

## Read Mark Lent

### Day 1: Mark 1.1-15

*The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.*

*As it is written in the prophet Isaiah,  
'See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,  
who will prepare your way:  
the voice of one crying out in the wilderness:  
"Prepare the way of the Lord,  
make his paths straight."'*

*John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. He proclaimed, 'The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.'*

*In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.'*

*And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness for forty days, tempted by Satan, and he was with the wild beasts, and the angels waited on him.*

*Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, 'the time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.'*

### Reflection

Of the four Gospel narratives in the New Testament, the one according to Mark is by some distance the shortest; and even from these first fifteen verses you can see why. There is no lengthy introduction or prologue. There is not even any account of Jesus' birth. After the opening line and a quotation from the prophet Isaiah we are plunged straight into the action, which moves at a pace. Even the forty days that Jesus spent in the wilderness is covered in just a couple of sentences.

Mark's is a Gospel that is remarkably single-minded, focused throughout on the one central question. Who is this Jesus of Nazareth? Other characters in the story wrestle with this question, as they witness the remarkable things that Jesus does, and respond with wonder and astonishment. Only little by little does the truth dawn, even for his closest disciples.

But for us, the readers of the Gospel, we are told the answer to that question in the very first line of the book. This is the beginning of "the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God". Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah, the one who had been foretold in the scriptures would come to set God's people free. Moreover, he is "the Son of God", the one in whom and through whom God is present and at work, bringing in his kingdom. The truth of Jesus' identity and calling is reinforced in the words of the divine voice, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased".

And all of this is "good news" or "gospel". Both are translations of the same Greek word, which is found at the beginning and end of this passage. It was a word that was often associated with official

or royal proclamations. If the emperor were to visit a city within his realm, heralds would go ahead of him to proclaim the “good news” of the imminent arrival of the ruler. In this passage, the true good news is proclaimed, by John the Baptist in preparing the way for the Lord through his baptism of repentance, by Jesus in his preaching throughout Galilee, and by Mark in telling this account of Jesus’ life and work. The book that he wrote is not to be seen as just interesting information about an extraordinary person; rather, it is “Gospel”, good news for all who are ready to receive it.

## **Day 2: Mark 1.16-45**

*As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the lake – for they were fishermen. And Jesus said to them, ‘Follow me and I will make you fish for people.’ And immediately they left their nets and followed him. As he went a little further, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John, who were in their boat mending the nets. Immediately he called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men, and followed him.*

*They went to Capernaum; and when the sabbath came, he entered the synagogue and taught. They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes. Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, and he cried out, ‘What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God.’ But Jesus rebuked him, saying ‘Be silent, and come out of him!’ And the unclean spirit, throwing him into convulsions and crying with a loud voice, came out of him. They were all amazed, and they kept on asking one another, ‘What is this? A new teaching – with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him.’ At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.*

*As soon as they left the synagogue, they entered the house of Simon and Andrew, with James and John. Now Simon’s mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they told him about her at once. He came and took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them.*

*That evening, at sunset, they brought to him all who were sick or possessed with demons. And the whole city was gathered around the door. And he cured many who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons; and he would not permit the demons to speak, because they knew him.*

*In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed. And Simon and his companions hunted for him. When they found him, they said to him, ‘Everyone is searching for you.’ He answered, ‘Let us go on to the neighbouring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do.’ And he went throughout Galilee, proclaiming the message in their synagogues and casting out demons.*

*A leper came to him begging him, and kneeling he said to him, ‘If you choose, you can make me clean!’ Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him, and said to him, ‘I do choose. Be made clean!’ Immediately the leprosy left him, and he was made clean. After sternly warning him he sent him away at once, saying to him, ‘See that you say nothing to anyone; but go, show yourself to the priest, and offer for your cleansing what Moses commanded, as a testimony to them.’ But he went out and began to proclaim it freely, and to spread the word, so that Jesus could no longer go into a town openly, but stayed out in the country; and people came to him from every quarter.*

## Reflection

Before all the theatres closed because of the pandemic, there was a new musical that was becoming very popular in the West End and beyond. It was called, “Everyone’s Talking About Jamie”. If we had to choose a subtitle for this second passage from St Mark’s Gospel, we could do worse than calling it, “Everyone’s Talking About Jesus”. As he begins his ministry after emerging from the wilderness, Jesus quickly creates quite a stir in the area around his hometown. As people hear of his teaching in the synagogue and his healing of the sick and deliverance of those afflicted by demons, excitement and astonishment builds. His fame, we are told, begins to spread throughout the region of Galilee.

Until this last year, we might have felt more comfortable talking about the news of Jesus “going viral”, or “spreading like wildfire”. Neither of those metaphors seem quite the same now we are so aware of the devastating impact of their literal equivalents. But the relevance of those figures of speech is that they indicate something spreading in a way that has got out of control. Not even Jesus himself seems to be in control of the buzz that is going around. Instead of encouraging people to talk about what is happening, as we might expect, Jesus issues calls to keep quiet, and makes attempts to withdraw from the clamour of the crowds. But there is no respite. The more Jesus commands silence, the more it seems people talk. Jesus’ withdrawal to a deserted place is interrupted by Simon and his friends, insisting, “Everyone is searching for you”. Everyone is talking about Jesus.

We live in a world in which fame is often seen as an end in its own right. There are celebrities who are famous for no other reason than being famous. Jesus is not fooled by the lure of instant or shallow fame. His focus stays resolutely on the purpose for which God has called him. He will not succumb to the temptation of staying in the places where he has become known and meeting the incessant demands that confront him there. He moves on, to other towns, other villages; but even there the word has spread. Jesus is the one about whom everyone is talking.

## Day 3: Mark 2.1-12

*When he returned to Capernaum after some days, it was reported that he was at home. So many gathered around that there was no longer room for them, not even in front of the door; and he was speaking the word to them. Then some people came, bringing to him a paralysed man, carried by four of them. And when they could not bring him to Jesus because of the crowd, they removed the roof above him; and after having dug through it, they let down the mat on which the paralytic lay. When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, ‘Son, your sins are forgiven.’ Now some of the scribes were sitting there, questioning in their hearts, ‘Why does this fellow speak in this way? It is blasphemy! Who can forgive sins but God alone?’ At once Jesus perceived in his spirit that they were discussing these questions among themselves; and he said to them, ‘Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, “Your sins are forgiven”, or to say “Stand up, and take your mat and walk”? But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins’ – he said to the paralytic – ‘I say to you, stand up, take your mat and go to your home.’ And he stood up, and immediately took the mat and went out before all of them; so that they were all amazed and glorified God, saying, ‘We have never seen anything like this!’*

## Reflection

Here we see the flipside of fame. The buzz of excitement around Jesus has not diminished, to the extent that the gathering of the crowd at the house at which he is staying creates its own problem. So many want to hear Jesus and to see him that others who really need to be in his presence are excluded. You know it is a large and densely packed crowd when it is easier for four men to carry a paralysed man on a stretcher on to the roof of a house, and to make a large enough hole in the roof to then lower their friend down than it is to say, "Do you mind just letting us through here?" The story offers a dual challenge to followers of Jesus today. The first is: are we willing to overcome all barriers in order to be in his presence? But the second, and perhaps the harder challenge: do we (intentionally or otherwise) create barriers in the way of others who would seek Jesus?

The flipside of fame includes the practical difficulties and invasions of privacy when so many want access to the one of whom they have heard so much. But there is a more dangerous flipside, that we see often, and that emerges in this passage. It sometimes surfaces as what has been called the "tall poppy syndrome", when after somebody has been built up by the adulation of the people, there is a backlash. People will step forward who are determined to cut the celebrity down to size.

Here it is the scribes who lead the backlash. They seize on Jesus' words about the forgiveness of sins with outrage, real or pretend. Who does he think he is? Only God can forgive sins. How dare this upstart put himself in the place of God! Who gave him the right to do and to say these things?

