

LENT
for
EVERYONE

MARK

YEAR B

A Daily Devotional

N. T.
WRIGHT

WJK WESTMINSTER
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ASH WEDNESDAY

Mark 1.1–20; focused on 1.1–9

¹This is where the good news starts – the good news of Jesus the Messiah, God’s son.

²Isaiah the prophet put it like this (‘Look! I am sending my messenger ahead of me; he will clear the way for you!’):

³‘A shout goes up in the desert: Make way for the Lord! Clear a straight path for him!’

⁴John the Baptizer appeared in the desert. He was announcing a baptism of repentance, to forgive sins. ⁵The whole of Judaea, and everyone who lived in Jerusalem, went out to him; they confessed their sins and were baptized by him in the river Jordan. ⁶John wore camel-hair clothes, with a leather belt round his waist. He used to eat locusts and wild honey.

⁷‘Someone a lot stronger than me is coming close behind,’ John used to tell them. ‘I don’t deserve to squat down and undo his sandals. ⁸I’ve plunged you in the water; he’s going to plunge you in the holy spirit.’

⁹This is how it happened. Around that time, Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee, and was baptized by John in the river Jordan.

There was a man on the radio the other day enthusing about a new restaurant he’d just visited. Actually, he interviewed the chef, and got him to talk about the exciting new ingredients he was adding to his salads. Customers loved it, he said. The reporter hadn’t been so keen to begin with, but gradually came round to the idea. The new, secret ingredient, mixed in with the lettuce and cucumber, was . . . locusts.

Well, explained the reporter cheerfully, you get used to prawns and other creatures with legs and eyes, don’t you? And the taste (so he said) was really rather good. We shall have to see whether it catches on.

But I suspect that, even in the first century, the mention of someone, in this case John the Baptist, eating locusts was not meant to make people think, ‘Good idea! Must try that some

day? Like the description of John's clothing, it was probably meant to highlight the fact that he appeared as a strange, wild man, living in a way that said, 'It's time for a change! Ordinary days are gone – a new age is just about to begin!'

That was the point, of course. We sometimes think of 'repentance' as being about going back: going back, wearily, to the place you went wrong, finally making a clean breast of it, and then hoping you can start again. Well, that may be how it feels sometimes, and Ash Wednesday is no bad time to face up to such a moment if it's got to be done. But John's message of repentance was essentially forward-looking. God's doing a new thing, so we have to get ready! If you suddenly got a phone call telling you that someone really important was coming to visit your house – the Queen, say, or even Victoria Beckham – you'd want to whip round the place with a duster, at least. Perhaps throw out that pile of magazines under the armchair. Maybe even do the left-over washing-up. Sort the place out, quick! She's on the way!

That is the mood John was evoking – and that's the mood Mark is creating in his characteristically breathless opening. 'This is where the good news starts': you can almost feel Mark being out of breath having run all the way up the road to your house. 'Good news!' (puff, pant). 'He's on the way!' (gasp, deep breath). 'Get ready now – he's nearly here!'

And who is this 'he' who is 'on the way'? Well, here's the puzzle which will occupy Mark, and us, throughout most of the book. Obviously, we say, it's Jesus: 'Jesus, the Messiah, God's son'. The phrase 'God's son' was used, in some key biblical passages, as a title for Israel's king. There are no signs in pre-Christian Judaism that it meant 'the second person of the Trinity'. Or that 'Messiah' meant anything like that, either. 'Messiah' meant 'the anointed one': again, pretty certainly a king.

But the two biblical passages Mark quotes (in his breathless state, he mentions Isaiah before quoting Malachi, and then comes back to Isaiah afterwards) – these two passages don't

seem to be talking simply about a king, a human figure in the line of the monarchs of old. They seem to be talking about Israel's God himself. Malachi 3.1 talks of God sending a messenger ahead of him to get people ready. Isaiah 40.3 is clear as well. The person who's 'coming' is God himself!

