

# The Gospel According to Saint Mark



Bible Notes  
April – June 2010

50p

April 1<sup>st</sup> (Maundy Thursday)

Mark 1 v1

Today Jewish people celebrate the Passover. They recall that God set their ancestors free from Egyptian slavery. More than that, they affirm their identity as Jews. They are the same people whom God freed from slavery. They have, they believe, a covenant with God which requires that they are obedient to the Law (Torah) and God promises to be their God.

This is what Jesus was celebrating with His disciples at the Last Supper. They were all Jewish people, marking and affirming their identity as the people of God. Maybe Mark was there. (Some people think he was the young man who ran away naked from Gethsemane.) Certainly, Peter was there and perhaps it was Peter who told Mark the story of Jesus.

The Good News, the Gospel, is that God is the God of all peoples - Jews and Gentiles alike. What is required of us is faith. The faithful are liberated from slavery to sin and death. They live in love, the new commandment Jesus gave us, the commandment which sums up the Torah. We are the people of the new covenant.

April 2<sup>nd</sup> (Good Friday)

Mark 1 v1

Good News, Good Friday. People ask why today is called “Good Friday” when such a horrible thing happened today as the Crucifixion of the Son of God. Yesterday, the Jews celebrated the Old Covenant. Today, Jesus fulfils the Old Covenant and brings the New Covenant into effect. Today He opens the Kingdom of Heaven to all believers. Today Jesus takes all evil on Himself and overcomes all the power of evil by the divine love. Today is indeed Good Friday.

April 3<sup>rd</sup> (Holy Saturday)

Mark 1v1

A bit of a slow beginning this quarter because I wanted to put Mark’s Gospel in the context of the events we are celebrating this weekend. On this quieter today, we’ll do some of the academic stuff. Traditionally, this Gospel has been regarded as the work of the John Mark we encounter in Acts. He knew Paul and travelled with him. He was very close to Peter and it has been thought that Peter provided Mark with the

material for this Gospel. More recently, many scholars have inclined to the view that the sayings and stories about Jesus circulated independently and mainly orally for three or four decades prior to their being written down in Gospel form. If this is so, we would not expect Mark to have had just one source such as Peter. Nor would the Gospel necessarily be the work of a well known person like Mark, close to the apostles.

Matthew, Mark and Luke tell the same stories in such similar words that they must be connected in some way. Most scholars believe that Matthew and Luke used Mark (or at least a version of Mark) as a source for their own writing. Some scholars, however, think that Mark abbreviated Matthew and that Matthew was first. I have seen it suggested (but not by any recent writer) that Matthew, Mark and Luke all drew independently on a pre-existing oral tradition.

In recent times, Mark has been a lot of people's favourite Gospel. It is the shortest and (at a superficial level) the simplest. Scholars generally believe it is closest to Jesus. Traditionally, Matthew was preferred for the history of Jesus because it was believed to be by Matthew the apostle. Many people like Luke because he seems more sympathetic to our concern for the poor and the place of women. For many centuries, John has been regarded as the "spiritual" Gospel and the one to read really to deepen your faith.

There is a lot we don't know about the Gospels and where they come from. They are, however, Good News, Holy Scripture, the Word of God in writing, bearing witness to the Word of God made flesh.

Like all Holy Scripture they are inspired by God for our learning and we ought (please excuse the pun) to *read, mark, learn and inwardly digest them*.

April 4<sup>th</sup> (Easter Day)

Mark 1 v1

Mark's Gospel is the Good News of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. According to St Paul, Jesus is declared to be the Son of God by the Resurrection. Mary and the shepherds knew that first Christmas. He

was acclaimed Son of God by God at His Baptism and Transfiguration. Peter recognised Him as the Son of God at Caesarea Philippi. The centurion at the crucifixion knew it. The high priest thought this was blasphemy. But at Easter, Jesus rises from the dead and all authority is given to Him in heaven and earth and this Gospel is to be proclaimed to the whole of creation. And so we celebrate today.

April 5<sup>th</sup>

Mark 1 v2

John the Baptist prepares the way for Jesus. The Kingdom of God is at hand. The Kingdom of God is always at hand. Judgment hangs over the sinner. Jesus is always standing at the door knocking, ready to enter the trembling heart, ready to come into the house, prepared to come into this Church, this village, this nation, this world. Jesus is always imminent and His Advent is always at hand.

*Prepare the Way of the Lord.* Are we ready to receive Him? What do we do to prepare the world to receive Him? Today is the day of the Easter Egg Hunt. Will the people who come find Jesus among us and will they experience him as Good News if they do?

April 6<sup>th</sup>

Mark 1 vv 3&4

The Gospel story is the story of God's people. It is a story which begins with Genesis, when God makes heaven and earth and all human beings in His own image. It focuses on Adam and his son Seth. It condenses on Noah and the descendents of Shem. Then Abraham and his son Isaac. Jacob is chosen over Esau. The sons of Jacob (=Israel) are set free from slavery in Egypt. Moses is their leader and law-giver, David their king. There are priests and prophets. It is a continuing story of God's relationship with humanity – a wideness in God's mercy which encompasses humankind, a focussing down to the one man, Jesus Christ, the quintessence of Israel, the epitome of humanity, opening up to incorporate once again the whole world, as was always God's intention.

This is why the New Testament always tells its story in the context of the Old Testament. It is the same story, the story of God's relation to His Creation.

April 7<sup>th</sup>

Mark 1 v5

I am always struck by the contrast between the way the crowds flock to see John (and Jesus) and the indifference we encounter today. People ask how did we make Jesus (of all people!) boring? And we have to admit there has been much in the history of the Church to put people off. There is quite possibly a lot in our own church today which puts people off. But I cannot accept the fact that the fault is all on our side.

If people really cared about the Christian message, I cannot see how they would be put off Church because the Church wasn't perfect. If they really thought that Jesus was Good News for them, would they stay away because they didn't like the form of service, the choice of hymns, the vicar or the time of day the service is held? If they really thought the Christian faith mattered, would they rank worship as less important than catching up on the housework or going to football practice or shopping?

Perhaps people haven't changed so much, however. There might have been crowds of thousands when Jesus was popular, fashionable, the latest thing. But He didn't have many friends when He hung on the Cross.

April 8<sup>th</sup>

Mark 1 v6

A prophet is a messenger of God. In the ancient world, when many people were illiterate, a messenger memorised the message and told the recipient what the sender had said. A prophet was someone who received the Word of God and told the recipients – the people in general, the king, general or priest – what God was saying to them. Being the Word of God, the prophets' message was not "mere words". The Word effects what it declares.

In a way Elijah is representative of all the Old Testament prophets and he is seen as the harbinger of the coming of God's Kingdom. That is why a seat is reserved for Elijah at the Passover. John is the last of the Old Testament prophets and the harbinger of God's Kingdom coming in Jesus. His dress symbolises his fulfilment of Elijah's role.

April 9<sup>th</sup>

Mark 1 vv 7&8

There was no such thing as Baptism before the time of John. There were various ritual washings, but they were not the same thing as Baptism. Some of the symbolism of Baptism is obvious. Evidently water cleanses and Baptism in response to repentance both symbolises and effects the washing away of sin. Water is necessary for life and we might think about Ezekiel's vision of a river of life flowing from the Jerusalem Temple to make the desert bloom and produce fruit for food and medicines for healing. Passing through the waters of the Red Sea was also a common experience for the people of Israel. It initiated their pilgrimage through the wilderness to the Promised Land. It was something all Israel shared. Pharaoh's pursuing army perished in the Red Sea. Water may destroy and Baptism is indicative of judgment. It divides believers from unbelievers, sheep from goats, redeemed Israelites from slave master Egyptians. It was through the waters of this same River Jordan that Joshua (the Hebrew form of the name Jesus) led the Israelites into the Promised Land when their forty years in the desert were complete. Water also supports. Boats are supported by water as Noah's Ark was born up on the waters of the Flood. In the Ark, God's people were saved, but the violent and profane people drowned.

All these ideas are possible when we think about John's Baptism, but, wonderful as all this, John is not worthy to unloose the shoes of the One Who will baptise with the Holy Ghost. What must that Baptism mean! It means everything we have said so far about water baptism and infinitely more so.

April 10<sup>th</sup>

Mark 1 vv 9-11

John baptises Jesus. The Holy Spirit is seen to come upon Jesus. God acknowledges Jesus as His Son.

Christians are baptised in Christ. We receive the Holy Spirit. God adopts us as His children. None of us lives up to that inheritance and many baptised people don't seem even to care. It's better, however, to pray for grace to be more Christ-like ourselves than to condemn others for their failures. Our example and our prayers may be their best hope of coming into their inheritance as the children of God.