The issue is one of authority, and where that authority comes from. We have already been told, in the previous chapter, that Jesus taught "as one having authority, and not as the scribes". There is an irony in that observation; the scribes are precisely those who might be regarded as properly authorised teachers of the law. They have received the training and the official validation that have never been given to the carpenter's son from Nazareth. But the authority exercised by Jesus does not come from the religious institution. There is only one source for this kind of authority; and that is God and God alone. The scribes may ask, "Who does this man think he is?", but are they willing to receive an answer?

### Day 4: Mark 2.13-22

*Jesus went out again beside the lake; the whole crowd gathered around him, and he taught them. As he was walking along, he saw Levi son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax booth, and he said to him, 'Follow me.' And he got up and followed him.*

*And as he sat at dinner in Levi's house, many tax-collectors and sinners were also sitting with Jesus and his disciples – for there were many who followed him. When the scribes of the Pharisees saw that he was eating with sinners and tax-collectors, they said to his disciples, 'Why does he eat with tax-collectors and sinners?' When Jesus heard this, he said to them, 'Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I have come to call not the righteous but sinners.'*

*Now John's disciples and the Pharisees were fasting; and people came and said to him, 'Why do John's disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?' Jesus said to them, 'The wedding-guests cannot fast while the bridegroom is with them, can they? As long as they have the bridegroom with them, they cannot fast. The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast on that day.'*

*'No one sews a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old cloak; otherwise the patch pulls away from it, the new from the old, and a worse tear is made. And no one puts new wine into old wineskins; otherwise, the wine will burst the skins, and the wine is lost, and so also are the skins; but one puts new wine into fresh wineskins.'*

## **Reflection**

"Follow me." These words of Jesus to Levi are a direct echo of the same words that had earlier been spoken to Simon and Andrew, to James and John, at the shores of Lake Galilee. "Follow me" is the simplest possible expression of the invitation to be a disciple. As soon as we answer the call of Jesus to follow him, we embark on the path of discipleship. To be a disciple is to follow and to learn. It is to be an apprentice, spending time in the presence of the master carpenter, watching him, copying him, and (in some small way) becoming like him.

Perhaps the most surprising part of this passage is not that Jesus has disciples. We knew that already, even if we scarcely dared to count ourselves in that number. Rather, is that others do too; we are told here about the disciples of John the Baptist and also of the Pharisees. There are similarities between them, but also big differences. The disciples of Jesus, of John, of the Pharisees are all seeking to be obedient to God and to grow in the life of faith.

But there is a key difference that finds its focus here in the issue of fasting. Jesus is asked, 'Why do John's disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?' There is a time to fast and a time to feast, and Jesus answers the query by using the image of a wedding. When the bridegroom is present is the time for guests to celebrate and throw a party. A wedding feast is often used in scripture as an image of the kingdom of God. The disciples of John and of the Pharisees fast, because they seek to purify themselves in readiness for the coming of that kingdom; but for the followers of Jesus that kingdom is already in their midst, in the presence of Jesus, the bridegroom.

For the Pharisees, Jesus eating with tax-collectors and sinners is a source of scandal. Does he not know what kind of people they are? But for Jesus, this meal in the home of Levi, the tax-collector turned disciple, is a vivid illustration and embodiment of the reality of God's kingdom, where are all invited to sit and eat at God's table.

## **Day 5: Mark 2.23-3.6**

*One sabbath he was going through the cornfields; and as they made their way his disciples began to pluck heads of grain. The Pharisees said to him, 'Look, why are doing what is not lawful on the sabbath?' And he said to them, 'Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry and in need of food? He entered the house of God, when Abiathar was high priest, and ate the bread of the Presence, which it is not lawful for any but the priests to eat, and he gave some to his companions.' Then he said to them, 'The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath; so the Son of Man is lord, even of the sabbath.'*

*Again he entered the synagogue, and a man was there who had a withered hand. They watched him to see whether he would cure him on the sabbath, so that they might accuse him. And he said to the man who had the withered hand, 'Come forward.' Then he said to them, 'Is it lawful to do good or to*

*do harm on the sabbath, to save life or to kill?’ But they were silent. He looked around at them with anger; he was grieved at their hardness of heart and said to the man, ‘Stretch out your hand.’ He stretched it out, and his hand was restored. The Pharisees went out and immediately conspired with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him.*

## **Reflection**

Jesus’ conflict with the Pharisees escalates. The issue now concerns the sabbath. More is at stake here than in the dispute over fasting, because this is no longer a matter of mere custom, but a requirement that stood at the very heart of the law and of Jewish identity. The fourth of the Ten Commandments lays down that everybody in the land, rich and poor alike and even the animals, are to do all their work in the first six days of the week, and to rest on the sabbath as a day holy to the Lord. If Jesus can be shown to be breaking this commandment and encouraging his disciples to do likewise, then what is left of his authority and credibility as a religious teacher and leader?

The first incident recounted seems fairly trivial. You can see why harvesting crops should be considered as work, and therefore banned on the sabbath, but nibbling a few grains of corn whilst strolling through a field? It is, at most, a minor and technical breach of the law. But it is significant enough for the Pharisees, whose specialism was the minute observance of the law in all its detail, to seize upon the action as an example of the lawlessness of Jesus and his followers.

The second incident is more serious. The healing of a disabled man can scarcely be dismissed as trivial. But is it work? By the letter of the law, probably. But if the Pharisees are concerned with the letter of the law, and with using that law as a tool to trap and to incriminate their opponent, Jesus takes the wider view. What is the purpose of the law in general and of the sabbath commandment in particular? Is it to bind, or to set free? Is it a burden, or a gift?

In speaking of the sabbath as made for humankind, rather than vice versa, and of it being better to do good on the sabbath than to do harm, Jesus recalls his hearers to the true purpose of the law as a liberating ordinance, given to enable human flourishing. The law, including the sabbath, is a gift to be received with joy, not an imposition against which to struggle.

The exchange between Jesus and the Pharisees illustrates how rules and religion can be a double-edged sword. They can be used, as intended, for our well-being; but they can also be misused, to oppress and to control. Jesus’ anger with the Pharisees is provoked by their willingness to see the continuation of human suffering as a price worth paying for the maintenance of their interpretation of the rules. A withered arm, it seems, is more easily healed than a hardened heart.

## **Day 6: Mark 3.7-19**

*Jesus departed with his disciples to the lake, and a great multitude from Galilee followed him; hearing all that he was doing, they came to him in great numbers from Judea, Jerusalem, Idumea, beyond the Jordan, and the region around Tyre and Sidon. He told his disciples to have a boat ready for him because of the crowd, so that they would not crush him; for he had cured many, so that all who had diseases pressed upon him to touch him. Whenever the unclean spirits saw him, they fell down before him and shouted ‘You are the Son of God!’ But he sternly ordered them not to make him known.*

*He went up the mountain and called to him those whom he wanted, and they came to him. And he appointed twelve, whom he also named apostles, to be with him, and to be sent out to proclaim the message, and to have authority to cast out demons. So he appointed the twelve: Simon (to whom he gave the name Peter); James son of Zebedee and John the brother of James (to whom he gave the name Boanerges, that is, Sons of Thunder); and Andrew, and Philip, and Bartholomew, and Matthew, and Thomas, and James son of Alphaeus, and Thaddeus, and Simon the Cananaean, and Judas Iscariot, who betrayed him.*

## **Reflection**

The Jesus movement, that had been creating such a stir, continues to build and to spread. There is an emphasis in the first paragraph of this passage on the large number of people involved. This is “a great multitude”, with people coming “in great numbers”; it is a “crowd”, so large that it presses upon Jesus and threatens to “crush him”. Moreover, those who are drawn towards Jesus are no longer simply from his own local region of Galilee; we are told that they come from all corners of Israel: “Judea, Jerusalem, Idumea, beyond the Jordan, and the region around Tyre and Sidon”. This has become a genuinely national movement.