Why? Wasn't God always, so to speak, 'there'? Why would he be 'coming'? Cut a long story very short: the ancient Jews believed that their God had abandoned Israel, and the Temple, at the time of the exile in Babylon, six centuries earlier. They had come back; they had rebuilt the Temple; but at no point did they have a sense that God had returned to live in it. (For a start, if he had, why were pagans still ruling over them?) So the great promises of God's return remained unfulfilled. And John the Baptist seemed to be saying that now was the time. He was on the way!

So Mark invites us, right off the top, to hold together two pictures. First, Israel's God is coming back at last! Second, here comes Jesus, Israel's true king, 'God's son' in that sense! How can we get our heads around that?

John doesn't give his hearers much time to think. He was plunging people into the river Jordan, but the Coming One – whoever he was – would plunge them in something much more dangerous and powerful. In the 'holy spirit'! That's another idea bursting in on Mark's hearers, making them wonder what on earth he's talking about. 'God's coming back! The Messiah's on the way! You'll be plunged in the spirit!' If you feel it's now your turn to be breathless, you're probably in good company. I suspect that his first readers felt the same.

But the point, of course – this is Ash Wednesday, after all – is that you need to get ready. When God arrives; when the king knocks on the door; when you're about to be plunged in the holy spirit – what is there in your life that most embarrasses you? What are you ashamed of? Which bits of the room have been quietly crying out to be tidied these many years, and you've been ignoring them? Mark is taking us on a pilgrimage

this Lent, to the place where, he believes, God has come into our very midst – that is, to the cross of the Messiah. It's time to get ready.

Today

Wake us up, gracious Lord, by the message of your coming, and help us, in our hearts and our lives, to be ready.

THURSDAY AFTER ASH WEDNESDAY

Mark 1.21–45; focused on 1.21–28

²¹They went to Capernaum. At once, on the sabbath, Jesus went into the synagogue and taught. ²²They were astonished at his teaching. He wasn't like the legal teachers; he said things on his own authority.

²³All at once, in their synagogue, there was a man with an unclean spirit.

²⁴'What business have you got with us, Jesus of Nazareth?' he yelled. 'Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are: you're God's Holy One!'

²⁵'Be quiet!' ordered Jesus. 'And come out of him!'

²⁶The unclean spirit convulsed the man, gave a great shout, and came out of him. ²⁷Everyone was astonished.

'What's this?' they started to say to each other. 'New teaching – with real authority! He even tells the unclean spirits what to do, and they do it!'

²⁸Word about Jesus spread at once, all over the surrounding district of Galilee.

It was the organist's night off. His deputy, fresh from college and looking even younger than he actually was, took charge of the choir. The singers – a good-hearted lot, but choirs will be choirs – were, almost instinctively, pushing the boundaries to see what would happen. Trivial things: a note fluffed here, a lead missed there. And – the most trivial of all, but a telltale

sign of implicit rebellion – some were wearing brown shoes, not the regulation black.

I watched as they processed back after the service. The young man didn't bat an eyelid. Very quietly, but with deadly accuracy, he alerted them to the mistakes. 'And, gentlemen,' he added, 'black shoes, please.' He didn't raise his voice. He didn't need to. He was in charge, and they knew it. Point made. It was good to see.

The surprise of authority – someone's in charge here! We'd better sit up and take notice! – is what Mark is highlighting in this early incident in Jesus' public career. And it shows what so much of the gospel is all about. Jesus was going about telling people that God was at last becoming king. *And he was behaving as if he, himself, was in charge* – as if *he* were the king. There's the puzzle: as much a puzzle for Jesus' first hearers, and for Mark's as well, as it is for us.

Mark contrasts Jesus' authority with that of 'the legal teachers'. We may not immediately pick up the significance of that. In the modern Western world, 'legal teachers' would presumably be teaching in a law school, where young practitioners would be trained for their various tasks. But in ancient Israel a 'legal teacher' was much more than that.