April 11<sup>th</sup>

Mark 1 vv 12&13

Mark says no more about Jesus' forty days in the wilderness than this. You have to read Matthew and Luke for the details of the temptations. There is an obvious parallel with the 40 years the Israelites spent in the wilderness after their Baptism in the Red Sea. There is also a link with keeping forty days in Lent – originally a preparation for Baptism – and now a preparation for Easter for all of the baptised. You sometimes need peace from the bustle of the world to come to terms with yourself and with God. We need space in our lives. It is good also to escape the tyranny of material things and of the body's needs and desires, if (necessarily) only for a limited time. I think we need such space on a regular basis throughout our lives – a Sabbath rest each week for worship and recreation; time each day for prayer, meditation, Bible study etc.; a yearly rhythm in which certain Christian feasts like Easter, Christmas, Ascension, Whitsun are allowed the room to replace work, shopping and entertainment in our daily routine. I think also that, like Jesus, we might sometimes need such space to prepare for new phases of our lives, new tasks, new responsibilities.

People will tell you they haven't got time, but haven't they really? We all make time for the things we really want to do. Isn't it the case that we are really afraid to *Be still and know that I am God*, because in our heart of hearts we don't really want to know?

April 12<sup>th</sup>

Mark 1 v14

If things going according to plan, I should be back today from a conference in Edinburgh "Is Religion Natural?" We shall be analysing what it is that makes individuals and human cultures religious. I guess it will be quite complex and a lot of it will very likely be beyond me. It will, however, do me good. It will be a break from what I usually do. I shall mix with different people and get some fresh ideas. So it will fulfil for me some of what I wrote for yesterday that people need – a time to get away, a time to contemplate matters of faith. I hope also, however, that going away like this will make me fitter to preach the Gospel of God's Kingdom when I come back. Our time with God isn't merely selfish, to make us better people. Our becoming better people is good for everyone we meet.

April 13<sup>th</sup>

Mark 1 v15

*The time is fulfilled.* What does that mean? Is it that the Old Testament has now run its course and so the New Testament can begin? Is it that the Roman Empire with its well built roads and efficient police service created an opportunity for worldwide mission which had not existed before and would not exist for many centuries after the fall of Rome? Is it that Rome in its conquest of the Holy Land had fulfilled a quota of wickedness such that God had at last to intervene? I'm not sure what Mark means or what Jesus meant at the time by saying *The time is fulfilled.* I do believe this, however. The Kingdom of God is always at hand. The time to repent and believe is always now. It is always time for you and me to repent and believe and it is time for those friends and neighbours whom we long to see come to faith. There is no excuse and no reason for delaying an answer to God's call.

April 14<sup>th</sup>

Mark 1 vv 16-18

*And straightway they forsook their nets and followed him.* They didn't say they'd get right with God when they'd finished college. They didn't say that they would explore religion when they were a bit less busy. They didn't say they'd have more time for Church when the children were off hand. When we make excuses for not doing something important now, the reality is often that we never will get round to it. We might kid ourselves that we will one day, but what we really mean is we won't. If the Christian faith is true, it demands our absolute commitment. If we hold back, it can only be because we don't really have faith and we don't think that the question of faith matters.

Almighty God, who didst give such grace unto thy holy Apostle Saint Andrew, that he readily obeyed the calling of thy Son Jesus Christ, and followed him without delay; Grant unto us all, that we, being called by thy holy Word, may forthwith give up ourselves obediently to fulfil thy holy commandments; through the same Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.



April 15<sup>th</sup>

Mark 1 vv 19&20

This is where a lot of us would get uneasy about Mark's Gospel and the Jesus he portrays. (Some people indeed say that the Jesus they believe in wouldn't do and say the things reported of Him in the New Testament. I'd like to know what other source of information they have about Jesus. I believe what they are really saying is that the real Jesus is too much for them and so they have made up a more comfortable Jesus to suit what they believe to be their own needs.) But it troubles us that John and James apparently abandon their father to follow Jesus. For most of us, family loyalty is an important part of religion. *Honour thy father and thy mother* is one of the Ten Commandments. Later on, Jesus Himself will castigate those who use religion as an excuse for neglecting their parents. Where faith and family conflict, however, we generally prefer family and we do not like fanatics who turn their backs on their families for the sake of their religion. We go out with our children rather than go to church. We marry the girl we love even if she is not of our faith. We consider it irresponsible if people make wills more generous to charities than to their children. Religion is an optional extra in most people's lives whereas family always comes first.

Normally, as implied above, our religious duty includes our duty to our families. Zebedee is not a helpless old man being left alone by his grown up sons. He seems to be hale and hearty and working on the boat and he is not alone because they have servants. It is possible that he was disappointed that they abandoned the family business; they did not, however, leave him destitute. Where faith does conflict with family, however, it is to our faith that our loyalty lies. If, for example, parents of another religion try to prevent a son or daughter from converting to Christianity, the child's duty is clear – whatever the cost.

For most of us, however, the conflict (if there is one) is nothing like as sharp as that. Sometimes indeed I think family commitments are an excuse for withdrawing from religious duty. It would not be unreasonable to tell most families that God comes first in your life and that your love for them is all one with your love for God. It would be more loving to your family to insist on following your religion and a better witness to them than to capitulate to their secular ideas.

April 16<sup>th</sup>

Mark 1 vv 21 & 22

Jesus taught with authority. He spoke plainly. He said what He meant. People might not like what they heard. They might not always understand but Jesus always spoke the truth because He is the truth.

The scribes were like lawyers. They were learned and sincere, but their guidance was advice hedged about by qualifications. They didn't speak on their own authority. They interpreted the Law. But Jesus is the Law.

Christian preachers and teachers must speak with the authority of Jesus – an authority based both on a thorough knowledge of the Bible and its interpretation in the Church and on a personal relationship with Jesus Christ.

April 17<sup>th</sup>

Mark 1 vv 23 & 24

One of the surprising features of the Gospel is that the demons know very well who Jesus is, whereas human beings fail to recognise Him. Demons know Him and fear Him because they know that He will destroy every manifestation of evil. Human beings are not, however, like demons inevitably on the path to destruction. Neither are human beings like the good angels who apparently effortlessly worship God for ever. Human beings are called to choose the one path or the other. That is hard and we do anything to evade the choice.

April 18<sup>th</sup>

Mark 1 vv 25-27

We have a new and authoritative teacher preaching at our services today. He is Simon Burton-Jones, our new archdeacon. I doubt if he will be casting out any demons. But the authentic proclamation of the Gospel is always with power. Charismatics and Pentecostals say we should regularly expect to see miracles. I am not so sure of that. I believe that God generally acts in accordance with the normal laws of nature. I would never say, however, that miracles are impossible. Nothing is impossible to God. But whatever works – medicine, prayer, the laying on of hands, surgery, anointing with oil, inoculations – it is all by the power of God and to be received with thankfulness. But Christians do act with authority Christ gave His Church.

April 19<sup>th</sup>

Mark 1 vv 28-31

As soon as she was well, Peter's mother in law got up and got on with her work. That is how it should be. Sometimes we set up a kind of co-dependency. Priests, doctors, social workers, politicians, we all need to be needed. We collude in relationships with parishioners, patients, clients and the public at large so that they remain dependent on us and we feel needed. The point of pastoral care, however, healing, support and a legislative framework is to enable people to fulfil their full potential. Society is not about depending on the professionals. It is about every member using his or her gifts and opportunities for the common weal.

April 20<sup>th</sup>

Mark 1 vv 32-34

At even, ere the sun was set,  
The sick, O Lord, around thee lay;  
O in what divers pains they met!  
O with what joy they went away!

Seldom singing Evensong, we miss all these wonderful evening hymns. Hymns reflect the faith of the people who composed them and the hymns that become popular in the Church and get passed down from generation to generation are the ones which resonate with other people's experience of God. Good hymns are Bible based and an honest reflection of our contemporary encounter with God. It is always worth thinking about the words of the hymns we sing. Well chosen tunes express the same faith in a non-verbal manner. Hymns all to be done well and thoughtfully.

Thy touch has still its ancient power;  
No word from thee can fruitless fall:  
Hear, in this solemn evening hour,  
And in thy mercy heal us all.

April 21<sup>st</sup>

Mark 1 vv 35-39

Committed to a locality or moving on? In the Church of England the theory has been that the vicar makes a long term commitment to the parish. In fact a vicar's job is sometimes called a *living*. Until 30 years

ago, there was no provision for retirement. Once ordained priest, a man is a priest for life, just as a married man is married *till death us do part*. A priest was not expected to retire unless he became too ill or frail to officiate. It was thought rather bad form to seek preferment, ambitiously to look for a better *living* in another parish. The vicar was part of the community. His family also had their part to play. It was a commitment.

