their hearts, they don't change. You could say that they don't *hear*. All that is stopping them is the crowd's admiration for Jesus. Perhaps you know a few people who are determined to stay 'deaf' to Jesus' gentle approaches: take a moment to pray for them today: even the hardest hearts can soften.

Similarly, we may be horrified at the behaviour of the so-called religious elite: but there's a challenge here for us, too. It's easy for us to grow 'deaf' to God's word, or to want to keep his blessings to ourselves. Jesus still comes to us, every day. Let's pray today for grace to keep a soft and open heart to God, and a willingness to keep bearing fruit to the world around us.

Day 61 – Mark 12:13-17 'To God what is God's'

I didn't plan it like this, but it's somehow fitting that this reflection originally appeared on the first day of the new tax year – and indeed on a day when a particular high profile tax rise in our country comes into effect. It is, perhaps, cold comfort to know that controversy over paying taxes is as old as government itself. In Jesus' day, the issue was red-hot because such taxes were paid, not just to the people's own leaders, but also to the Romans, their hated oppressors. Those who collected them were considered traitors – which is why Jesus' own kind behaviour towards both Levi and Zacchaeus elsewhere in the gospels (Levi even becomes one of the disciples, renamed Matthew) is so striking.

It also makes the latest loaded question arguably the most dangerous. One mis-step here could either lead to Jesus being arrested as a radical, or lynched as a collaborator. The stooges recruited to ask the question raise the stakes even higher by deliberately speaking about Jesus' integrity, and refusal to conform to social prejudices (v14).

So how is Jesus going to get out of this one (you may be thinking)? With divine wisdom, just as he does with all the other questions. His answer reframes the question entirely: each authority should get the obedience/offering rightfully owed to them. Whilst early Christian leaders endorsed the basic legitimacy of paying taxes (Romans 13:6), Jesus leaves just enough 'wiggle room' in his answer to imply that there is also a concomitant responsibility for leaders to justify what they ask of their people; we are given permission to ask the question: 'What exactly does Caesar rightfully deserve?'

However, the next part of Jesus answer takes us well beyond the hot topic of taxes: 'Give to God what is God's.' To which we have to ask: 'And what is God's?' The answer is clear: 'Everything!' For in God we live and move and have our being (Acts 17:28)... for from him and through him and to him are all things. (Romans 11:36)

This is not just a brilliant reply, it also puts the ball right back in his questioners' court. Are they giving God everything he deserves? Are we? Today, take a few moments to reflect on where we might feel tempted to short-change God a bit. God is good, and gracious, and a great listener: why not share it with him, and ask for help to keep giving him all that he deserves – just as Jesus encourages us to do.

Day 62 – Mark 12:18-27 'The God of the living'

It may surprise you to know, but even as late as Jesus' lifetime the Jewish people were divided as to whether there was eternal life after death. The early books of the Old Testament say little about it, and even some of our most cherished texts are ambiguous: the last verse of Psalm 23 actually says: 'I will dwell in the house of the Lord for long days,' which is shorthand for 'the rest of my life' – but Christian bible translators quickly started rendering it as 'forever'. That's true, of course: we now believe it *is* forever – but it's not the literal meaning of what King David wrote, just our Christian tweak!

The group which represented those who still weren't sure there was life after death were the Sadducees. They were largely wealthy and well-educated, and their objections were partly intellectual. The idea of eternity left them with awkward riddles they couldn't solve, such as the one they posed to Jesus: if someone marries more than once, which spouse do they have in heaven for eternity?

Jesus' reply is challenging on numerous levels. First, unlike the previous two posers, he does answer their question directly (which in itself indicates that he treated this as a genuine approach, and not just a trap): but the reply is not what they (or perhaps we) were expecting. There won't be marriage in heaven, because there won't need to be. Marriage is a gift for *this* world: a source of love, stability and blessing for humanity (at least it should be); but in heaven, when we are made perfect in love, are totally secure and are fully free to bless and be blessed, then marriage's job is done. The only marriage described in heaven is between God and his people (Revelation 21:2).