But from that large crowd, and from the significant number of followers of Jesus (or “disciples”), Jesus selects an inner circle of “apostles”, to whom is entrusted the authority to go out and to speak and to act in the name of Jesus. Many are called to be disciples, but only these named twelve are described as apostles. In one sense, the appointment of the twelve is simply good sense and good leadership. If this movement is to continue and to grow, there needs to be a team of those whom Jesus trusts and equips to work with him. There are echoes of the actions of Moses in the Old Testament, who appoints and delegates others to act on his behalf, because of the scale of the task.

But the choosing and sending of the apostles is not just about fulfilling a practical need. There is a symbolic importance to this commissioning too. It is surely no accident that it is exactly twelve men who are named as apostles. The number twelve would bring to the mind of anybody steeped in the Hebrew scriptures the twelve tribes of Israel, named after the sons of Jacob. The union of the twelve tribes had long since disintegrated. Jesus’ appointment of twelve apostles can be seen as a signal that, in him and through him, Israel was to be restored and renewed as the people of God.

But there is to be a twist. This passage, which is full of hope for the future and celebration of a new beginning, ends on a sombre and sinister note. The final name on the list of apostles is the name that has become a byword for treachery: “Judas Iscariot, who betrayed him”. This story of Jesus, which begins with his soaring popularity and fame, will ultimately lead to desertion, abandonment, and the cross.

## **Day 7: Mark 3.20-35**

*Then he went home; and the crowd came together again, so that they could not even eat. When his family heard it, they went out to restrain him, for people were saying, ‘He has gone out of his mind.’ And the scribes who came down from Jerusalem said, ‘He has Beelzebul, and by the ruler of the demons he casts out demons.’ And he called them to him, and spoke to them in parables, ‘How can Satan cast out Satan? If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. And if a*

*house is divided against itself, that house will not be able to stand. And if Satan has risen up against himself and is divided, he cannot stand, but his end has come. But no one can enter a strong man's house and plunder his property without first tying up the strong man; then indeed the house can be plundered.*

*'Truly I tell you, people will be forgiven for their sins and whatever blasphemies they utter; but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit can never have forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin' – for they had said, 'He has an unclean spirit.'*

*Then his mother and his brothers came; and standing outside they sent to him and called him. A crowd was sitting around him; and they said to him, 'Your mother and your brothers and sisters are outside, asking for you.' And he replied, 'Who are my mother and my brothers?' And looking at those who sat around him, he said, 'Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.'*

## **Reflection**

In many ways, this is a strange passage, with its talk of Beelzebul and Satan, of binding the strong man and plundering his house, of an unforgivable sin of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit, and with what seems to be Jesus' harsh treatment of his closest family as if they were strangers. In reading these words, we come face to face with the strangeness of Jesus himself. We are a long way here from the "gentle Jesus, meek and mild" of popular imagination. This is a wild Jesus, untamed and untameable. Like Aslan in the Narnia Chronicles, he is good, but he is not safe.

The passage begins with Jesus' family becoming alarmed by the strange behaviour of the one whom they thought they knew so well. He is considered to be "out of his mind" and in need of being restrained. The actions that so alarm them seem to be connected with his work of casting out unclean spirits, something that probably seems even stranger to us in the twenty-first century than it did to them. For all that there is often an overlap between mental illness and spiritual sickness, modern attempts to explain away the Gospel language of "unclean spirits" as outdated ways of describing psychiatric problems are unconvincing. Mark is clear that Jesus is engaging in conflict with all sorts of oppressive powers, seen and unseen. There are many dimensions to the struggle between good and evil. What matters is what side of the conflict he is on; the parable Jesus tells about the divided house exposes how perverse and illogical it is for the scribes to call Jesus an agent of the devil, when he is so clearly undoing the devil's work.

Satan's kingdom is being dismantled at the same time as the Kingdom of God is appearing. God's kingdom, proclaimed and enacted in Jesus' ministry, is seen in the community of those who follow him. A new family is being established, which goes beyond the blood ties of human kinship to embrace all who hear and accept the word of God. Jesus' final words in this passage are not so much treating family members as strangers, but declaring that those who were once strangers are now part of the wider and truer family of all God's people.

## Day 8: Mark 4.1-20

*Again he began to teach beside the lake. Such a very large crowd gathered around him that he got into a boat on the lake and sat there, while the whole crowd was beside the lake on the land. he began to teach them many things in parables, and in his teaching he said to them, 'Listen! A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seed fell on the path, and the birds came and ate it up. Other seed fell on rocky ground, where it did not have much soil, and it sprang up quickly, since it had no depth of soil. And when the sun rose, it was scorched; and since it had no root, it withered away. Other seed fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked it, and it yielded no grain. Other seed fell into good soil and brought forth grain, growing up and increasing and yielding thirty and sixty and a hundredfold.' And he said, 'Let anyone with ears to hear listen!'*

*When he was alone, those who were around him along with the twelve asked him about the parables. And he said to them, 'To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside, everything comes in parables; in order that "they may indeed look, but not perceive, and may indeed listen, but not understand; so that they may not turn again and be forgiven."*

*And he said to them, 'Do you not understand this parable? Then how will you understand all the parables? The sower sows the word. These are the ones on the path where the word is sown: when they hear, Satan immediately comes and takes away the word that is sown in them. And these are the ones sown on rocky ground: when they hear the word, they immediately receive it with joy. But they have no root, and endure only for a while; then, when trouble or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately they fall away. And others are those sown among the thorns: these are the ones who hear the word, but the cares of the world, and the lure of wealth, and the desire for other things come in and choke the word, and it yields nothing. And these are the ones sown on the good soil: they hear the word and accept it and bear fruit, thirty and sixty and a hundredfold.'*

### Reflection

The Gospels written by Matthew, Mark and Luke are all in agreement that Jesus' teaching most typically came in the form of parables. Parables are short stories (sometimes very short stories) which make their point by way of drawing similarities between everyday objects and situations and the things of God. Where Mark differs from Matthew and Luke is that he records very few of the actual parables themselves. This well-know story, usually called the parable of the sower, is one of the rare examples in which Mark relates both the parable and Jesus' interpretation of it. In general, Mark is far more interested in telling his readers about the impact of Jesus' teaching than its content.

The parable of the sower is a deceptively simple story. It takes a scene that would have been familiar to those living in the rural villages around Galilee, of a farmer scattering seed in the hopes of a good harvest. It is easy to assume that the simplicity and familiarity of the imagery is there to make the spiritual message that Jesus proclaims easily accessible, something that anybody listening can understand. In one sense, that is true; no academic learning or qualifications are needed to grasp the good news of God's kingdom. So Jesus' own explanation of why he taught in parables may come as something of a surprise; it is not in order to make the kingdom message transparent to everyone, but just the reverse. The parable form will both reveal and veil the mystery of the kingdom; as Jesus

says, quoting the prophet Isaiah, he speaks in parables in order that “they may indeed look, but not perceive, and may indeed listen, but not understand.”

So what is the point of the parable of the sower? It may help to ask, if this parable is the answer, what is the question? It would be easy to assume that the question is something along the lines of “How am I to live? What must I do to be the good soil, in which the seed produces a rich and fruitful harvest?” Seen in that way, we look for a moral to draw from the story, such as “avoid the distractions of wealth, and persevere through hard times”. They are good lessons, but not ones I think that are central to the parable’s purpose.

Rather, it is a story that answers the question that the earliest followers of Jesus (and not a few of his followers today) soon found themselves asking, as they embarked on the mission of declaring the good news of God’s kingdom to people in their towns and villages. Why is it, they (and we) might ask, that not everybody accepts this wonderful message? Why is there such a disparity in the way that people respond to the Gospel? It is a question that can lead us to think “What are we doing wrong? What should we say or do that would then bring everybody to believe?”

The parable of the sower sets us free from this line of questioning, which can easily become self-destructive and demoralising. Yes, we should do what we can to speak of Jesus with conviction and clarity. But ultimately we cannot force anyone to believe, and even God does not force people to believe. It is in the nature of the gospel that some will ‘get it’ and others won’t; but for those who do, the change it brings is like the seed that gave its incredible yield, thirty and sixty and a hundredfold.