In recent decades, this has somewhat changed. Families (especially wives) are no longer expected to define their own lives with reference to the *pater familias*. The advent of women vicars alters the dynamic again. (Nobody expects the vicar's husband to organise the church flowers or to reach a comforting arm round a troubled parishioner.) People in general move much more often than they used to. It is rarer to live in the same place all your life. And it is no longer true that people shop, work and enjoy themselves within a short distance of their homes. Communities are much more fluid than they used to be. It is now considered normal for vicars to think in terms of a career, holding several different positions between ordination and retirement. This process reflects and is encouraged by the replacement of the parson's freehold (a job for life if I want it) with common tenure (the vicar's position contingent on keeping the boxes ticked).

I am saddened by this trend and I suspect that many of you are too. But some people think it is positive. The vicar does not so much take a role in the community he joins at his injunction; he is a professional come to do a job on and for that parish and then he moves on, perhaps to be replaced by someone with different gifts, perhaps leaving lay leadership to run the parish.

In the Gospel, Jesus doesn't stay in one place. He moves from village to village. Should clergy be more like Jesus in this respect? Or was the ministry of Jesus different? After all, Jesus is present in every community everywhere where people meet in His Name. I feel strongly that, as a priest, I want to be part of the community, me committed to you, you committed to me.

April 22<sup>nd</sup>

Mark 1 vv 40-45

This is *the Gospel of Jesus Christ the Son of God*. Mark reveals Jesus as the Son of God in these stories about healing, cleansing and casting out evil, as well as some (but not much, compared with the other gospels) record of His teaching. He is explicitly recognised as the divine Son at His Baptism, Transfiguration and Crucifixion – the last occasion being the confession of a Roman centurion. As we say *You reveal the power of your love made perfect in our human weakness*.

Healing the disease the Bible calls leprosy is special because it rendered the sufferer ritually unclean. They were cut off from family, friends and the life of the community. It is special that Jesus touches the leper and special that He heals him. Jesus reaches out to absolutely everybody, including the disgusting outsider. So should the people who claim to follow Him.

April 23<sup>rd</sup>

Mark 2 vv 1-12

This is a good story. We are touched by the perseverance of the paralysed man's friends. We enjoy the bit about making a hole in the roof. (What did the owner of the house think?) We are indignant at the blindness of the people who question Jesus' authority. But what is the focus of the story? First of all, it seems that it is more important that the man's sins should be forgiven than that he should regain the use of his legs. The question though, really, is the question of authority. Who is Jesus to forgive sins? Only God can forgive sins. Jesus says *the Son of man hath power on earth to forgive sins*, but who is the Son of man? Surely Jesus means Himself when He speaks about the *Son of man* – though not all scholars even agree so far. In the Old Testament *son of man* is usually just a fancy poetic way of saying *man* or *human being*. In the Book of Daniel, however, the *Son of man* is a figure who represents the whole people of God before the eternal Throne. If Jesus is the *Son of man*, does that mean simply that He is a human being or that He is the human being Who represents all the people of God, potentially the whole human race? I think we can use the phrase *son of man* in both these senses when we speak about Jesus. And so it is that He can forgive sin - being both God and man - and His Church, as His Body, is tasked with proclaiming His forgiveness to the world.

April 24<sup>th</sup>

Mark 2 vv 13-15

Levi (better known as Matthew) is new to the Church. He responds to Jesus, leaves his old way of life and follows Him. His first thoughts are to celebrate and to share the good news with his friends, the very people religious people find it so easy to despise or to fear – *the publicans and sinners*.

Can you imagine the reaction of Levi's parish priest and church council? "Why do you still want to mix with those kinds of people? Jesus has set you free from your old way of life. You need new friends, church people, or you run the risk of back-sliding." "I hope you're not thinking of holding this party in the church hall. What would people think if we let in all these *publicans and sinners*? They might steal the tea spoons. There's plenty of respectable hard-working church members (who give a lot in the free will offering scheme) who will find another church if our church is overrun with the likes of *publicans and sinners*."

April 25<sup>th</sup> (St Mark's Day)

Mark 2 vv 16 & 17

O Almighty God, who hast instructed thy holy Church with the heavenly doctrine of thy Evangelist Saint Mark; Give us grace, that, being not like children carried away with every blast of vain doctrine, we may be established in the truth of thy holy Gospel; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Surely those *established in the truth of thy holy Gospel* would react to the *publicans and sinners* in the same way that Jesus does.

April 26<sup>th</sup>

Mark 2 vv 18-20

Fasting is part of many religious traditions. It may be a sign of repentance or mourning. It may be an effort to win God's favour (which is always suspect, but only too human). It may be an attempt to master the desires of the flesh. Extreme fasting produces states of heightened ecstasy which some people believe are a window on the divine and others suspect of being pathological. Anyway, Christ's disciples are not to be judged by human traditions.

April 27<sup>th</sup>

Mark 2 vv 21&22

I've always found this saying of Jesus difficult. The analogies are obvious enough. If wine is still fermenting, it will burst worn out wine skins just as it bursts the glass bottles of many an amateur wine maker. It would be daft to cut a piece out of a new garment to make a patch for an old one, especially if the new material shrank in the wash and made a bigger hole.

But what does this mean for religion? I think it means this. You can't keep your old way of life, your old ideas and graft a piece of Christian faith on to them. To become a Christian is to repent. It is to be buried with Christ. It is to be born again. He makes all things new. There can be no compromise. You are either a disciple of Christ or you are not. You cannot be a citizen of this world and a citizen of heaven. You cannot serve God and Mammon. If you try, you serve neither God nor Mammon very well and I guess you will always be unhappy and conflicted. Once a Christian, you must be a Christian through and through and your attitudes to everything else – money, position, power, family, friends, leisure – will be determined by your relationship to Jesus Christ.

April 28<sup>th</sup>

Mark 2 vv 23-28

*The Son of man is Lord also of the Sabbath.*

Before David was king, he was pursued by King Saul, who wanted to kill him. He ran off with a band of men who went to the shrine at Nob for shelter, food and weapons. (David could expect support from the priests because he was already the LORD's Anointed (i.e. Messiah, Christ.) The only food available was the holy bread which was offered each day to the LORD and then consumed by the priests. The priest allowed his men to eat this as it was an emergency even though some people might have considered this to be sacrilege. Jesus argues from this story that His disciples are free to pick corn on the Sabbath. Is the argument that, as the heavenly *Son of man*, Jesus has the authority to rule on the Sabbath law? Or does He mean that Sabbath law is for human benefit and human beings can use their common sense to interpret it? Both explanations are possible and I think compatible. Or is it that His disciples have a common status with David's supporters?

April 29<sup>th</sup>

Mark 3 vv 1-5

I recently complained to a fellow Christian (and a member of the Labour Party) that this government legislates as though England were not a Christian country. “What do you expect,” she replied, “when only about 7% of the population regularly go to Church?” (I might add that she is one of the 93% who don’t.) Church attendance in this country had been declining for decades but it really plunged when Sunday Trading was legalised. (For balance, I had better point out that that was a Conservative measure.) Anyway, people who had previously been regular church-goers suddenly found they had other things to do on a Sunday. As church-going became more unusual, herd instinct took over and more people stayed away. Adults thought they could be Christians without going to church. They neglected to bring or even to send their children, believing they would learn all they need to know at school, but schools in a secular or multicultural society hesitate to teach any one particular religion. In a couple of decades, there came a time when government could run the country as though religion were of no importance.

Once upon a time, England might have been guilty of the Pharisees’ error, keeping Sunday as a Sabbath on which it was scarcely lawful to do good. Now the pendulum has swung to the opposite end. But if we don’t keep Sabbath time (if not on Sunday at some other time) I should like to know when we expect to encounter our God, how we think adults and children are likely to grow in the faith and how we can expect to exert a Christian influence on the way this nation is run?

April 30<sup>th</sup>

Mark 3 vv 6-12

Jesus has an impact on the whole of the Holy Land. People come to hear Him from all over. He heals them, cleanses them, casts out evil, raises the dead. He meets our needs. But there is tremendous opposition. Those who believe that their needs are already met by wealth, prestige or power, religion even, do not want Jesus upsetting things.



May 1<sup>st</sup> (St Philip and St James)

Mark 3 vv 13-18

Disciples are people who learn from the Master. All Jesus' followers are disciples. Apostles are people who are sent. Jesus was sent by the Father. He chooses twelve apostles from the number of disciples and sends them to do the work the Father sent Him to do. After the Ascension the apostolic Church teaches those who convert to Christ what Christ Himself teaches. Thus all converts become disciples. All converts are part of the apostolic Church, sent to complete the mission of Jesus. So all we Christians learn from Christ in order that He may send us to do His work in the world.

O Almighty God, whom truly to know is everlasting life; Grant us perfectly to know thy Son Jesus Christ to be the way, the truth, and the life; that, following the steps of thy holy Apostles, Saint Philip and Saint James, we may stedfastly walk in the way that leadeth to eternal life; through the same thy Son Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

May 2<sup>nd</sup>

Mark 3 vv 20 & 21

Crowds came to Jesus, but His close friends thought He'd gone mad. Christianity is countercultural. A lot of what Jesus says is opposed to common sense, or at least to unredeemed common sense. If we are faithful to Jesus, we may find that we are laughed at or worse. What Jesus teaches is a threat to unredeemed humanity. He turns all humanity's values upside down. *Love your enemies! Don't worry about food and clothing! Turn the other cheek to the bully! God doesn't love only good people! God's people ought to be perfect!*

Today is the festival of the less well know St Athanasius who was granted wonderful insights into the meaning of the Incarnation, but then suffered many years of persecution.