Israel's 'law', after all, went back to Moses – or rather, to God himself, on Mount Sinai. The law, for them, wasn't just a system of rules and regulations. It was (so they believed) the ultimate revelation of what it meant to be human. What it meant to be God's people. And when the Jewish people were hemmed in and oppressed by pagan enemies – as they were in Jesus' day – the law was the badge they wore, proudly, to show that they really belonged to God even if things were tough just now. To 'teach the law' in that world was much more than training the next generation of barristers. It meant setting the social and cultural boundaries. It meant maintaining God's people in their distinct, and special, identity.

But the people who taught the law did so not on their own authority but by interpreting and applying existing law, both

written and oral. ‘This is what so-and-so taught,’ they would say, quoting both recent and ancient authorities. But Jesus didn’t do that. As we see in the other gospels (the Sermon on the Mount, for instance), he was quite outspoken. ‘You’ve heard that it was said . . . but I say to you . . .!’ He behaved, and spoke, as if he was in charge.

And he backed up his speaking with action. Here we run into a problem – for us. In Jesus’ world, as in many parts of the world today (but not usually so visibly in the modern West), people’s lives were blighted by forces or powers beyond their control, forces that seemed to take them over. People say, in our world, ‘I don’t know what made me do it.’ People in Jesus’ world reckoned they *did* know why some people seemed totally ‘off the rails’: there were hostile ‘spiritual’ forces out there, hard to define, but powerful in their effect. Calling such a force a ‘demon’ or an ‘unclean spirit’ doesn’t mean they knew exactly what it was. It was a way of saying that the person was over-powered by an outside force. A malign power from beyond themselves.

And part of the point of God becoming king at last, which was the centre of the message of Jesus, was that all rival powers were being defeated. Jesus came with power and authority greater than the forces that had corrupted and defaced human lives. For God to become king meant that all other forces had to be dethroned. And the most obvious sign of that was that the dark, shadowy forces that had seized control of some benighted individuals were being decisively challenged.

These ‘forces’ were cunning. They seemed to know too much. Here and elsewhere we see the people they controlled shouting out what Jesus wanted at that stage to keep secret. He was God’s Holy One (verse 24); and he had come, ultimately, to destroy all forces of evil in the world. They seemed to have an ‘inside track’ on spiritual realities. (Whether we moderns like it or not, by the way, this is a sure sign that stories like this weren’t made up. The early Christians were unlikely to

invent ‘testimony’ to Jesus from the lips of highly disturbed individuals.)

For Mark, and I suggest for us, stories like this should flag up the fact that there are many things in the world that appear to go horribly wrong which the best brains we have can’t even analyse, let alone solve. The experience of terrifying and inhumane regimes around the world over the last century teaches us that forces can be unleashed which make people do unimaginably terrible things to one another. And all this has happened at a time when, in the modern Western world at least, people have banished ‘religion’, and even Jesus, to the sidelines, into the corner labelled ‘personal therapy and lifestyle’.

Fortunately, Jesus refuses to stay in such a corner – just as he refused to fit into the expectations of the townsfolk at Capernaum. He insists on being in charge, even though it will be at the cost of his own life. That is the pattern of the whole gospel, ending up on the cross itself where, strangely, Jesus defeats all the powers of darkness.

Today

Sovereign Lord, help us to trust you when things seem out of control.

FRIDAY AFTER ASH WEDNESDAY

Mark 2.1–17; focused on 2.13–17

¹³Once more Jesus went out beside the sea. All the crowd came to him, and he taught them.

¹⁴As he went along he saw Levi, son of Alphaeus, sitting at the toll booth. ‘Follow me!’ he said. And he got up and followed him.

¹⁵That’s how Jesus came to be sitting at home with lots of tax-collectors and sinners. There they were, plenty of them, sitting with Jesus and his disciples; they had become his followers.

¹⁶When the legal experts from the Pharisees saw him eating with tax-collectors and sinners, they said to his disciples, ‘Why does he eat with tax-collectors and sinners?’

¹⁷When Jesus heard it, he said to them, ‘It’s sick people who need the doctor, not healthy ones. I came to call the bad people, not the good ones.’