#### **Day 9: Mark 4.21-34**

*He said to them, ‘Is a lamp brought to be put under a bushel basket, or under the bed, and not on the lampstand? For there is nothing hidden except to be disclosed; nor is anything secret, except to come to light. Let anyone with ears to hear listen!’ And he said to them, ‘Pay attention to what you hear; the measure you give will be the measure you get, and still more will be given you. For to those who have, more will be given; and from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away.’*

*He also said, ‘The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground, and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how. The earth produces of itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head. But when the grain is ripe, at once he goes in with his sickle, because the harvest has come.’*

*He also said, ‘With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it? It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs, and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade.’*

*With many such parables he spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it; he did not speak to them except in parables, but he explained everything in private to his disciples.*

## Reflection

Following the parable of the sower, Jesus continues his teaching through a set of further short parables, which in many cases are closer to proverbs than they are to stories. Although they are apparently unconnected, a common theme or thread runs through these sayings. That thread is the hidden nature of God's kingdom, which develops in secret, but will in due course be revealed.

Yesterday's reading spoke about "the secret", or literally "the mystery" of the kingdom of God. Here, we are told that there is nothing secret that will not eventually be brought to light. That may be why parables are the most appropriate form in which the message of the kingdom can be conveyed, as, by nature, parables both hide and reveal God's truth. They function in some way as riddles, which puzzle the hearers and entice them to try to tease out the meaning. Like cryptic crossword clues, they may leave us baffled, but if we persevere the moment may come when the penny drops and the answer becomes clear. The truth dawns.

The cryptic nature of Jesus' parables and sayings fit the cryptic nature of God's kingdom. Like a seed beneath the surface of the soil, its germination and growth goes largely unseen. But in due course a plant will emerge which will far exceed anything that we might have imagined could have been contained within that tiny seed. Even when we think nothing is happening, God's kingdom is growing. For now it is hidden, but it will finally come to light for all to see.

### Day 10: Mark 4.35-41

*On that day, when evening had come, he said to them, 'Let us go across to the other side.' And leaving the crowd behind, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was. Other boats were with him. A great gale arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already being swamped. But he was in the stern, asleep on the cushion; and they woke him up and said to him, 'Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing? He woke up and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, 'Peace! Be still! Then the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm. He said to them, 'Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?' And they were filled with great awe and said to one another, 'Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?'*

## Reflection

Time and tide, they say, wait for no man. There are forces of nature that are beyond our control, forces that are epitomised by the power of the sea. As fishermen, Simon and Andrew, James and John, will have learnt to respect the untameable forces of wind and wave. The most you can hope to do in the face of the storm is to ride it out. They are understandably fearful when a gale of such strength blows up on the lake that it seems inevitable that the small boat will sink.

At this moment of greatest peril, Jesus is fast asleep, apparently oblivious to the danger. Is this, as the disciples suggest, a sign that he is indifferent to the fate of those on board the tiny vessel? No. It is a sign of trust. Jesus does not share the fear the others have, for reasons that then become clear. Jesus speaks the words, "Peace! Be still!" and the storm subsides. There is a great calm.

The fear of the onlookers that had previously been directed towards the power of the sea and the storm is now directed towards Jesus. The phrase translated here "they were filled with great awe" literally reads, "they feared with a great fear". It is the awe or fear that comes from being face to

face with something utterly beyond our comprehension or control. “Who is this”, they ask, “that even the wind and the sea obey him?”

It is asked as a rhetorical question, but as readers of the Gospel we are prompted to reflect on the only possible answer. As King Canute famously discovered (or demonstrated to his flatterers), the power of the sea is not subject to human command, even that of kings. Only the creator God is in charge of the wind and the waves. So who then is this? In modern parlance: Go figure.

### **Day 11: Mark 5.1-20**

*They came to the other side of the lake, to the country of the Gerasenes. And when he had stepped out of the boat, immediately a man out of the tombs with an unclean spirit met him. He lived among the tombs, and no one could restrain him any more, even with a chain, but the chains he wrenched apart, and the shackles he broke in pieces; and he had the strength to subdue him. Night and day among the tombs and on the mountains he was always howling and bruising himself with stones. when he saw Jesus from a distance, he ran and bowed down before him; and he shouted at the top of his voice, ‘What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I adjure you by God, do not torment me.’ For he had said to him, ‘Come out of the man, you unclean spirit!’ Then Jesus asked him, ‘What is your name?’ he replied, ‘My name is Legion, for we are many.’ He begged him earnestly not to send them out of the country. Now there on the hillside a great herd of swine were feeding; and the unclean spirits begged him, ‘Send us into the swine; let us enter them.’ So he gave them permission. And the unclean spirits came out and entered the swine; and the herd, numbering about two thousand, rushed down the steep bank into the lake, and were drowned in the lake.*

*The swineherds ran off and told it in the city and in the country. Then people came to see what it was that had happened. They came to Jesus and saw the demoniac sitting there, clothed and in his right mind, the very man who had had the legion; and they were afraid. Those who had seen what had happened to the demoniac and to the swine reported it. Then they began to beg Jesus to leave their neighbourhood. As he was getting into the boat, the man who had been possessed by demons begged him that he might be with him. But Jesus refused, and said to him, ‘Go home to you friends, and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and what mercy he has shown you.’ And he went away and began to proclaim in the Decapolis How much Jesus had done for him; and everyone was amazed.*

### **Reflection**

In an earlier discussion sparked by his work of casting out unclean spirits, Jesus had used the image of “tying up the strong man” to speak of overcoming the powers of evil. Here, Jesus encounters a man with unnatural strength, who cannot be bound even by the chains that society has imposed upon him. It will not be further chains that subdue this troubled man, but rather the freedom that Jesus brings him from the forces that are the cause of his disorder and distress.

There are indications in this account that there is more going on here than the healing of a single troubled individual, important as that is. The motif of impurity runs through this story; it is not only the spirits that have taken possession of this man that are unclean. The tombs among which he lives would have been regarded in Jewish culture as ritually impure, and hence unfit for human habitation, and of course pigs were seen as an unclean animal. Then as now, the consumption of

pork is forbidden within Judaism, and we might well wonder what the swine were doing in that landscape at all. The name “Legion” may well be an allusion to the armies of the Roman Empire that were the unclean occupying power over Israel at this time. In casting out the unclean spirits from this man, Jesus is pointing towards a wider redemption for the land and the people of God.

We can see in this story of the healing of “Legion” a companion piece to the preceding story of the stilling of the storm. In each case, destructive and uncontrollable forces are subdued by the authoritative voice of the Son of God. In place of chaos and violence, comes a great calm. But for the onlookers, this inexplicable calm is itself disturbing. It speaks of a power beyond their grasp, and rather than rejoicing in the peace that has been brought to the demoniac, the local villagers fearfully beg Jesus to leave their neighbourhood. Sometimes, people would prefer to put up with the familiarity of the status quo, however chaotic or unjust that may be, rather than embrace the disruption and challenge of God’s kingdom of peace.