Everliving God, whose servant Athanasius testified to the mystery of the Word made flesh for our salvation: help us, with all your saints, to contend for the truth and to grow into the likeness of your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God now and for ever. Amen.

May 3<sup>rd</sup>

Mark 3 vv 22-26

One way of looking at this is as a dispute within the Jewish religion. The scribes are seeking to interpret and live by the Law which God gave to Moses on Mount Sinai. Jesus can be seen as a rabbi, a teacher of the Law. To an outsider, this looks like a dispute within Judaism. It is certainly a dispute within the people of God. People can be very bitter in disputes about religion, especially people who purportedly share the same religion. It is what we call the *odium theologicum*, theological hatred. The Church of England and the worldwide Anglican Communion are going through a bout of *odium theologicum* at the moment. We need to pray for the Church, for the Archbishop of Canterbury and for other Church leaders at this time. Jesus says it would be ridiculous for Satan to fight against Satan. His house would certainly fall. How much less sense it makes for Christian to fight against Christian.

May 4<sup>th</sup>

Mark 3 v27

Only one person can bind Satan. That is Jesus. He destroys the power of the devil by His victory on the Cross. It is a victory of self-sacrificial love. In Jesus, our sins are forgiven and we don't have to worry about them any more. When we are tempted or undermined, we can, in Christ, resist the devil and he will flee from us. We can cast our care on God because He cares for us.

May 5<sup>th</sup>

Mark 3 vv 28-30

This notion of an unforgivable sin puzzles and alarms people. I think the point is that we have to come to God in order to receive forgiveness and so, if we resist the Holy Spirit absolutely, we cannot know that we need to be forgiven or approach the only One Who can forgive us. Blasphemy means something much more serious than using the Name of God carelessly as a swear word, although we certainly ought not to do that. Blasphemy against the Holy Ghost would be something very serious. I wouldn't rule out that God could find a way even round that, but neither would I deny that those who stubbornly reject God throughout their lives might find themselves at last unable to return. If you're worried about blasphemy against the Holy Ghost, you're not guilty. You wouldn't have the grace to worry if you were!

May 6<sup>th</sup>

Mark 3 vv 31-35

Even Mary and His earthly family don't fully get Jesus. It must have been very hard for them, when He left them, became a celebrity and then the object of ridicule and hatred. They must have been very fearful for Him and perhaps hurt at seemingly being left behind. It is impossible to imagine how Mary must have felt at the foot of the Cross. Like the others, I am sure Mary only fully comprehended after the Resurrection, Ascension and the coming of the Holy Spirit.

Yet how wonderful what Jesus says about His disciples. We are all His family, the Holy Family. Imagine that!

May 7<sup>th</sup>

Mark 4 vv 1 & 2

Everybody knows that Jesus taught in parables, but what are parables? We tend to assume that they were teaching aids, stories which somehow made difficult concepts easy to understand. It is not as simple as that, however. The notion of parable is not unrelated to the idea of riddle. Looking ahead to vv 11 & 12, it actually appears that parables obscure the message for those who are not ready to receive it.

Occasionally parables are analogies, as here each area sown is analogous to something in the real world – a hard heart, a shallow disposition, busyness with trivia, an open mind. Generally, however, parables are not analogies. (Many scholars believe that the Parable of the Sower didn't begin life as an analogy.) What parables are are memorable stories or observations which point to a profound truth, often so profound that we find it hard to take on board.

May 8<sup>th</sup>

Mark 4 vv 3-10

Is the sower careless, generous or just plain stupid? Why waste seed sowing it where it has little or no chance of growing? You see, I don't think we should take this too literally. A reasonably prudent human farmer would know which parts of his field would produce a good crop. If he had time, he'd pick up the stones and pull out the weeds. He certainly wouldn't sow on the path. But the wisdom of God is wiser than human wisdom. He pours out His love on good and bad alike. He sends the Word to the whole world. So, therefore, should His Church.

May 9<sup>th</sup>

Mark 4 vv 11-13

These words of Jesus shock. They undermine what most of us understand by parables – simple stories to make the faith easier to understand. In order to understand this, you would have to read Isaiah 6. The prophet is granted a vision of the glory of God. He is overwhelmed by his own unworthiness and God sends a seraph to cleanse him. The prophet then responds to God's call, *Whom shall I send?* (He is to be an apostle?) God warns him that the people will not be willing to receive God's Word as the prophet will deliver it and that this is God's purpose. If God runs the Universe, nothing happens outside His Providence. As prophets, people who spread the Word, we are mystified and hurt by the lack of response. But this too is within the purposes of God.

May 10<sup>th</sup>

Mark 4 vv 14 & 15

Who are the people by the wayside? There are many evidences of the Gospel in the world. The wonders of the world point to the glory of God. So does the marvel of human love. The fact that there are so many church buildings bears witness to the Gospel as do "wayside pulpit" style posters. The Christian religion is far from invisible in the institutions and public life of modern Britain. There are bibles in book shops and thousands of churches eager to welcome inquirers to services, alpha courses, etc. Many people are, however, completely indifferent to all these evidences and invitations. Some are worse than indifferent and are actively hostile. There are too many with influence in national and local government who would like to exclude evidence of the Christian Church from public life – e.g. replacing Christmas with *Winterval*.

May 11<sup>th</sup>

Mark 4 vv 16 & 17

There are parts of the world today where Christians are actively persecuted. Maybe sometimes secular states or states which support another religion (such as Islam) are successful in crushing the Christian Church. Often, however, it works the other way. The blood of the martyrs proves to be the seed of the Church. If people are threatened with death or imprisonment for their faith, the choice is clear and many, thank God, die as Christians rather than live as apostates. In modern Britain, persecution is much more subtle. You might be laughed at.

You might be made to feel different, as if you didn't somehow belong. You'd be going against the grain of society. No-one says outright *Either you renounce your faith or you die*. If they did you would know what you ought to do. What happens, however, is that you come to feel a bit odd if you practise your faith and you start to think that you can still be a Christian without talking about it or going to Church or letting it affect your work or your social life. You bear no fruit and eventually you die spiritually.

May 12<sup>th</sup>

Mark 4 vv 18 & 19

Bishop Chad of Harare humbled us all at the diocesan synod when he spoke about the way Christians in Zimbabwe are persecuted. Excluded from their church buildings, they worship in the open. Beaten and tortured by the police, they keep the faith. He told us that the Church in Harare is growing in numbers. Those who are Christians have to make up their minds about what really matters. Their faithfulness in the face of persecution proclaims to other people – even their tormentors – that the Christian faith is really worth something.

There is a fable about the sun, the wind and the rain each boasting that he could get the coat off a wayfarer. The rain beats down and the traveller pulls up the coat and does up the buttons. The wind howls around his legs. He does up the belt and holds on to his coat. When the sun comes out, the traveller abandons his coat of his own free will. It seems that, in the same way, threats of death and imprisonment don't succeed in getting people to give up their faith, but material prosperity and freedom to worship as we please are very effective in inviting people to give up on their Christian commitment.

May 13<sup>th</sup> (Ascension Day)

Mark 4 v 20

Think back to what we said about all this being in God's providence. Those who are truly friends of Jesus and remain faithful despite opposition and the temptations of this world, flourish and bear fruit – the fruit of the Holy Spirit. They are citizens of heaven and heirs of eternal life.

Grant, we beseech thee, Almighty God, that like as we do believe thy only-begotten Son our Lord Jesus

Christ to have ascended into the heavens; so may we thither ascend, and with him continually dwell, who liveth and reigneth with thee and the Holy Ghost, one God, world without end. Amen.

May 14<sup>th</sup> (St Matthias otherwise kept 24<sup>th</sup> February) Mark 4 vv 21-25

To be a Christian is both a privilege and a responsibility. Our lives are pointless if they do not reflect the love of Christ. Good and bad will come out. Nothing is hidden from God. Judas heard Jesus, the Word of God, but he messed up. If we are faithful, faith grows. If we are unfaithful, it is hard for us to accept the grace of God.

O Almighty God, who into the place of the traitor Judas didst chose thy faithful servant Matthias to be of the number of the twelve Apostles; Grant that thy Church, being alway preserved from false Apostles, may be ordered and guided by faithful and true pastors; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

May 15<sup>th</sup> Mark 4 vv 26-29

We don't know how the seed grows. Neither do we know how the Church grows. Growth is of God. It is so easy to get depressed by declining numbers. It isn't difficult to get depressed by the antics of General Synod and some of our Church leaders, divisions over doctrine, the bureaucratisation of ministry. The Church's money troubles can really get us down. To be honest, we can be disappointed in our own congregation and in ourselves. But growth is of God. What is required of us is to remain faithful, for each one of us to do the good works that God has prepared for us to walk in. Church growth is of God and we don't know how He manages it, but we do know that we can trust Him.