For those of us who are fortunate to enjoy happy marriages, this should give us pause for thought as to how we imagine eternity. I do believe that we will still retain deep and ongoing relationships of love with those we hold dear on this earth: but we need to beware transplanting images of our 'nuclear family' straight into heaven. We talk often about being reunited with loved ones: but Jesus is clear in this passage that the glorious fabric of heaven will mean these relationships take on a different form. However, this is not bad news, quite the reverse: our lives will be so complete that every relationship will be full of love and life.

Jesus goes further: he also reminds the Sadducees that God described his relationship with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob to Moses 400+ years later in the *present tense*. So, in fact, for those who looked closely at the Scriptures, the idea of eternal life was there all along. That's why he chastised their lack of useful study and also their doubt in the life-giving power of God.

Today, you may want to think a bit about how you imagine heaven: it may be hard initially to get your head around what Jesus is teaching here. Pray for God to enlighten and encourage you, as well as for grace to accept the 'unknowns' of eternity. Either way, may this thought lift our hearts today: God is the God of the living! He is your God, now and forever – yes, forever!

Day 63 – Mark 12:28-34 'The greatest'

In sports journalism nowadays the word GOAT has become one of the most likely you'll see, especially online. Which might seem odd to you if you're not a sports fan: what do goats have to do with professional sport? The clue is in the capitals: GOAT is an acronym, which stands for Greatest Of All Time. It allows sports fans endlessly to debate which of their heroes is the greatest – or, I should say, the Goat. Are Messi or Ronaldo better than Pele, Maradona or Cruyff? Is Lewis Hamilton now the Goat in the world of motorsport? And so on...

As a sports nut myself, I'm not averse to these discussions: but I have to admit that today, we get to focus on a much more important Goat: which is the greatest commandment of all time? Of all the wisdom that God gave humanity, which is top of the pile? This is exactly the question that a particular teacher of the law asks Jesus. It seems that this teacher is acting on his own initiative (and therefore not overtly connected to a partisan faction), nor is he motivated by underhand plotting; he notices that 'Jesus had given them a good answer' so he asks a real, deep, genuine question: in commandment terms, what is the Goat?

It's a good, clear question, and Jesus gives him a fabulous, clear answer: the greatest is to love God; the next is to love your neighbour. Unlike previous verbal sparrings, what Jesus says is not a controversial answer, either, and the teacher agrees wholeheartedly: 'Well said!' He goes further by noting that these commandments to love are what God had really always wanted all along – regrettably a religious system built on offerings and sacrifices had often been prone to missing the *point* of these things: they were meant to be expressions of the heart that gave them.

God had reminded his people of this vital truth numerous times in the Old Testament (e.g. Psalm 51:16-17), and whilst, thanks to Jesus, we are now free from the sacrificial system – all fulfilled by the cross – we too can fall into a similar trap. We can turn our relationship to God into a set of do's and don'ts, or a sequence of transactions. This simple teaching of Jesus brings us back to the heart – literally *the heart* – of the matter. Love God, and love others. It's easy to say and much harder to do! But, for all that, it is profoundly simple to remember, and simply profound to practise: if we aim for these twin 'loves', we're not going to go too far wrong.

So today, make a simple resolution: to love God as much as you can, and to love others as an overflow of that love. Then pray for God's help to do it – and go for it! As a guide to living, it's the GOAT.

Day 64 – Mark 12:35-44 'A striking contrast'

'Red and green should never be seen with nothing in-between.' I don't know if you've ever received that fashion advice – I don't set much store by it myself, as my weekly emails attest: the more red and green, the better! It comes from the idea that a strong contrast is off-putting: we like things to blend, to fit together...

But as we conclude our week in the temple at Jerusalem, we must admit that at Jewish festival time, all of life is there. Thousands will have gathered from all sections of society: near and far, rich and poor, and also from many nations. The spectacle must have been intense: especially so when you add in thousands of animals required for the sacrifices. These had to be paid for, but the temple had its own system of coinage: first you had to change your shekels (or whatever) into the temple's own money (at rates which benefitted those who did this), and then you're ready to buy your sacrifices or make an additional donation to the temple treasury.

The treasury itself was like a big metal tapered tub, which made a loud clanging sound as money was thrown in. Think a church collection plate on steroids! Of course, if you wanted everyone to see how generous you were, you could throw large numbers of coins little by little into the 'tub' so everyone could hear the sound of them clanging against the walls. Conversely, the poor would have to suffer the shame of a light tinkling as they made their way past.