### **Day 12: Mark 5.21-43**

*When Jesus had crossed again in the boat to the other side, a great crowd gathered round him; and he was by the lake. Then one of the leaders of the synagogue named Jairus came and, when he saw him, fell at his feet and begged him repeatedly, ‘My little daughter is at the point of death. Come and lay your hands on her, so that she may be made well and live.’ So he went with him.*

*And a large crowd followed him and pressed in on him. Now there was a woman who had been suffering from haemorrhages for twelve years. She had endured much under many physicians, and had spent all that she had; and she was no better, but rather grew worse. She had heard about Jesus, and came up behind him in the crowd and touched his cloak, for she said, ‘If I but touch his clothes, I will be made well.’ Immediately her haemorrhage stopped; and she felt in her body that she was healed of her disease. Immediately aware that power had gone forth from him, Jesus turned about in the crowd and said, ‘Who touched my clothes?’ And his disciples said to him, ‘You see the crowd pressing in on you; how can you say, “Who touched me?”’ He looked all around to see who had done it. But the woman, knowing what had happened to her, came in fear and trembling, fell down before him, and told him the whole truth. He said to her, ‘Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease.’*

*While he was still speaking, some people came from the leader’s house to say, ‘Your daughter is dead. Why trouble the teacher any further?’ But overhearing what they said, Jesus said to the leader of the synagogue, ‘Do not fear, only believe.’ He allowed no one to follow him except Peter, James, and John, the brother of James. When they came to the house of the leader of the synagogue, he saw a commotion, people weeping and wailing loudly. When he had entered, he said to them, ‘Why do you make a commotion and weep? The child is not dead but sleeping.’ And they laughed at him. Then he put them all outside, and took the child’s father and mother and those who were with him, and went in where the child was. He took her by the hand and said to her, ‘Talitha cum’, which means, ‘Little girl, get up!’ And immediately the little girl got up and began to walk about (she was twelve years of age). At this they were overcome with amazement. He strictly ordered them that no one should know this, and told them to give her something to eat.*

### **Reflection**

We are now about a third of the way through Mark's Gospel, and certain themes, words and patterns are beginning to stand out. Once again we read of Jesus crossing the lake in a boat, and of great crowds pressing in and almost literally giving Jesus no room to move. The frenetic pace of the narrative is reinforced by the frequent use of the adverb "immediately"; everything is happening in a rush. People are begging Jesus for help, in the trust and hope that he is the one with the power and authority to respond to their needs. And when he does act, the response of the onlookers is one of amazement; but Jesus here, as so often, issues an injunction to silence. Tell no one what you have seen and heard.

Power is a prominent theme throughout the Gospel. In today's passage, the focus is on Jesus' power to heal, as demonstrated in these two interwoven stories, of the daughter of the synagogue leader, and of the unnamed woman who is addressed by Jesus as "daughter", a reminder of her worth and standing as part of God's people. A further subtle link between the two stories is drawn by the observation that the woman with haemorrhages has been suffering for twelve years, the same length of time that Jairus' daughter has been alive.

There are two aspects of power that are expressed in these accounts. The first is the power of touch. Jairus approaches Jesus confident that the touch of the Messiah's hands will be enough to heal the girl of her serious illness. That thread of the story concludes with Jesus taking the hand of the child and in so doing restoring her to life. The power of touch is perhaps shown even more strongly in the other thread of this narrative. The pressure of the crowd is such that many are touching Jesus, pressing against him in the crowd. The woman who has been suffering for so long is convinced that Jesus can offer what the doctors never could, and that she need not even trouble him by asking for a deliberate act of healing. A touch of his garment will be enough.

And indeed it is enough; but her hope that she might go unnoticed in the crowd is thwarted. Jesus knows that power has gone out of him, through that touch. But his question to the disciples, "Who touched me?" is not asked in anger, but in deep compassion. The woman will not be denied the healing for which she was so desperate. That healing has come, not simply through the power of touch, but through the power of faith, the same faith that drove the leader of the synagogue to seek out Jesus on behalf of his daughter.

But neither faith nor touch are powerful in and of themselves. They are but channels, through which the healing power of God, embodied in Jesus, is poured out into the world. That is a power against which sickness, and even death itself, cannot ultimately triumph.

### **Day 13: Mark 6.1-13**

*He left that place and came to his home town, and his disciples followed him. On the sabbath he began to teach in the synagogue, and many who heard him were astounded. They said, 'Where did this man get all this? What is this wisdom that has been given to him? What deeds of power are being done by his hands? Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?' And they took offence at him. Then Jesus said to them, 'Prophets are not without honour, except in their home town, and among their own kin, and in their own house.' And he could do no deed of power there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them. And he was amazed at their unbelief.*

*Then he went about among the villages teaching. He called the twelve and began to send them out two by two, and gave them authority over the unclean spirits. He ordered them to take nothing for their journey, except a staff; no bread, no bag, no money in their belts; but to wear sandals and not to put on two tunics. He said to them, 'Wherever you enter a house, stay there until you leave the place. If any place will not welcome you and they refuse to hear you, as you leave, shake off the dust that is on your feet as a testimony against them.' So they went out and proclaimed that all should repent. They cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them.*

## **Reflection**

Jesus begins to teach in the local synagogue. Such is the wisdom and authority with which he speaks that those who hear are astounded, and ask questions about who this person might be. So far, so unsurprising. It is the same response that Jesus' kingdom ministry has elicited wherever he has been. The difference in this story is that the synagogue is in Jesus' own hometown, and amongst his hearers are those who remember him, however distantly, as a young boy growing up in an unremarkable family. "Who is this?" quickly becomes "Who does he think he is?" Far from taking pride in a local hero, a hometown boy made good, they turn against him.

It is a natural tendency to try to answer the question about a person's identity by way of their family background. That is part of the fascination for many people of genealogy; by researching our family tree, we may get insights into who we really are. But it can work both ways. Sometimes, the background information can mislead us. By thinking we already know who somebody is, we fail to follow the evidence that is there right in front of us.

The questions "Who are you?" and "Where are you from?" are linked, but they are not the same. The observers in the synagogue find themselves unable to perceive the true answer to their question as to where Jesus got his gifts and authority from because they cannot look beyond his human family. They are as prejudiced as those scribes who attributed Jesus' power to cast out demons to Beelzebul. Freed from that prejudice, an honest answer can be given; authority such as this can only be God-given.

Just as Jesus acts on his heavenly Father's authority, so the twelve are then commissioned to act on Jesus' authority. He sends them out two by two, with minimal physical resources, so that they are dependent upon God, but also upon the hospitality of those to whom they go. They will meet with a mixed response. Some will not want to know; but for those who do receive and welcome them, God's kingdom draws near.

## **Day 14: Mark 6.14-29**

*King Herod heard of it, for Jesus' name had become known. Some were saying, 'John the baptizer has been raised from the dead; and for this reason these powers are at work in him.' But others said, 'It is Elijah.' And others said, 'It is a prophet, like one of the prophets of old.' But when Herod heard of it, he said, 'John, whom I beheaded, has been raised.'*

*For Herod himself had sent men who had arrested John, bound him, and put hi in prison on account of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, because Herod had married her. For John had been telling Herod, 'It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife.' And Herodias had a grudge against him, and wanted to kill him. But she could not, for Herod feared John, knowing that he was a righteous*

*and holy man, and he protected him. When he heard him, he was greatly perplexed, and yet he liked to listen to him. but an opportunity came when Herod on his birthday gave a banquet for his courtiers and officers and for the leaders of Galilee. When his daughter Herodias came in and danced, she pleased Herod and his guests; and the king said to the girl, 'Ask me for whatever you wish, and I will give it.' And he solemnly swore to her, 'Whatever you ask me, I will give you, even half of my kingdom.' She went out and said to her mother, 'What should I ask for?' She replied, 'The head of John the baptizer.' Immediately she rushed back to the king and requested, 'I want you to give me at once the head of John the Baptist on a platter.' The king was deeply grieved; yet out of regard for his oaths and for the guests, he did not want to refuse her. Immediately the king sent a soldier of the guard with orders to bring John's head. He went and beheaded him in the prison, brought his head on a platter, and gave it to the girl. Then the girl gave it to her mother. When his disciples heard about it, they came and took his body, and laid it in a tomb.*

## **Reflection**

This rather grisly story of the beheading of John the Baptist is introduced by Mark as a flashback. It may seem like something of a digression, and is one of the very few scenes within the Gospel in which Jesus is not centre stage. However, it serves as a striking counterpoint to the accounts of Jesus proclaiming and enacting the kingdom of God. Jesus is shown to be the one who exercises true power and authority. Herod, by contrast, is the epitome of worldly power. He has all the trappings and titles of a ruler, but these things are revealed as a hollow and empty show.