Three times yesterday the doorbell rang unexpectedly. First it was the engineer; he came to inspect the foundations of the outhouse. Then it was the builder; he came to measure for some windows that need replacing. Finally it was the electrician; he came to fix some damaged light fittings. (Like the mythical Number 17 bus: you wait for ages, and then three come at the same time.) They came, each of them, to do a job. All went off happily with the job done.

Perhaps the most interesting word in this fascinating passage is that word, ‘came’, in verse 17. ‘I came’, says Jesus, ‘to call the bad people, not the good ones.’ Pause a moment before we even think about the bad and the good. What does Jesus mean, ‘I came’? He implies that, like the builder and his colleagues, he had ‘come’ with a specific purpose. But . . . ‘come’ from where? Isn’t it an odd way of talking about a sense of vocation? Might we not expect someone engaged in a particular mission to speak of ‘I’ve been called to . . .’, rather than ‘I’ve come’?

I think this saying hints at something we noticed right at the start of Mark’s gospel: that Jesus was, simultaneously, called to act out the part of Israel’s Messiah, and to act out the role of Israel’s God, coming (yes!) to rescue his people at last, to reveal his glory and establish his kingdom. I think this is what we see here, reflected off the text in a sudden flicker of light. There are echoes here, after all, of what God says in the prophecy of Ezekiel, chapter 34. There, speaking of Israel as a flock of sheep, God declares that he himself is going to come and search for the lost and the strayed.

Jesus uses that image, too, of course, in various places, but here he chooses another one: that of the doctor. Imagine a doctor who was so keen to put on a good show that he filled up the hospital with healthy people! Not a lot of point in that. But the people who were keeping an eye out for Jesus and what he was doing – the ‘legal experts’ from the party of the ‘Pharisees’, a kind of self-appointed group of moral watchdogs – make out that they’re shocked at Jesus keeping company with all the wrong people.

That, too, is significant. Why would anybody have worried about who Jesus was associating with? People can be friends, we assume, with anybody they like. Yes: but only if they’re private citizens. You or I can be friends with the strange characters we happen to meet. But if the Prime Minister, or his wife, befriends some dodgy or shady person it reflects badly. It calls their judgment into question.

And Jesus wasn’t acting as just another person on the street. He was already recognized as someone claiming to speak for God, claiming to announce that God was now becoming king in the new way he’d always promised. So he naturally became a target. Imagine the journalists and photographers swarming around someone who suddenly announces the foundation of a new political party! Everyone wants to know what signals are being sent, what lifestyle this person will adopt, and so on. That’s what it was like with Jesus.

Jesus leaves them in no doubt: his new kingdom-of-God movement will be all about celebrating a new sort of healing. He’s already been healing people’s bodies, and now he uses that medical imagery to explain what’s happening on a larger scale as well. Tax-collectors were no more popular in the ancient world than they are today. In fact, they were often even less popular, because they would be working for some regime or other – either the Romans, the hated pagans who were the ultimate overlords, or one of the Herod family, local but not much better. (The reason there was a tax-booth just along the

seashore from Capernaum is that you would cross over from Herod Antipas' territory into that of his brother, Philip.) In a small community, everyone would know everyone else, and once someone was regarded as a bad character, that would be it. Nobody would want to be friends – except other people who had been treated in the same way.

And Jesus was determined to treat them differently. This was not (just to be clear) because, so to speak, God likes bad characters and wants them to stay as bad characters. No: God loves bad characters and wants to rescue them! Sometimes people today speak as though Jesus simply tells people that they're all right the way they are. That would be like a doctor filling the hospital with sick people and leaving them still sick.

When Jesus says 'Follow me!' it is, of course, a wonderful affirmation of who we are, deep down inside. You are a human being, made to reflect God's image and glory into the world, and Jesus is calling you to do just that in whatever specific way God wants from you. That is part of the message of Lent: a new calling.

But this doesn't mean we can continue to live in the ways we've always lived. On the contrary. When Jesus calls someone, said Dietrich Bonhoeffer, he commands them to come and die. We shall see that soon enough. The death begins right here, as the 'sick people' discover that Jesus heals them so that they leave that old life behind. But, as with the gospel as a whole, the death happens so that new life can grow in its place. When you hear Jesus calling, 'Follow me!', you should expect both. From sickness to health. From death to life.