At the heart of today's passage is a striking contrast: Jesus observes two very different people, who carry very different reputations: first there are the religious elite: well respected, privileged, powerful. And then there is a widow: poor, of little social standing – a 'charity case.' Who does Jesus praise?

Not the elite: 'watch out for them,' Jesus says. They're all show. They love their position, but their hearts are corrupt. Indeed, one of the reasons that widows in this culture are often poor is that their worldly goods are taken by these (male) elites – 'they devour widow's houses'.

Instead, the few pence which the widow offers to God is highly praised: relatively speaking, she has given far more than the wealthy leaders: her donation might mean she goes to bed hungry that night.

Survey after survey has shown that the rich give proportionately less than the poor (just google 'rich give less than poor survey' to verify that!). It's not for nothing that Jesus repeatedly warns of the dangers of allowing money to grab our hearts. But Jesus' observation here is wider: God doesn't see the world the way we do. He sees not just our hearts but also our capacities: where we come from, what we resources we have. He doesn't notice the loud clanging or the light tinkling, only the silent sound of a heart longing for him.

'We cannot do great things: only small things with great love.' Today pray for God to stir your heart with a fresh longing for him. And may that simple, humble longing lead to a small thing offered with great love. Amen.

The following Reflections were written specifically for Holy Week:

Day 65 (Monday) – Mark 14:1-11 ‘Extravagant love’

We’re blessed to be able to worship in a beautiful, inspiring building. Despite being made with wooden scaffolds, rudimentary tools and makeshift mortar, it has stood for hundreds of years, and is likely to for hundreds more. Most of us sucked in our breath and felt a sense of thrill when we first stepped inside it. Many of us do even now. Imagine what it must have been like for the mediaeval peasant folk who lived around it in timber dwellings? Imagine the awe, the sense of glory and mystery – all pointing to the great God in whose name it was built.

The church is really the people, of course it is – and we must beware idolatry of bricks and mortar. But all the same, a glorious building not only inspires worship, but represents an *act of worship in itself*. It’s not often that we think of the cost of building it. How on earth does a poor agrarian subsistence economy finance such luxury? What did it cost each peasant family to pay their taxes over decades to see it built? Yes, it certainly provided much needed employment and a focus for the identity of the village – but I wonder how many times a family went hungry or made some other sacrifice to see it built? What poverty might have been alleviated if the money hadn’t been spent on a building at least ten times larger than anything around it, whose sole purpose was for worship?

When we start to ask these questions, we get to the heart of today’s famous but unsettling story. We love the image of the woman anointing Jesus’ head with this very expensive perfume, but many of us no doubt share the disciples’ sentiments. Jesus had just challenged the financial corruption of the temple officials, and yet here he was a few days later, apparently condoning an act of wasteful, reckless extravagance. Surely there are better ways to spend money wisely?

But Jesus is having none of it. Yes, we should always care for those who need it, as Jesus advises – but he also reminds us that *the first and primary object of our attention is Jesus himself*. Jesus’ own love for us is extravagant, reckless even – the end of this week proves it, beyond a shadow of a doubt – and so, too, he commends extravagant love returned. This woman’s costly worship, done for no other reason than to demonstrate her adoration of her Lord, is ‘a beautiful thing’.

The woman could never have known that Jesus’ prediction would come true: ‘wherever the gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has done will also be told, in memory of her.’ Just as the poor mediaeval families who made sacrifices for decades to pay for and build our church building could never have known that 700 or 800 years later, people would *still* be gasping as they enter, people would *still* be offering their worship to God with hearts and hands raised in adoration – that their offering of extravagant love would remain powerful, inspiring, enduring. It is a beautiful thing.

As Holy Week begins, take time to reflect on the reckless, extravagant love of God for you – yes, you! The love that led to extraordinary sacrifice. Let’s acknowledge that too often we become people who know ‘the price of everything and the value of nothing.’ Let’s recommit ourselves to extravagant worship, reflecting the wild, reckless love of our Creator. It is a beautiful thing.