Herod (not to be confused with his father, the so-called "Herod the Great" who we encounter in the Christmas story as the jealous ruler who ordered the slaughter of the innocents in Bethlehem) is called "King Herod" by Mark, but this is misleading. He is a puppet ruler and any authority or power that he has is held only by the permission of the emperor in Rome. In that respect he is like Pontius Pilate, and there is a further resemblance between the two figures in the way this story unfolds. Neither Herod nor Pilate are presented as wanting the death of the prisoner in their custody, yet both are manipulated into a position where they sense they have no option but to order the execution. For all their supposed power, they are powerless over the things that really matter.

Herod's relationship to John the Baptist is as ambiguous as that of Pilate to Jesus. Herod is challenged by John, but he is also fascinated by him. In a court full of flatterers, Herod is drawn to this man who alone has the courage and integrity to speak truth to power. He cannot let John go free, but neither does he desire the prophet's death. But the shallowness and inadequacy of Herod's type of power is revealed in the ease with which he is manoeuvred into a position where, against all his wishes and better judgement, he gives the executioner the order to wield the sword and deliver John's head on a platter. Herod cannot backtrack on the foolish promise that he gave so publicly at the banquet without losing face; and for rulers such as Herod, to lose face is to lose everything.

Taken on its own, this passage is a telling critique of the illusory nature of a tyrant's power. Taken in the context of the Gospel as a whole, it foreshadows the events of the passion. Herod and Pilate may be able to order the death of an innocent and godly man; but true power lies with those who are not swayed from doing God's will and seeking God's truth. No wonder Herod suspects and fears that, in Jesus, John the Baptist has come back to haunt him.

## Day 15: Mark 6.30-44

*The apostles gathered around Jesus, and told him all that they had done and taught. He said to them, 'Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest awhile. For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat. And they went away in the boat to a deserted place by themselves. Now many saw them going and recognized them, and they hurried there on foot from all the towns and arrived ahead of them. As he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things. When it grew late, his disciples came to him and said, 'This is a deserted place, and the hour is now very late; send them away so that they may go into the surrounding country and villages and buy something for themselves to eat.' But he answered them, 'You give them something to eat.' They said to him, 'Are we to go and buy two hundred denarii worth of bread, and give it to them to eat?' And he said to them, 'How many loaves have you? Go and see.' When they had found out, they said, 'Five, and two fish.' Then he ordered them to get all the people to sit down in groups on the green grass. So they sat down in groups of hundreds and of fifties. Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed, and broke the loaves, and gave them to his disciples to set before the people; and he divided the two fish among them all. And all ate and were filled; and they took up twelve baskets full of broken pieces and of the fish. Those who had eaten the loaves numbered five thousand men.*

### Reflection

The feeding of the five thousand is one of the most well-known of Jesus' miracles, and it is rich in meaning and resonance. But ideally it would never have happened. Jesus' intention was for some time apart, for the apostles and for himself, far from the madding crowd. The twelve need time to rest and reflect, recovery time after the exertions of their first experience of going out in mission. But, as so often seems to happen, that intention is thwarted. There will be no time of quietness by themselves, because the crowd is ever present. Even in the supposedly deserted place, they are there, having caught wind of where Jesus and his disciples were heading.

However, Jesus' reaction to this interruption is not one of irritation or frustration, but one of love. We are told that "He had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd". It is a telling phrase, and one full of echoes from the scriptures. The people of Israel are frequently referred to as the sheep of God's pasture, and the leaders as the shepherds. The prophet Ezekiel has denounced those leaders for failing in their duty of care; instead of feeding the sheep and keeping them safe, they have looked only to their own needs, and have allowed the sheep to be scattered and become lost. But the word of judgement against the shepherds also becomes a word of hope and of promise to the flock; if the leaders have to take care of Israel, God himself will come to them and be their shepherd, seeking the lost, binding up the lame, and feeding the hungry.

Jesus' compassion for the crowd is based in more than human empathy. The miracle of providing plenteous food for the multitude is more than a striking demonstration of his power. The incident is a clear sign that Jesus is the one through whom Ezekiel's prophecy is to be fulfilled. In Jesus, the Lord has come to his people, to be the Good Shepherd, and to meet their needs in a way that the earthly leaders have signally failed to do.

## Day 16: Mark 6.45-56

*Immediately he made his disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, to Bethsaida, while he dismissed the crowd. After saying farewell to them, he went up on the mountain to pray.*

*When evening came, the boat was out on the lake, and he was alone on the land. When he saw that they were straining at the oars against an adverse wind, he came towards them early in the morning, walking on the lake. He intended to pass them by. But when they saw him walking on the lake, they thought it was a ghost and cried out; for they all saw him and were terrified. But immediately he spoke to them and said, 'Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.' Then he got into the boat with them and the wind ceased. And they were utterly astounded, for they did not understand about the loaves, but their hearts were hardened.*

*When they had crossed over, they came to land at Gennesaret and moored the boat. When they got out of the boat, people at once recognized him, and rushed about that whole region and began to bring the sick on mats to wherever they heard he was. And wherever he went, into villages or cities or farms, they laid the sick in the market-places, and begged him that they might touch even the fringe of his cloak; and all who touched it were healed.*

### Reflection

Fear comes in different forms. Most obviously, there is the fear that comes from jeopardy, when we are facing a clear and present danger, a threat to our survival. That was the type of fear the disciples had in a previous passage, when the boat on which they were sailing was becoming overwhelmed by the wind and waves of a mighty storm. The situation in this reading is less drastic - we are simply told that they were struggling to row against an adverse wind – but it would be understandable if the disciples still felt a measure of that kind of fear. This wind may well worsen.

But there is another kind of fear, that is sometimes called the fear of the uncanny. It is the fear that arises when we are confronted by something that is so far beyond our experience or understanding that we cannot properly process it within a rational framework. This is the kind of fear that the disciples feel when they first glimpse Jesus walking on the water of the lake towards them. No wonder they react by thinking they are seeing a ghost. Human beings, made of flesh and blood, can't walk on water. Can they?

Just as Jesus once spoke to still the storm, so now he utters the words to calm their fears: 'Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.' The command not to be afraid is one that is often uttered by angels when they appear to men and women in the Gospels. Think of the angel Gabriel to Mary at the annunciation (Luke 1.30), or the angel to the shepherds in the field outside Bethlehem (Luke 2.10). Fear is a natural reaction to the breaking in of the unknown, when the powers of heaven touch earth; but we need not be afraid.

The disciples are astounded; but Mark suggests they really shouldn't be. Have they not already seen enough in Jesus, at the feeding of the five thousand, or the stilling of the storm, to mean that this latest incident should not take them by surprise? Apparently not. The disciples are shown as rather slow on the uptake. Perhaps that can be a comfort to ourselves as well, when we don't quite get things the first time round.

## Day 17: Mark 7.1-23

*Now when the Pharisees and some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem gathered around him, they noticed that some of his disciples were eating with defiled hands, that is, without washing them. (For the Pharisees, and all the Jews, do not eat unless they thoroughly wash their hands, thus observing the tradition of the elders; and they do not eat anything from the market unless they wash it; and there are also many other traditions that they observe, the washing of cups, pots, and bronze kettles.) So the Pharisees and the scribes asked him, Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?' He said to them, 'Isaiah prophesied rightly about you hypocrites, as it is written,*

*"This people honours me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me;  
in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines."*

*You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition.'*

*Then he said to them, 'You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God in order to keep your tradition! For Moses said, "Honour your father and your mother"; and "Whoever speaks evil of father or mother must surely die." But you say that if anyone tells father or mother, "Whatever support you might have had from me is Corban" (that is, an offering to God) – then you no longer permit doing anything for a father or a mother, thus making void the word of God through your tradition that you have handed on. And you do many things like this.'*

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

*When he had left the crowd and entered the house, his disciples asked him about the parable. He said to them, 'Then do you also fail to understand? Do you not see that whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile, since it enters, not the heart but the stomach, and goes out into the sewer?' (This he declared all foods clean.) And he said, 'It is what comes out of a person that defiles. For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person.'*

### Reflection

Wash your hands before eating. When you buy fruit and vegetables, clean them with fresh water before eating them. Both are sensible pieces of advice that I, for one, was taught as a child by my mother, and the importance of which has been reinforced during the present pandemic. Hand and food hygiene matters.