I don't say that our Church will necessarily survive as it is. Ultimately the Anglican Communion would be honoured to lose its separate identity in a reunited worldwide Church of Orthodox, Catholic and Protestant. Locally we might not need mediaeval buildings, PCCs and formal structures, even a stipendiary ministry. If local Christians are disunited and uncommitted, God might have to replace them, but the Guarantor of the Church is God and His purposes never fail.

Just over ten years ago, we adopted a new calendar which emphasised that Easter is a fifty day celebration of the Resurrection incorporating our Lord's Ascension into Heaven and the coming of the Holy Spirit. All these events are one event – the glorification of the Son of Man. This explains the name changes which I know some people regard as tiresome and irrelevant. It also explains why the theme of Ascension is somewhat played down on this Sunday (now called Easter 7).

Interestingly, the Roman Catholic Church has moved rather in the opposite direction on this issue. Like us, RCs believe it is important that people celebrate the Ascension, but they've largely given up hope that people will turn out to worship God on a weekday. So they've transferred the celebration of Ascension Day to the Sunday following.

All this might seem a bit esoteric and likely to be of interest only to clergymen. It is important, however, to try to get the Christian year right. The festivals not only commemorate events which happened 2,000 years ago. In fact that is not their main point at all. When we keep Christmas, Good Friday and Easter, we – the people of God – in a sense participate in those events. Like Jews celebrating the Passover, we are not just thinking about what God did to liberate our ancestors thousands of years ago. We are affirming and reinforcing our identity today as the people God has redeemed. We participate in the meaning of Christmas, Good Friday and Easter. If we faithfully observe the festivals, we celebrate what we are as Christians and we grow into what we are called to be. The Kingdom grows like a mustard seed and we don't understand the process of growth. The farmer does, however, plough and weed and water. He establishes the conditions for growth. Similarly, the Church in her calendar and worship services (liturgy) seeks to create the conditions in which her children flourish and bear fruit.

In my tactless opinion, it is simply contemptible to assume that people can't find time for God on weekdays. We worship every day in order to become the people we are meant to be. Participating in the Church's year forms us as Christians. Formation is not an optional extra.

O God the King of glory, who hast exalted thine only Son Jesus Christ with great triumph unto thy kingdom in heaven; We beseech thee, leave us not comfortless; but send to us thine Holy Ghost to comfort us and exalt us unto the same place whither our Saviour Christ is gone before, who liveth and reigneth with thee and the Holy Ghost, one God, world without end. Amen.

May 17<sup>th</sup>

Mark 4 vv 33 & 34

*He spoke the word as they were able to hear it.* I try, but I'm not sure I always succeed. Sometimes I think I fail to put things in a way that people can understand. Please tell me when I do so fail. We all try: preachers, teachers, all of us as we attempt to communicate the message. Often we fail to get the message across. Maybe that's when we fail to express it the right way for a particular audience – though we have to guard against distorting the Word to suit the audience. Some audiences won't or even can't accept the message. Jesus explained things to His disciples alone that were too much for the crowds. Later on, after the Ascension, the disciples probably passed on to more receptive crowds what Jesus had previously explained to them alone.

May 18<sup>th</sup>

Mark 4 vv 35-41

Rough seas represent primaevial chaos. The movement of the waves looks chaotic. The sea is dangerous. In the Bible (and in the myths of other ancient cultures) God is the one who subdues the waters. When darkness was upon the face of the deep, He said, *Let there be light*. He made the dry land appear. He allowed the waters to return to cover the earth in Noah's flood and then made them subside again. God led the children of Israel out of Egypt through the Red Sea and into the Promised Land through the River Jordan. The fact that Jesus subdues the storm bears witness that He is the Son of God.

He is the Son of God and the Son of Man. He is one with His Church. He came because God so loved the world. Jesus is in the same boat as us and we can have faith even at those times it seems to us like He is sleeping.



March 19<sup>th</sup>

Mark 5 vv 1 & 2

The notion of evil spirits is likely to be a problem for us. Many of the conditions described in the New Testament as possession look to us like physical or mental illnesses which we would treat with drugs, surgery or psychotherapy. Yet the Gospels clearly portray Jesus as someone Who casts out evil spirits. In fact it is one of the best attested things about Him. If we say that there is no such thing as demons, we effectively say either that Jesus was wrong or that we cannot rely on what the Gospels say about Him – in which case we know very little about Him at all. So it appears that we can say, on the one hand, either that Jesus was a man of His time with the same superstitions as His contemporaries, or that the Gospels just get Him wrong; or, on the other hand, we can affirm both demons and exorcisms and risk being linked with cranks who damage the credibility of Christianity in the modern world. Jesus is either irrelevant, because He is lost in the past, or unacceptable because He contradicts a modern scientific understanding of the way the world works.

How am I going to get out of that one? Well first of all, I don't rule out the existence of demons. If you believe that the only reality is material reality, you don't believe in demons, spirits or angels. But then you don't believe in God either. If you believe that God exists, you believe in spirit and you have to concede at least the possibility that He creates spiritual beings, such as demons and angels, as well as material things like rocks, plants, animals and people. So, logically, as Christians we have to believe in the possibility of demons and angels. Given the biblical witness to their existence, having conceded their possibility, I think we also have to concede that they exist. What is actually going on when it is claimed that an angel appears to Mary or an unclean spirit possesses a man, I am not bold enough to speculate, but I feel I must affirm the reality if I am true to the Bible as the Word of God.

My tentative speculation is that disease is a physical manifestation of evil and that maybe there is sometimes or always a spiritual personification of that evil, what the Bible calls a demon or unclean spirit. Medical treatment is a blessing which defeats disease as a physical or mental evil. Jesus "casts out the demon" the spiritual personification. But that is just my theory and I don't know if it helps you?

May 20<sup>th</sup>

Mark 5 vv 3-5

Whatever was the cause of this man's troubles, I always feel great compassion for him. His treatment reminds me of the treatment of lunatics in days gone by. To be honest, we don't treat the mentally ill and the demented very well even today. Perhaps because we are afraid of them or because we are afraid of becoming like them, perhaps because caring for them requires vast resources and treatments often don't seem very effective, but whatever the reason, our society does not treat the mentally ill with Christian compassion.

May 21<sup>st</sup>

Mark 5 vv 6-8

The thing is that again the demons recognise Jesus as the Son of God when human beings don't. I am reminded of what St James says:

Thou believest that there is one God; thou doest well: the devils also believe, and tremble. But wilt thou no, O vain man, that faith without works is dead.

May 22<sup>nd</sup>

Mark 5 vv 9-13

Knowing someone's name gives you power. That's why management require staff who face the public to give their names and the staff in question mumble their names and hide their badges. If you know the name and number of the policeman who coshed you in the demonstration, you've got him. The Name of God in the Bible is too holy even to utter and to take God's Name in vain is to break the Ten Commandments. I don't think anybody really knows why Jesus allowed the demons to possess the pigs.

May 23<sup>rd</sup> (Whitsun or Pentecost)

Mark 5 vv 14 & 15

After Jesus had cast out the evil, the man was in his right mind. Human beings are truly in their right mind when they are possessed by the Holy Spirit and they possess Him.

God, who as at this time didst teach the hearts of thy faithful people, by the sending to them the light of thy Holy Spirit; Grant us by the same Spirit to have a right judgment in all things, and evermore to rejoice in his holy comfort; through the merits of Christ Jesus our Saviour, who liveth and reigneth with thee, in the unity of the same Spirit, one God, world without end. Amen.

May 24<sup>th</sup>

Mark 5 vv 16 & 17

The people of Gadara (or wherever) have seen a wonderful miracle. This person who was in such distress has been cured by Jesus. So they want to get rid of Jesus. People in general do not want the power of God impinging on their lives. God would make their lives much better (and probably they really know that) but complacent conventionality is extremely hard to shake off.

May 25<sup>th</sup>

Mark 5 vv 18-20

Usually in Mark, Jesus tells the beneficiaries of cures to keep it to themselves. He is not yet ready to be made manifest to Israel. His time has not yet come. But this is Gentile territory. There is nothing to hinder telling people about the mighty works of God straightaway. The worldwide mission only really got under way after the Ascension, but we live in post-Ascension times. There is no reason for us not to tell our friends now *how great things the Lord hath done*.

May 26<sup>th</sup>

Mark 5 vv 21-23

Quietly in the background people in the parish collect for Demelza House the Children's Hospice. People who have come to live here more recently may not be aware that Demelza is the daughter of Derek and Jennifer Philips who lived in the village and were members of our Church here 25 years ago. It is a wonderful work, however, to care for gravely sick children and it is good that people here support this work with their prayers and their gifts of money.