Loving Jesus, thank you for your extravagant love for me. My love for you so often has limits. Help me to love you as you love me. Open my eyes to see what the woman at Bethany saw. Thank you. Amen.

Day 66 (Tuesday) – Mark 14:12-31 'All fall away'

The journey of Jesus through Holy Week is, among many things, a journey from crowds to loneliness. The great throng of Palm Sunday becomes the large crowd in the temple; then the smaller gathering at Bethany, moving on to the Last Supper with his disciples; then just Peter, James and John in Gethsemane, until finally Jesus is arrested and is completely alone. Listeners left, followers gone, friends fled.

The narrative becomes more intense, claustrophobic. Today Jesus prepares to eat the Passover (v13), then at the celebration itself talks of betrayal (v18) and his own shed blood (v24). He finishes the meal with an evening walk where he finally comes clean: 'you will all fall away.' (v31)

It is a stark and sobering admission, and not surprisingly his friends, buoyed not just by wine and conversation, but an evening reflecting on God's sovereign activity in history, don't agree. A tight-knit huddle, they've weathered all storms – literal and spiritual – for three years. They're just not the 'falling away' types – especially not gung-ho, have-a-go Peter. 'Even if all fall away, I will not.'

We all know what happens next, and we'll reflect some more on it over the coming days. But I'm always struck by the disconnect between words and deeds. Between brave declarations, and craven response. Between intention and action. Or as Jesus puts it shortly: 'The Spirit is willing' – it usually is – 'but the flesh is weak.'

And as we gaze back at these iconic scenes with 2,000 years' perspective – two millennia of knowledge and experience – it strikes me that the only honest response is simply this: *there but for the grace of God go I*. Go any of us. The disciples are just like us: true of heart and easily scattered. How many times has the rooster crowed for each of us?

And yet... and yet.... Jesus is still Jesus. Still full of compassion and mercy, still slow to anger and of great goodness. Still able to welcome us back with our blushing, tear-stained cheeks. And in this famous meal he gives us, this simple but glorious act of remembrance, we are able each time to acknowledge our weakness, and praise his strength; to lament our faithlessness and rejoice in his faithfulness; to receive mercy and forgiveness again. Every time we eat this bread and drink this cup, we proclaim the Lord's saving death until he comes.

Even as they gather to celebrate the Passover, Jesus knows they will all desert him within hours – and yet he gives them this wonderful sign of his love anyway. That is grace – and it is grace we remember today. As the old hymn puts it so well: 'When Satan tempts me to despair, and tells me of the guilt within: upwards I look and see him there, who made an end of all my sin.' Amen, thank you Jesus.

Loving Lord, there but for your grace I would have gone so many times. Thank you for your mercy and love. Make my weak knees strong, and stand by my side always. Amen.

Day 67 (Wednesday) – Mark 14:32-42 'Not what I will'

The will – it's a strange and slightly mysterious thing, isn't it? We first start to see it when a child is just a few months old, newly weaned – turning their nose up at one mouthful of food only to embrace another.

Wills famously start to assert themselves strongly as toddlers. The battles all of us parents will remember! Usually over little things, but nonetheless important, as ultimately it's about who's in charge. And this sense of the will lives on in those who are described as 'strong-willed', which is often a euphemism for people who like to get their own way!

The will is a statement not just of authority but of intent. When couples get married they don't say 'I do' (sorry to disappoint you), but 'I will'. Even our last wishes are declared by – you guessed it – a will.

Wills matter. The great spiritual writer Watchman Nee defined the soul as the combination of the mind, the emotions and the will. It differs from the other two precisely because *it defines where (and to whom) our gaze is directed.* If the mind gives us the what and why, and the emotions the how, the will focuses us on the where and to whom. In matters of life and faith, whose will prevails?

All of which leads perfectly onto the heart of this passage today. Here we see two battles of the will, both within a person or people. For the disciples, the tussle is relatively straightforward: their spiritual desire to support their friend Jesus versus their physical desire to sleep on a warm, dark evening after a large meal.

For Jesus, the battle is much more intense, life (and death) defining even. Jesus' destiny hangs in the balance: he knows what lies ahead, and he faces the ultimate test of the will: his own, human will to avoid it, clashing with what he knows his Father's will to be.