Today

Help me, gracious Lord, to hear you calling, to celebrate your love, and to accept your healing in every area of my life.

SATURDAY AFTER ASH WEDNESDAY

Mark 1.9–15

⁹This is how it happened. Around that time, Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee, and was baptized by John in the river Jordan.

¹⁰That very moment, as he was getting out of the water, he saw the heavens open, and the spirit coming down like a dove onto him. ¹¹Then there came a voice, out of the heavens: ‘You are my son! You are the one I love! You make me very glad.’

¹²All at once the spirit pushed him out into the desert. ¹³He was in the desert forty days, and the satan tested him there. He was with the wild beasts, and angels waited on him.

¹⁴After John’s arrest, Jesus came into Galilee, announcing God’s good news.

¹⁵‘The time is fulfilled!’ he said; ‘God’s kingdom is arriving! Turn back, and believe the good news!’

Part of the fun of learning to read is learning to listen for echoes. If you were browsing in a bookshop and saw a novel with the title *Pride, Prejudice and Passion*, you would recognize at once that the author was echoing Jane Austen’s novel *Pride and Prejudice*. If you were a Scottish football supporter and saw a headline saying ‘Old Firm up to New Tricks’, you would know at once that this referred to some new controversy involving the ‘Old Firm’, the two great Glasgow clubs, Rangers and Celtic. And if you switched on the television and heard the announcer describing a new series in which people were determined ‘to boldly go’ somewhere exotic or dangerous, you would recognize the echo of *Star Trek*. This echo recognition functions at every level of writing and speaking. The evidence suggests that it has always done so, ever since humans spoke and wrote words.

Part of the excitement of learning to read the Bible is listening for the echoes that one text sets up when it refers back to another – which the author assumes, or hopes, that you will already know. This passage is one of the classic examples. Jesus is baptized by John in the river Jordan, and as the spirit comes

down on him like a dove there is a voice from heaven: ‘You are my son! You are the one I love! You make me very glad.’

Now if this is the voice of God himself (and Mark clearly intends us to understand that that’s what it is), then presumably God can say what he likes. But, as regularly in the New Testament, the ‘new’ thing God is doing and saying is the fulfilment, the coming-of-age if you like, of all kinds of things he had been saying in the Old Testament. And here there are two passages which those with sharp ears will be able to detect. Only if we pick up these echoes will we be able to ‘hear’ what Mark was wanting us to hear.

First, there is Psalm 2. It’s a short, powerful poem about the kingdoms of the world and the kingdom of God. The world’s kingdoms huff and puff and make a lot of noise, telling one another that they can do without God; and God looks down and laughs at them, installing his own appointed king, and warning the nations that they must submit to him. It’s a vivid statement of the ancient Jewish hope, told and retold in one story after another.

And at its heart is the word of God to the king whom he is appointing to rule the nations. The king himself, in the poem, tells what he heard: ‘I will tell of the decree of YHWH: He said to me, “You are my son; today I have begotten you. Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage, and the ends of the earth your possession.”’

So Mark wants us to hear that the voice of God at Jesus’ baptism is appointing him, as his own ‘son’, to the role of the king who will bring God’s rule to bear on the foolish, warring nations. The second passage reinforces this and gives it particular direction. It’s from the first of the ‘servant’ poems in Isaiah 40—55: ‘Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights. I have put my spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations.’

The ‘servant’, then, is the one who makes God very glad, and who will be the means through which God’s justice will extend

into all the world. But, as we read on in Isaiah, we discover how the ‘servant’ is going to do this. It will happen through his own suffering and cruel, shameful death.

There is no doubt, as we read on through Mark’s gospel, that these are the themes that the author wanted us to hear, as ‘echoes’, right up front. And, as we do so, we should see how they help him to get us on track for his larger theme of God’s kingdom.