May 27<sup>th</sup>

Mark 5 vv 24-34

The healing of his seamless dress  
Is by our beds of pain;  
We touch him in life's throng and press,  
And we are whole again.

Another great hymn which affirms a biblical truth in Christian experience. What a difference it makes that we can pray in the face of life's problems – pray in church, pray in our designated prayer times and just prayer in life's throng and press.

May 28<sup>th</sup>

Mark 5 v35

Do we give up hope when we come to a death? Is death the end, the end of our hopes, the end of our hopes for other people? Do we give up when we are certain that people are going to die? Should we even help them to end their lives if their lives seem to offer nothing more other than pain, indignity and the certainty of an early demise?

Jesus will resurrect Jairus' daughter. That doesn't happen nowadays (or at least not very often). Resuscitation is not resurrection. Is there hope given that it is impossible (or at least extremely unlikely) that the truly dead will be restored to life? Jairus' daughter herself must have died again one day and is presumably buried somewhere in the Holy Land.

The answer of course is in the Resurrection and Ascension of Jesus. He opened the Kingdom of Heaven to all believers. When our loved ones die in the Lord, they have not come to an end, but to a new and more wonderful beginning.

May 29<sup>th</sup>

Mark 5 vv 36-43

*Talitha cumi.* They preserved the words that Jesus actually said. The New Testament is written in Greek, the language generally understood throughout the eastern Mediterranean in those days. But, in their every day lives, the people of Palestine spoke Aramaic. (Hebrew by then was for worship and reading the Bible.) Jesus was no exception and some of His actual Aramaic words are preserved because they were so precious. *Amen. Abba. Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachtani? Ephphatha.*

This was a very special moment. Only the closest disciples were allowed to be present. The grieving parents had their daughter returned to them. Jesus demonstrated that He is *the Way, the Truth and Life; the Resurrection and the Life.*

May 30<sup>th</sup> (Trinity Sunday)

Mark 6 vv 1-6

The people at Nazareth can't accept the authority of Jesus as a teacher. Neither do they have the faith to receive his healing power. They know who He is – the carpenter, Mary's son, brother to a large family. He is just one of them. And of course all that is true. Jesus is Mary's Son.

He is a man. He did work as a carpenter. He is one of us. But the people of Nazareth only have that half of the picture. The miracle is that Jesus the man is also Jesus the God. The divine comes into our world in Jesus. He opens the Kingdom of Heaven to all believers. If we know Jesus, we know God and to know God is to have eternal life. Because Jesus is a human being it is possible to know Him as one of us. Because we can know Him, we can become like Him; we can be made divine, we can be caught up in the eternal unity of the Blessed Holy Trinity.

And so we celebrate the Trinity – that God is the Father, Who made Heaven and earth; the Son, Who unites in Himself both Heaven and earth; the Holy Spirit, Who makes known the Father and the Son; and that these three are one God, are our God.

Almighty and everlasting God, who hast given unto us thy servants grace by the confession of a true faith to acknowledge the glory of the eternal Trinity, and in the power of the Divine Majesty to worship the Unity; We beseech thee, that thou wouldest keep us steadfast in this faith, and evermore defend us from all adversities, who livest and reignest, one God, world without end. Amen.

May 31<sup>st</sup>

Mark 6 vv 7-9

Some years (10 or 12?) ago at diocesan synod we established a fund to support Christian work in the new communities which are to be established in the Thames Gateway. So far as I know, the communities have not yet been built due to inefficiency and the recession and the Christian work has mostly, therefore, not begun. Our plans as churches often go wrong. Things don't work out the way we expect. The young mission priest the Cathedral sent into the pubs of Rochester to reach the youth spends most of his time with a group of Second World War veterans. That's not failure. It's God using him in ways the Church didn't anticipate. Jesus seems to delight in sending out His apostles unprepared. People tell me it would be irresponsible to do the same today. We need to plan, they say. Maybe so, but God doesn't always respect our plans and we should be prepared for that.

June 1<sup>st</sup>

Mark 6 v10

It's something I'm not good at, but it is gracious to accept hospitality, to accept what other people can do for you. People like to be useful. They like to contribute. We don't always want to be the recipients of other people's largesse. A factor in preventing church growth can be if the vicar tries to run a one man band so that no-one else can make a useful contribution or if a tight group of loyal lay people won't let anybody else do anything or insist that newcomers can only take things on under the direction of longer established members of the church. They say that the way to get more men into the church is to find them jobs they can do!

Brother let me be your servant, let me be as Christ to you;  
Pray that I may have the grace to let you be my servant, too.

June 2<sup>nd</sup>

Mark 6 v11

Two points. There is a judgment. People can reject Jesus and there are consequences. We tend to assume that a nice God doesn't worry too much if we reject Him and His perfect law of love, and that, even if we haven't bothered much about Him, there will be a place waiting for us in Heaven when the time comes. That isn't the biblical picture of God. God's fierce love demands our equally passionate love in return. He longs to forgive sinners who repent, but repentance means a good deal more than an insincere apology, made because we realise that it is in our own best interests to offer it.

More shockingly, secondly, the apostles are told not to waste time on those who reject their message. Was that just a policy for that time when Jesus had to great round Galilee and Judea in just three years? Or does it still apply? Should we just move on when our ministry is rejected?

June 3<sup>rd</sup>

Mark 6 vv 12 & 13

The apostles do what Jesus did. The mission of the holy, catholic and apostolic Church is to do the work of Jesus in the world today.

The practice of anointing the sick with oil had died out in the Protestant churches, but it has made something of a comeback as part of our ministry to the sick.

June 4<sup>th</sup>

Mark 6 vv 14-16

Jesus made an impact. So who was He? Herod felt very guilty about John the Baptist as we shall see. Was Jesus John come back to haunt him? After all John and Jesus had very similar ministries at least to begin with. Other people thought Jesus might have been Elijah (whose returned is anticipated every Passover) or another OT prophet returned to this earth.

What about today? Why do people think Jesus had such an impact and still has on the lives of millions of people? A great teacher? A con man? The basis of a myth St Paul used to found a new religion? Or is He the Christ of God, risen from the dead, Whose Holy Spirit quickens the hearts of all the millions of believers there are in the world today?

June 5<sup>th</sup>

Mark 6 vv 17-29

The other night on television I saw a very decent man, who now holds high office in this country, answering an interviewer's questions. He was desperately trying to evade giving straight answers to questions about whether or not someone had been tortured, whether or not the British government was aware of it if torture had taken place, and whether or not the British government would be willing to turn a blind eye to torture in a good enough cause. On the face of it, it appeared that the government department for which he is responsible had broken the law with respect to the function of the courts. He wouldn't answer that question either. Yet basically he is a very decent man who probably went into politics as a form of public service. Is it inevitable that even good people are corrupted by power? If so, is good government an impossible dream?

June 6<sup>th</sup>

Mark 6 vv 30-32

*Come ye yourselves apart into a desert place and rest a while.*

Retreat conductors often begin with these words. A group of people go away together to pray, to worship, to meditate, to listen to spiritual addresses. They entrust their homes, their families and their work to God while they withdraw to replenish the spiritual batteries. It is necessary to rest. It is necessary to have time to focus on God. We should not begrudge ourselves or other people that time.

I used to fantasise about buying a large house in the Lake District and running retreats for the stressed out. We'd start the day with Morning Prayer and a full English breakfast. We'd walk in the hills. Then we'd go to the pub. I used to joke that, if people didn't feel better after a week spent like that, they didn't deserve to! But you can see why getting away from it all, time with God in prayer, a proper appreciation of good food, physical exercise and fresh air amid the splendours of creation and a convivial time with friends would all contribute to a proper well-being as human beings.

June 7<sup>th</sup>

Mark 6 vv 33 & 34

We need rest and time to spend alone with God, but often we are interrupted by other people's needs. If that is so, like Jesus, we have to attend to them. That doesn't mean, however, that we don't still plan to take time off or that we come to consider ourselves indispensable, never taking a holiday or even a day off.

June 8<sup>th</sup>

Mark 6 vv 35-44

This is one of the most important of the miracle stories. It comes in all four Gospels. In Matthew and Mark it is repeated by another similar event – the Feeding of the 4,000. The two feeding miracles are linked as demanding the response of faith. This story is often chosen for the Gospel reading in Church. I could write pages about Passover and manna, about prophets feeding their disciples, about the heavenly banquet and the Christian Eucharist, about grace before meals, about sharing, about God making our tiny contribution more than enough, about the fact that Jesus was born at Bethlehem, which means *House of Bread*, about *Give us this day our daily bread*.

Let me, however, just ask you to meditate on these words.