The struggle is immense: he describes himself to his friends as 'overwhelmed with sorrow'; in Luke's account, his anguish is so intense it bursts blood vessels near the skin surface, so he literally sweats blood. Whose *will* will prevail?

As we observed earlier, it all comes down to authority and intent. Ultimately Jesus was completely obedient to one authority, and one alone – his Father's. And this determined his intention. After hours of wrestling, he comes to the earth-shattering, earth-changing decision: 'Yet not what I will, but what you will.' Nine words which change the universe, the course of history, the future of humanity.

The contrast with the disciples is so stark, it's almost tragically funny. Jesus wrestles for his life while they wrestle with their eyelids. How like us! How wonderful, then, to know that our future rests in Jesus' perfect obedience rather than ours.

And may that hope of a secure future, thanks to Jesus' costly obedience – also give us inspiration and courage to surrender to God's will in the little – and not-so-little – callings of our lives.

Courageous God, I am in awe of your obedience. Thank you, thank you that you said 'Not what I will.' Help me to will as you will, because I know that you are good. Amen.

Day 68 (Maundy Thursday) – Mark 14:43-72 'Witness statements'

I've never yet been asked to give evidence in a court room. Once I almost did: I'd submitted written testimony and was expecting to be cross-examined. It was only a civil case, not a criminal one, but even so, I was so nervous I forgot to put a belt on when getting ready at home, only realising when I was halfway along the street. I had to dive into a shop near the train station and buy one on the way, or I would have had to keep my hands in my trouser pockets throughout to stop a clothing malfunction! Not a good look before a judge....

Thankfully my written evidence was accepted without dispute, and my trousers stayed secure: but it was a sobering reminder of the power of a witness statement. In today's passage Jesus is surrounded by many witnesses, one after the other – however none of them were the sort you'd want on your side at your time of need. Each witness gave their own 'testimony':

A kiss – from his friend Judas.

A sword – to win Jesus' freedom through terror.

A club – from those crowding round to arrest him.

A garment – left by the young man who fled. Many have often wondered if this was Mark himself, quietly admitting his own failure of nerve.

A lie – from those recruited by Jesus' enemies, to try and smear his name.

A rip – from the High Priest, as Jesus quoted Daniel before him: a gloriously true prophecy which sealed his fate.

A denial – from his best friend Peter. Or rather three denials, before the rooster declares his cowardice.

As we reflect on the enormity of Jesus' sacrifice, we hold in our minds Jesus' call for each of us to be witnesses. And yet, so often we may feel like one or more of these people, offering faulty testimony. A denial here, a betrayal there....

It is hard to read today's passage without being humbled. But in the midst of the storm, we also claim this truth: Jesus knows. No failure of ours is new to him: he saw it all in Holy Week, indeed in this one night. And *still* he loves. Still he forgives. Still he speaks a word of reassurance to us, just as he did to Peter.

We will never plumb the depths of his love: but we can marvel in it, and receive it afresh today.

Faithful Lord, thank you that no failure of ours puts us beyond your love. You were let down in every way: and still you were faithful to your calling. Give us grace to receive your astonishing forgiveness, and to be empowered to be your witnesses, for your precious sake. Amen.

Note for Good Friday: Today, take a few moments to read Mark 15:1-39 and spend time at the foot of the cross.

Day 69 (Holy Saturday) – Mark 15:37-47 'Mary and Joseph'

It's a strange coincidence in the gospel narrative that Jesus' earthly life starts with a Mary and a Joseph, and ends with a Mary and a Joseph – just a different pair. It's true that Jesus' mother is also in Jerusalem in Holy Week, and John's gospel records her as being by the cross when Jesus dies. But a different Mary takes centre stage here: Mary Magdalene.

This is the Mary who had been healed and restored by Jesus (Luke 8:2) and who afterwards became one of Jesus' most faithful friends. This faithfulness was rewarded by the extraordinary privilege of being the first to meet Jesus after his resurrection (John 20:14); but in today's passage we see her supporting Jesus, watching and waiting both at the cross (v40) *and* at the tomb (v47).

This suggests strongly that she followed Jesus wherever he went that day – even his lifeless body, quickly carried to the tomb by Joseph (and others) as sunset drew nigh. All of Jesus' twelve closest (male) friends had disappeared: but Mary, and several other women, were still *there*.