So we might well wonder what, if anything, the Pharisees were doing wrong in being so scrupulous about washing hands, food, and utensils. It sounds like good practice. The ritual washing demanded by the Pharisees should not be seen as the same thing as the kind of handwashing which we are encouraged to practise to reduce the transmission of disease. In the traditions kept by the Pharisees, washing was not primarily intended to remove dirt or germs from people's hands (though it may well have had that benefit), but to make them holy.

Jesus is not saying that the Pharisees are wrong to observe these things; his criticism is of the contrast between the attention they give to the external practices of ritual cleansing, and the inward

matters of the heart. He draws a distinction between ‘the traditions of the elders’, which focus on outward purity, and the commandments of God, which go much deeper and further.

Even in a secular context, we sometimes talk about people doing certain activities such as hand-washing “religiously”. That can be meant both positively and negatively. To wash our hands religiously before meals might simply mean habitually, regularly, constantly. At its best, it may be an activity that we carry out carefully and prayerfully. At its worst, to do things “religiously” is to do them superstitiously or self-righteously.

Jesus’ criticism of the Pharisees and their scrupulous observance of the traditions around handwashing is based on his perception that they are being “religious” in the worst sense. The rules are being used as a way to bolster themselves and to criticise others. True religion looks not to judge others, according to whether or not they keep to the outward rules, but looks inward to our own heart. What do we see there? Whether or not we have clean hands, do we have pure hearts?

### **Day 18: Mark 7.24-37**

*From there he set out and went away to the region of Tyre. He entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there. Yet he could not escape notice, but a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet. Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophoenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. He said to her, ‘Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.’ But she answered him, ‘Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.’ Then he said to her, ‘For saying that, you may go – the demon has left your daughter.’ So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.*

*Then he returned from the region of Tyre, and went by way of Sidon towards the Sea of Galilee, in the region of the Decapolis. They brought to him a deaf man who had an impediment in his speech; and they begged him to lay his hand on him. He took him aside in private, away from the crowd, and put his fingers into his ears, and he spat and touched his tongue. Then looking up to heaven, he sighed and said to him, ‘Ephphatha’, that is, ‘Be opened.’ And immediately his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly. The Jesus ordered them to tell no one; but the more he ordered them, the more zealously they proclaimed it. They were astounded beyond measure, saying, ‘He has done everything well; he even makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak.’*

### **Reflection**

A theme which links these two incidents is that of the importance of having a voice. The first story tells of a woman who, in Mark’s account, is nameless. However, she is not voiceless, despite being both a woman and a Gentile, two categories of people whose voices were rarely heard or recognised in first century Israel. Indeed she uses her voice to remarkable effect. When Jesus responds to her request for her daughter to be healed with words that appear to be an insulting dismissal, this Gentile woman is prepared to answer back. She turns the derogatory contrast of “children” and “dogs” on its head with a witty and sharp riposte: ‘even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs’. Jesus acknowledges that reply as evidence of her courage and her faith. declaring, ‘For saying that, you may go’. Her request is granted. This remarkable woman, who refused to silently and submissively accept her status as an outsider, speaks up to powerful effect. She will not be excluded. She will not be voiceless.

The second story speaks of a person who is initially voiceless in a more literal and physical way. Others have to beg Jesus on his behalf. Jesus responds to their requests and his healing touch on the man who was deaf and mute has the effect that 'his tongue was released and he spoke plainly'. He is given a voice. Others also discover a voice, as (despite Jesus' instructions) they go out and proclaim the good news, of this one through whom the deaf hear and the mute speak.

The twin stories in Mark's Gospel present us with a challenge. Are we listening to those whom our society dismisses as voiceless? Do we allow those who experience exclusion to speak, or do we contribute further to their silencing? And if we have a voice, how will we use it, and on whose behalf?

### **Day 19: Mark 8.1-26**

*In those days when there was again a great crowd without anything to eat, he called his disciples and said to them, 'I have compassion for the crowd, because they have been with me now for three days and have nothing to eat. If I send them away hungry to their homes, they will faint on the way – and some of them have come from a great distance.' His disciples replied, 'How can one feed these people with bread here in the desert?' He asked them, 'How many loaves do you have?' They said, 'Seven.' Then he ordered the crowd to sit down on the ground; and he took the seven loaves, and after giving thanks he broke them and gave them to his disciples to distribute; and they distributed them to the crowd. They had also a few small fish; and after blessing them, he ordered that these too should be distributed. They ate and were filled; and they took up the broken pieces left over, seven baskets full. Now there were about four thousand people. And he sent them away. And immediately he got into the boat with his disciples and went to the district of Dalmanutha.*

*The Pharisees came and began to argue with him, asking him for a sign from heaven, to test him. And he sighed deeply in his spirit and said, 'Why does this generation ask for a sign? Truly I tell you, no sign will be given to this generation.' And he left them, and getting into the boat again, he went across to the other side.*

*Now the disciples had forgotten to bring any bread; and they had only one loaf with them in the boat. And he cautioned them, saying, 'Watch out – beware of the yeast of the Pharisees and the yeast of Herod.' They said to one another, 'It is because we have no bread.' And becoming aware of it, Jesus said to them, 'Why are you talking about having no bread? Do you still not perceive or understand? Are your hearts hardened? Do you have eyes, and fail to see? Do you have ears, and fail to hear? And do you not remember? When I broke the five loaves for the five thousand, how many baskets full of broken pieces did you collect? They said to him, 'Twelve.' And the seven for the four thousand, how many baskets full of broken pieces did you collect?' And they said to him, 'Seven.' Then he said to them, 'Do you not yet understand?'*

*They came to Bethsaida. Some people brought a blind man to him and begged him to touch him. He took the blind man by the hand and led him out of the village; and when he had put saliva on his eyes and laid his hands on him, he asked him, 'Can you see anything?' And the man looked up and said, 'I can see people, but they look like trees walking.' Then Jesus laid his hands on his eyes again; and he looked intently and his sight was restored, and he saw everything clearly. Then he sent him away to his home, saying, 'Do not even go into the village.'*

## Reflection

If you have been following through these readings from the Gospel of Mark each day, you would be forgiven for thinking, on reading today's passage, 'Hang on! Haven't we heard this story already? Have I made a mistake?' But no. There is no mistake. Other than a change in the numbers (of people in the crowd, of loaves of bread, of baskets of fragments remaining), the account of the feeding of the four thousand here in chapter eight is remarkably similar to that of the feeding of the five thousand in chapter six.

The amount of repetition is such that it was once fashionable for some biblical scholars to think that Mark had made a mistake, and that he inadvertently included two different versions of the same incident. But the author of the Gospel has not made a mistake either, as is clear from Jesus' questions to the disciples, about how many baskets of pieces were collected on each occasion. It is a deliberate decision to recount both of these parallel episodes, for a reason.

Part of that reason seems to be to emphasise how slow the disciples are to understand. Jesus speaks to them in what sounds like the tone of a frustrated teacher who is wondering quite what they have to do to make the lesson plain to these dim-witted pupils. There is an element of ironic humour when the disciples in the boat think that Jesus' talk about the "yeast" of the Pharisees and of Herod is a reference to literal bread. They just don't get it. Jesus asks 'Do you have eyes, and fail to see?'

It is surely no accident that this failure of comprehension is then followed by the story of the healing of a blind man. Here, somebody who previously could not see is enabled to do so. What is unusual in this healing story is that it takes part in two stages. After the initial act of healing, the man has partial sight; he can make out the shapes of people, but they look 'like trees walking'. Only after a second dose are we told that he can see clearly.

The suggestion that Mark is subtly making is that the disciples likewise only come to faith partially and gradually. They have some understanding of who Jesus is, but as yet that understanding is flawed and sketchy. Much will need to happen before they come to see clearly who it is that they are following.