*And Jesus said unto them: I am the Bread of Life.*

June 9<sup>th</sup>

Mark 6 vv 45 & 46

This miracle was very significant for the crowds and for the disciples. They decide to make Jesus king. Perhaps they are thinking of the Exodus or of King David or of any of the promises of the OT. They are not understanding, however, how Jesus fulfils the Law & the Prophets.



June 10<sup>th</sup>

Mark 6 vv 47-52

It seems that they wouldn't have been surprised at His walking on the water if they had understood the miracle of the loaves. According to Ps 79 vv 19 & 20 (speaking of God).

Thy way is in the sea, and thy paths in the great waters: and thy footsteps are not known.

Thou leddest thy people like sheep: by the hand of Moses and Aaron.

After Passover, God led the children of Israel by the hand of Moses and Aaron through the Red Sea into the wilderness. There they fed on the manna. They were like sheep, God's flock, whose archetypal king would be the shepherd boy David, the LORD's anointed. All these ideas tie together so that we can have some conception of Who Jesus is.

Jesus! My Shepherd, Brother, Friend,  
My Prophet, Priest and King,  
My Lord, my Life, my Way, my End,  
Accept the praise I bring.

June 11<sup>th</sup> (St Barnabas)

Mark 6 vv 53-56

Wouldn't it be wonderful if there were mass healings like this today? If only, say, our new bishop, whoever he is, could go into the hospital and cure all the patients. Some Christians say that he could (or you or I could) if only we had enough faith. Cynics say that these miraculous healings never really happened and that they only appear in the Gospel narrative because credulous people were desperate to believe that Jesus could save them. I believe that Jesus did heal like this and I believe that miracles can occur today, but that they are relatively rare. I don't think it is God's purpose that the Church should perform miracles like these as a matter of routine. But I do believe that the Church (you and I) is empowered by the Holy Spirit to do the work God does want done today.

O Lord God Almighty, who didst endue thy holy Apostle Barnabas with singular gifts of the Holy Ghost; Leave us not, we beseech thee, destitute of thy manifold gifts, nor yet of the grace to use them alway to thy honour and glory; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

June 12<sup>th</sup>

Mark 7 vv 1-4

When you read the Bible, you are confronted with the concept of clean and unclean. There are unclean animals, which must not be eaten. There are unclean medical conditions, leprosy, making the sufferer untouchable. Uncleanness arises from touching dead bodies or bodily fluids. Ritual washings are prescribed. Contamination occurs if anyone touches something which is unclean. It is very easy to confuse this biblical concept of cleanliness with modern ideas about hygiene. Now it is true that avoiding some of the foods and practices described as unclean would help to guard against infection. Some of the things the Jews believe are unclean would also disgust many of us Gentiles. However what the Bible means by unclean is not necessarily the same as unhygienic. It is really about making a distinction, about separating the people of God from the nations of the world. It is a question of holy or profane. The identity of the people of God is tied up with their avoidance of what is unclean. Unclean might mean unhygienic. It is definitely unclean to be ethically impure. But a lot of what is required of the practising Jew – circumcision, the avoidance of pork, not wearing garments of mixed materials, the way you shave and cut your hair – only makes sense if you are a Jew. Jesus is not telling people that hygiene is a waste of time here. He is interpreting the Torah. He joins the OT prophets in reminding Jews that it is useless to keep the minutiae of ritual if you disregard much more important commandments about fairness, generosity and honesty. I think He is also beginning the process whereby His followers will conclude that the ritual requirements of the Old Testament need not be binding on Christians, the expanded people of God.

June 13<sup>th</sup>

Mark 7 vv 5-13

The Pharisees were very concerned to keep the Law in its entirety. They debated what it meant and how it applied to various situations at great length. There was thus a whole lot of written and oral tradition in addition to the words of the Bible. The Bible itself has commandments way beyond the Ten and what Jesus said were the two that summarised the whole Law. The effect was that these Pharisees had got lost, unable to see the wood of divine life for the multiplicity of interpretative trees.

June 14<sup>th</sup>

Mark 7 vv 14-23

As the Old Testament knows perfectly well, what is required is a good character. You can tick all the boxes. You can strive with all your might to keep every single one of the commandments, interpreting them with the utmost strictness. You can sell all your goods and give the money to the poor. You can give your body to be burned. But if you have not charity, you are nothing. What matters is that you love God with all your heart. If you do that, you will love your neighbour as yourself. If you love, you will keep the commandments because it is your nature to do so. You won't be fearful of getting caught out in a lapse. You won't be proud of yourself because you have succeeded. If you love God and your neighbour, you will keep the commandments simply because that is the kind of person you are.

June 15<sup>th</sup>

Mark 7 vv 24-30

We had this story at the children's service lately and I asked the children if they could explain it. I find it hard to understand. So do the experts who write the books. Jesus seems quite harsh with the woman. Of course, if we knew the tone of voice He used, it might seem much less harsh. Maybe He wanted to draw that intelligent response out of the woman, to encourage her to think, rather than to be a passive beggar. I think that He was reluctant to start a Gentile mission. That was for after the Ascension, the task He would give His Church. Our Lord's earthly ministry was to the Jews. This was the divine plan to make salvation available to all the peoples of the world – to Jews and Gentiles – through Jesus fulfilling Israel's destiny as the chosen people and inviting Israel to participate in this new fully comprehensive covenant as a first step in a worldwide mission.

I believe that modern "feminist" interpretations which suggest that Jesus did not understand His own mission until a Gentile woman made Him think again might be heart-warming but they run the risk of undermining our understanding of Jesus as the incarnate Son of God and His teaching as possessing divine authority.

June 16<sup>th</sup>

Mark 7 vv 31-37

I remember a conversation with a parent whose child had been deaf from infancy. If this now near nearly grown up person suddenly experienced a miracle enabling him to hear again, he still wouldn't know many of the things a hearing child would have learned. He would be an intelligent, but relatively ignorant young man, with no obvious explanation for his lack of education. For this kind of reason, some deaf people want to see themselves as part of a deaf community with signing as its own recognised language. Some deaf people question the wisdom of operations which might enable those born deaf to hear in later life. They might find themselves belonging fully neither to the hearing nor to the deaf community. Some deaf parents have even gone so far as to demand the right to a deaf child (by the use of embryo selection). They argue that a hearing child would not belong to the same community as her deaf parents. In the interests of equality and fairness our society tends to recognise "communities" – black, Asian, gay, deaf, even women. The compassionate reason for this recognition is to try to redress the balance for people who might be weaker than others or discriminated against. There is a danger, however, that we create a fragmented society in which people identify themselves as black, gay, women or deaf, say, rather than as members of the whole human race, members one of another. We may actually perpetuate discrimination when we ought all to be learning to be open to the needs of all other people, whether they belong to our "community" or not.

June 17<sup>th</sup>

Mark 8 vv 1–9

All four Gospels include the Feeding of the 5,000. Only Mark and Matthew include the Feeding of the 4,000. Some people seem to find it hard to believe that there was a second feeding miracle. I don't see the logic of that. If He did it once, He could do it again. Indeed, isn't that one of the points of the story? That Jesus can always provide for our needs. So what ever happens to us, we can pray to God through Him, confident both that God does care for us and that He can care for us. We may not get the answers to our prayers which seem obviously right to us. But God is all knowing and all loving as well as all powerful. So we can trust Him to give our prayers the truly right answers. I find prayer a great comfort in time of trouble how ever He answers.

June 18<sup>th</sup>

Mark 8 vv 10-13

We should all like a sign – proof that there is a God, that Jesus is Whom is supposed to be, that we shall go to Heaven when we die. But Jesus refuses to give signs when they are demanded of Him. Why should that be? Two reasons. The first is that to demand a sign indicates a lack of faith. The second is that there are in fact plenty of signs around for those who have the faith to recognise them.

June 19<sup>th</sup>

Mark 8 vv 14-21

These words of Jesus indicate that there were indeed two feeding miracles, not that the same story got told twice with the details a bit mixed up. The disciples are fretting about bread. What they should have realised from the two feeding miracles is not that Jesus can endlessly multiply the contents of our bread bins so that we don't have to work for it. What they should have realised was that there is something much more important than feeding your physical body. Jesus is the Bread of Life. What did He really mean when He taught us to pray *Give us this day our daily bread*? Certainly, people who think they will find time for religion only when they have done everything necessary to provide for their physical needs and desires, have got things completely the wrong way round.

June 20<sup>th</sup>

Mark 8 vv 22-26

This isn't an instant healing. The man regains his sight in two stages. Maybe this is like the deaf young man. An instant cure might make his problems worse, if he wasn't able to adjust. I once heard a story of a man who had been blind for many years. When they finally developed an operation to cure him, he found that he was terrified by being able to see things like the fast-moving traffic, which he had learnt to negotiate by hearing alone. So may be this man was cured in two stages to help him adjust to being able to see again.

It might also be that the rather drawn out process of getting this man to see clearly serves as an introduction to the following section which reveals what a drawn out process it is for people to see Jesus clearly.