Joseph of Arimathea's story is different. If Mary had likely been a social outcast before she met Jesus, Joseph was wealthy and powerful, 'a prominent member of the Council' (v43). But he had been no less impacted by Jesus – we don't know exactly how, but the text tells us that he was 'himself waiting for the kingdom of God.' This is shorthand for a devout faith, but the fact that he took this bold step of caring for Jesus' body when so many others had fled suggests that he saw in Jesus the fulfilment of God's purposes for his kingdom.

And so these two unlikely characters, from opposite ends of society, come to play a key role in the story of God at this climactic moment. As Holy Week draws to its dramatic and joyful conclusion, it reminds us that Jesus' message – and his kingdom – are *for everyone*; and everyone is able to play their part in God's purposes. Mary's is a story of healing and presence, Joseph's a story of boldness and influence; Mary's friendship with Jesus lasted years, Joseph only appears in the narrative now; but they have one thing in common – they are faithful friends to Jesus.

Holy Week is ultimately about Jesus' faithfulness to God, and also to us. But this extraordinary love demands a response. Jesus is our most faithful friend: will we be a faithful friend in return? The way that we express that might be different, unique: but our calling is the same. 'Surely this man is the Son of God!' How will we respond?

Lord Jesus, thank you for all that you did for me. Thank you for the examples of Mary and Joseph, touched by you, and faithful in their love. Help me to be faithful to you, my most faithful friend. Amen.

Day 70 (Sunday: Easter Day!) – Mark 16:1-8 ‘Son-rise at Sunrise’

There’s nothing like a good sunrise, is there? When Jeremiah thinks about God and describes His mercies as ‘new every morning’ there’s something that rings true about that when we see the sun rise. Whatever our circumstances, our spirits lift, as light floods into the world once again.

Sunrise is glorious, and yet curiously un-noticed. The fact that it happens every single day means that many of us take it for granted. It’s so regular, so much part of the fabric of existence, it’s largely ignored. For all that, though, we need it: the earth can’t function without sunlight. If you like to watch wildlife programmes, one thing you’ll notice about parts of the world that have long periods of darkness is that very few people, animals and plants live in them. Creation needs the sun. The sun is constantly bringing us new life. Sunrise every morning is life-giving, a sign of new life.

Today is Easter Sunday, and we celebrate another kind of sunrise – with a change of just one letter, we celebrate SON-RISE. And Mark’s gospel tells us that on that first Easter day, the two coincide: just after sunrise, it says, the two Marys and Salome go to the tomb. The world-changing event happens at dawn: Son-rise at sunrise. And as we gaze on that empty tomb this morning, we can note that this son-rise can also be described with those same 3 words:

It’s glorious. Look at the details: not just the angel, Matthew in his gospel also tells us about the earthquake, the brilliant light. Just think about what it would be like to witness someone rise from the dead... When Jesus rises from the dead it’s extraordinary. Hard-bitten Roman soldiers fall to the ground in awe. The angel has to say to the women: ‘Don’t be alarmed.’ Son-rise is glorious. It still is, by the way. As we gather today along with millions of others around the world, may God capture our hearts again with a vision of his glory, as his Son rises gloriously from the dead.

It’s unnoticed. At least, it is by most of our culture. Over Easter weekend you’ll get more news about travel on a bank holiday weekend than about the resurrection. Most shops will be open every day this weekend. Life for many goes on as normal. And yet, for those prepared to look, this Son-rise is the treasure hidden in the field of that famous parable: the glorious, beautiful secret of God’s life and love meeting with humanity and changing our lives forever.

And that is ultimately what the son-rise is about, isn’t it? *It’s lifegiving.* Jesus rises to new life, but it’s not just for him: He promises that all those who follow him will receive that life too. That’s why, when we declare ‘Jesus is alive’, we are declaring the most profound, life-changing statement in all history. The disciples who met the risen Jesus couldn’t help but worship him. Millions of people around the world who gather to celebrate this good news can’t help but worship him.

Perhaps the son-rise will be unnoticed by many today – but it remains as glorious and life-giving as ever. May God grant us all grace to cry with joy: Alleluia, Christ is risen!