### Day 20: Mark 8.27-9.1

*Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and on the way he asked his disciples, 'Who do people say that I am?' And they answered him, 'John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.' He asked them, 'But who do you say that I am?' Peter answered him, 'You are the Messiah.' And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him.*

*Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. he said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, 'Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.'*

*He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, 'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life*

*will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? Those who are ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.’ And he said to them, ‘Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see that the kingdom of God has come with power.’*

## **Reflection**

We have reached the midpoint in our journey through the Gospel according to St Mark, and with it a distinct shift in its direction and emphasis. The first half of the Gospel has offered an often frenetic picture of Jesus’ activity, mostly in and around the villages and towns near Lake Galilee. Through teaching in the synagogues, healing the sick, casting out demons, stilling the storm, walking on water, and feeding the hungry, Jesus has demonstrated a God-given power and authority. His actions have prompted both favourable and hostile responses, but friend and foe alike have, in astonishment, asked themselves the question, ‘Who is this?’ Here, at Caesarea Philippi, Jesus invites his followers to look back on all they have seen and heard so far, and ask themselves the same question.

The question is posed in two ways, of which the first is the safest to answer. ‘Who do people say that I am?’ The disciples need do no more than report back the opinions expressed by others. If the answers are wrong, it is not their fault. They are just saying what they’ve heard. The second phrasing of the question is more personal and therefore more risky: ‘But who do you say that I am?’ It is a question that is not just asking for an opinion, but for a commitment. It is Peter who is bold enough to venture a reply: ‘You are the Messiah.’

A striking feature of Mark’s account of this conversation is that Jesus never says whether any of the answers given are right or wrong. Peter is not corrected for calling Jesus Messiah, but neither (unlike in Matthew’s later version of this exchange) is he commended either. Instead, he is given the injunction to tell this to no one.

However, the continuation of the conversation suggests that, if Peter has got it right, he has only got it partially right; and he now gets it spectacularly wrong. Jesus foretells his coming suffering and death, an outcome that Peter is unable to contemplate, or square with his expectations of a messiah. Surely the Messiah would be a powerful, all-conquering figure. God would never allow his anointed saviour and ruler to be crucified.

But this is the hardest lesson to learn. The way of the kingdom is and can only be by the way of the cross. Only through suffering can Jesus bring salvation, and only through taking up their own cross can his disciples truly follow him. From now on, the Gospel will be directed towards the culmination of Christ’s work at Calvary. But even that will not be the end. In his haste to dismiss the thought of Jesus’ passion, Peter doesn’t even seem to have registered the final phrase in Jesus’ foretelling of what will happen. He will be killed “and after three days rise again”.

## Day 21: Mark 9.2-13

*Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain apart, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them. And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus. Then Peter said to Jesus, 'Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, one for Elijah.' He did not know what to say, for they were terrified. Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, 'This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!' Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them any more, but only Jesus.*

*As they were coming down the mountain, he ordered them to tell no one about what they had seen, until after the Son of man had risen from the dead. So they kept the matter to themselves, questioning what this rising from the dead could mean. Then they asked him, 'Why do the scribes say that Elijah must come first?' He said to them, 'Elijah is indeed coming first to restore all things. How then is it written about the Son of Man, that he is to go through many sufferings and be treated with contempt? But I tell you that Elijah has come, and they did to him whatever they pleased, as it is written about him.'*

### Reflection

Having been rebuked by Jesus as "Satan" in the previous passage, for seeking to dissuade his master from embracing the way of the cross, Peter is again subjected to something of a put down here. He has blurted out the first thing that came into his mind in response to what he has seen on the mountain top, an offer to build dwellings for Jesus, Moses and Elijah, and in response hears the command from on high: "This is my Son, the Beloved: listen to him!". We can, I am sure, sympathise with Peter; he is caught up in an experience way beyond his understanding or imagination.

On the mountain top, earth and heaven can seem very close together. The air is thin, and maybe this is what is sometimes called "a thin place". But past and present also seem to collapse into one. The presence of Moses and Elijah reminds us of mountain top experiences in the Old Testament. Moses received the ten commandments on Mount Sinai, and coming down from the mountain his own face was shining, reflecting the glory of God that he had witnessed. Elijah, who had triumphed over the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel, was also then taken to a mountain where he was assured of God's presence and power through the "still, small voice".

Moses and Elijah can be seen as representing "the law and the prophets"; their presence on the Mount of Transfiguration may be a way of demonstrating that Jesus is the fulfilment of the revelation that had come to Israel in the past. In words that may bring this incident to mind, an unnamed New Testament writer begins a letter by declaring, "Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds. He is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being." (Hebrews 1.1-3) Through Jesus and in Jesus, God speaks a living word to us. No wonder we, like Peter, are summoned to "Listen to him!"

## Day 22: Mark 9.14-29

*When they came to the disciples, they saw a great crowd around them, and some scribes arguing with them. When the whole crowd saw him, they were immediately overcome with awe, and they ran forward to greet him. He asked them, 'What are you arguing about with them?' Someone from the crowd answered him, 'Teacher, I brought you my son; he has a spirit that makes him unable to speak; and whenever it seizes him, it dashes him down; and he foams and grinds his teeth and becomes rigid; and I asked your disciples to cast it out, but they could not do so.' He answered them, 'You faithless generation, how much longer must I be among you? How much longer must I put up with you? Bring him to me.' And they brought the boy to him. When the spirit saw him, immediately it threw the boy into convulsions, and he fell on the ground and rolled about, foaming at the mouth. Jesus asked the father, 'How long has this been happening to him?' And he said, 'From childhood. It has often cast him into the fire and into the water, to destroy him; but if you are able to do anything, have pity on us and help us.' Jesus said to him, 'If you are able! – All things can be done for the one who believes.' Immediately the father of the child cried out, 'I believe; help my unbelief!' When Jesus saw that a crowd came running together, he rebuked the unclean spirit, saying to it, 'You spirit that keep this boy from speaking and hearing, I command you, come out of him, and never enter him again!' After crying out and convulsing him terribly, it came out, and the boy was like a corpse, so that most of them said, 'He is dead.' But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him up, and he was able to stand. When he had entered the house, his disciples asked him privately, 'Why could we not cast it out?' He said to them, 'This kind can come out only through prayer.'*

### Reflection

It is not clear quite how long Jesus had spent on the Mount of Transfiguration with Peter, James and John, but it was long enough for his absence to be felt. The remaining members of the twelve have been seeking to continue the apostolic ministry of healing and casting out unclean spirits, but they have struggled without success to bring the help needed for one particularly troubled young man. The master achieves what his apprentices have failed to achieve, and healing comes to the boy, whose symptoms appear to be similar to those of what we would describe as epilepsy.

It is hard not to hear a note of frustration, even annoyance, in Jesus' words after he has been told of the disciples' failure to cast out the unclean spirit. It is not clear whether it is the disciples themselves or the wider crowd who are being referred to as the "faithless generation", but a link is certainly established between faith and healing. There are echoes of the situation in Jesus' hometown, where we are told that he could do very few deeds of power because of the lack of faith of the local residents. In each case, Jesus expresses shock and surprise at their unbelief.

There are occasions in the Gospel when people approach Jesus with what seems to be complete confidence that he has the power to deliver what they ask of him. The father of the boy in this story does not quite fall into that category, but perhaps in a way that enables us to identify with him more readily. He hopes that Jesus can heal his son; but he doesn't know for sure. "If you are able to do anything, have pity on us and help us." Jesus picks up on that "if", and calls the man to a firmer, more confident faith: "All things can be done for the one who believes." The tension, which many experience, between faith and doubt, is encapsulated in the man's fervent protestation and prayer: "I believe; help my unbelief!"

If that is where we are, caught on the cusp between doubt and faith, then we are in good company. Jesus hears the prayers of the child's father, and both delivers his son from the unclean spirit but also the man himself from his remaining unbelief.