June 21<sup>st</sup>

Mark 8 vv 27-30

What we make of Jesus is the decisive question of our lives. Many people recognise Him as a great teacher, even as a prophet. They might be willing to concede that He wrought miracles. Many non-believers respect His teaching. Moslems regard Him as a prophet (second only to Mohammed). Hindus may be willing to include Jesus as one of many gods or manifestations of the Divine. A very few Jews recognise Jesus as a reforming Rabbi, though most Jews are utterly put off Jesus by the terrible things Christians have done to Jews supposedly in His Name.

But Peter gets it right (at last). *Thou art the Christ.* In Matthew's account of the same incident, this is spelt out. *Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God.*

If we share Peter's faith, our whole attitude to everything changes because it means that the Ultimate Reality upon Whom all reality depends became a human being, offered Himself in love to you and me, and demands our love in return. If we believe that, our attitude to everything is transformed.

June 22<sup>nd</sup>

Mark 8 vv 31-33

I suppose we've all had times when we've felt very close to God. Some experience of God has been so wonderful that we have promised never to let Him down again. We have genuinely believed that we are capable of living as He would have us live. And then it has all come crashing down. The first big test and we behave no better than a citizen of this world. This may have happened so often that we have given up hope, that we have become quite cynical about the possibility of living a genuinely Christian life. Peter has these experiences time and again in the Bible. He is very close to Jesus. He is up there with the divine. And then he acts in a way which is all too human. But Peter never gives up on Jesus and Jesus never gives up on him. The thing is to remain close to Christ however we may feel. It is by being in His presence that we are transformed. And there would be no point if we held back from closeness to Him at the times we most needed transformation.

June 23<sup>rd</sup>

Mark 8 vv 34-37

If we believe in Jesus, *the Christ, the Son of the living God*, our whole attitude to everything changes. God made us in His image to enjoy Him in all eternity. God is love. Whatever is less than love is unworthy of Him and alienates us from Him. Insofar as we are alienated from God, our lives are incomplete. Alienation from God is sin and the wages of sin is death. Jesus is the atonement for sin. He makes us clean of sin. He makes us at one with God. He sets us free from sin. Sin is selfishness and love is self sacrifice. To be free from sin is to be willing to give up all the things which separate us from God. Paradoxically, we are only fulfilled in our enjoyment of the things of this world when we receive them as the gifts of God.

June 24<sup>th</sup> (Nativity of St John the Baptist)

Mark 8 v 38

John could easily have denied Jesus. He must have known the risk he was running, preaching to vast crowds under a powerful and paranoid regime. He must have known the risks confronting the Pharisees with their hypocrisy and of criticising Rome's pocket King Herod in public. It seems that, when he was in prison, he had doubts about Jesus, as well he might. When Herod spoke to his prisoner John, maybe John could have answered in such a way as to regain his freedom. But he didn't; he remained faithful, one of many martyrs for the faith, who now reign with Christ in glory. What do we do when it seems easier to keep quiet about faith than to risk confrontation or mockery?

Almighty God, by whose providence thy servant John Baptist was wonderfully born, and sent to prepare the way of thy Son our Saviour, by preaching of repentance; Make us so to follow his doctrine and his holy life, that we may truly repent according to his preaching; and after his example constantly speak the truth, boldly rebuke vice, and patiently suffer for the truth's sake; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

June 25<sup>th</sup>

Mark 9 v1

When we studied Mark at college in the first year, we stopped at this verse. It is an obvious break, but what does it mean by people standing there not tasting death till they had seen the Kingdom of God come with power? Does it mean the Transfiguration which comes next in the Gospel narrative? Does it mean the Crucifixion, Resurrection, Ascension and the Coming of the Holy Spirit? Does it mean that those believers who die, don't really die but live in Christ in Heaven? I am the resurrection and the life, saith the Lord: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live: and whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die. (John 11 vv 25 & 26).

I think any of those meanings is possible. The last one is especially hopeful in that it includes you and me with the people present then with Jesus in Caesarea. What I am not keen on is the view that Jesus and the early Church expected the Second Coming and the end of the world within the life time of those who had witnessed the Life, Death and Resurrection of Jesus. Maybe, this belief was held generally in the early Church, but I am unwilling to believe that Jesus got things so wrong or even that He is substantially misquoted in the Gospels. If that were the case, could we rely on any of the teaching attributed to Him? I am concerned that a casual modern (or post-modern) Christianity deals with all the difficult bits in the Bible by dismissing them as out of date, irrelevant or simply wrong. If we do that, we finish up with a religion of our own invention, which unsurprisingly turns out to be fairly useless. We have to be prepared to grapple with what we don't understand – even with what we find quite hard to believe.

June 26<sup>th</sup>

Mark 9 vv 2-4

Both Moses and Elijah communed with God in the Old Testament on the Holy Mountain. Moses received the Law, including the pattern for the Temple, the place, in the OT, where Heaven and earth meet. Elijah received strength and a further commission from God. These great OT figures both support and revere Jesus Who fulfils everything that they stand for in the Presence of God and in the world.



June 27<sup>th</sup>

Mark 9 vv 5 & 6

The Feast of Tabernacles, held in the Autumn, commemorates the forty years the Israelites dwelt in tents as they journeyed to the Promised Land. It also anticipates the coming of the Kingdom of God. It celebrates the gift of the Law. Elijah too is seen as the prophet who ushers in God's Kingdom. So Peter is both totally lost and groping in the right direction for the significance of the Transfiguration. Perhaps he is trying to prolong, even to make permanent, an appearance which is transitory. But here we surely see Jesus as the fulfilment of the Law and the Prophets, the Temple, Priest and Sacrifice, the Atonement, the One Who opens the Kingdom of Heaven to all believers, the Son of God.

June 28<sup>th</sup>

Mark 9 v 7

When God acknowledges Jesus as His Son, He instructs the disciples, *Hear him*. In the biblical languages and in the thought world of the Bible, to hear is to obey. What is Christ's Commandment? *A new commandment I give unto you, That ye love one another; as I have loved you, that ye also love one another.*

The Transfiguration reveals the glory of Christ. The glory of Christ is the glory of the Cross, The glory of Christ is His self-sacrificial love. What the Transfiguration reveals is that humanity can partake of the divine splendour. We human beings can share His glory, we in Him and He in us. This is what it means to be baptised in faith. Christians are in Christ and Christ in them, which means that we share His glory. His glory is His love. If we are in Christ, we keep His commandment to love. To love is to be like Him. To love like Him is to have eternal life. If we love Him, we keep His commandments. Practice makes perfect. If we practice the divine love, we grow into that love and nothing can pluck us from His Hand.

*Where I am, there shall my servant be.*

I think that means both the Cross and the Kingdom of Heaven, because they are both the experience of the fullness of divine love.

June 29<sup>th</sup> (St Peter {and St Paul})

Mark 9 v 8

The heavenly vision is suddenly gone. There is just Jesus and the disciples. The time will come when they no longer have Christ's physical Body. He will ascend into Heaven. When that time comes, the Church will be His physical Body. The Church will know His Presence by the Holy Spirit. The Church will, by the grace of that same Spirit, hear the Word of God, grow into the likeness of Christ and so glow with the splendour of Christ's love that it will draw the world to Him.

Insofar as we, the Church, fail in that holy vocation, we demonstrate our lack of willingness to cooperate with God's Holy Spirit in us. Repentance and prayer are the key to repairing our Church as a conduit of the grace of God.

O Almighty God, who by thy Son Jesus Christ didst give to thy Apostle Saint Peter many excellent gifts, and commandest him earnestly to feed thy flock:  
Make, we beseech thee, all Bishops and Pastors diligently to preach thy holy Word, and the people obediently to follow the same, that they may receive the crown of everlasting glory; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

June 30<sup>th</sup>

Mark 9 vv 9 & 10

As so often in the Gospels, Jesus tells His disciples not to tell everything yet. It is only in the light of the Crucifixion and Resurrection that the Word makes sense. His disciples still themselves don't understand. They have seen a foretaste of His Glory, but they can't quite make sense of it. They are not sure what the Resurrection means.

In a way, they are not so different from us. We, surely, have experienced foretastes of His Glory, but we are very far from full understanding. We are bound to be. You cannot see God and live. The fulness of the revelation waits for Heaven.

I am sure that we cannot really say what the Resurrection means. It means far more than that the tomb of Jesus was found to be empty on the Third Day. It is the transforming, life-giving power of the Spirit of the Risen Christ, both in the Church and in the world. It is the opening of the Kingdom of Heaven to all believers. It is eternal life. It is the fact that you and I know Jesus now and that we are promised that we shall live in Him for ever.

There is a lot we do not yet understand. But we do have more than those first disciples. We have the Gospels. We have the Spirit. We know more of the story. And we have now the commission with which Mark's Gospel ends.

Go ye into all the world, and preach the Gospel to every creature.