Jews of Jesus’ day associated the idea of God becoming king with the ancient memory of their great story, the Exodus. That’s when God brought them out of slavery, through the Red Sea, into the desert, and then through the river Jordan into the promised land. That’s what it meant, in another ancient song, for God to become king (Exodus 15.18). Now Jesus is, as it were, leading the way through the water into the new world, the new time, the new possibility. He goes into the desert for forty days, like the Israelites in the desert for forty years. Then back he comes, and makes the announcement: ‘This is the time! God is becoming king, right now!’

This is the ‘good news’ for which Israel had longed (another ‘echo’, this time of Isaiah 40.9 and 52.7). And anyone who hears this message must also hear another one, the one to which we pay special attention in Lent: ‘Turn back’ – turn back from doing things your own way, from organizing your life according to your own hopes and whims. If God is becoming king, and if Jesus is being installed as the human king through whom God’s kingdom is now happening, the only appropriate reaction is to abandon our own little hopes and schemes and let God be God in our lives. And through our lives.

Today

Lord Jesus, Son of the living God, help us to believe that you are the world’s true king, and to turn back from all that gets in the way of your rule in our lives.

WEEK 1: SUNDAY

Psalm 25.1–10

¹To you, O LORD, I lift up my soul.

²O my God, in you I trust;
do not let me be put to shame;
do not let my enemies exult over me.

³Do not let those who wait for you be put to shame;
let them be ashamed who are wantonly treacherous.

⁴Make me to know your ways, O LORD;
teach me your paths.

⁵Lead me in your truth, and teach me,
for you are the God of my salvation;
for you I wait all day long.

⁶Be mindful of your mercy, O LORD, and of your steadfast love,
for they have been from of old.

⁷Do not remember the sins of my youth or my transgressions;
according to your steadfast love remember me,
for your goodness' sake, O LORD!

⁸Good and upright is the LORD;
therefore he instructs sinners in the way.

⁹He leads the humble in what is right,
and teaches the humble his way.

¹⁰All the paths of the LORD are steadfast love and faithfulness,
for those who keep his covenant and his decrees.

I met a friend the other day who is working on the great Victorian missionary and explorer David Livingstone (1813–73). Livingstone was a great hero to nineteenth-century Christians: he combined evangelistic zeal with a restless hunger for both geographical and scientific exploration, and – long before people became cynical about such things – he genuinely believed that he was bringing ‘civilization’ to the vast and hitherto unmapped interior of Africa. ‘I am prepared to go anywhere,’ he said, ‘provided it be forward.’ We today might want to point out the folly of blundering on into the unknown, and of doing things that

might have, to say the least, more ambiguous results than he intended. But there is no doubting his sheer courage and energy, which puts most of us (whose efforts are no doubt equally ambiguous, though on a more domestic scale) to shame.

But I was put in mind of such visionary exploration when praying through this Psalm; because it is the prayer of someone who has heard God's call to set off and go somewhere but is, as yet, quite uncertain where that 'somewhere' is. This, to be sure, has been a common experience of God's people down the ages. There are several times, in the book of Acts, that great tale of early missionary expansion, when Paul and his companions are not sure where to go next, and have to wait in puzzlement for further instructions.

So the prayer at the heart of the Psalm is in verses 4 and 5: 'Make me to know your ways, O LORD; teach me your paths. Lead me in your truth, and teach me.' That should be our prayer day by day, and especially now as we've set off on this Lenten journey. (Experience of past Lents suggests that it can be a time when those who take it seriously find that, like the early explorers, they are going out into a country they don't know, full of unforeseen hazards as well as glorious possibilities.)

But the problem is not just that we don't know where we're going. There are two other difficulties which we will be all too aware of. First, there seem to be hostile forces all around us. The first Sunday of Lent, when traditionally we reflect on Jesus' temptations, is often a day for reflecting on our temptations as well. Anyone determining to make a fresh start, and to go forward with Jesus into the unknown, is almost bound to find that testing of one sort or another increases dramatically. I was talking recently to a friend who, after many years of pondering God's call, is finally going forward for training for full-time ministry. Almost at once things began to go wrong: serious sickness in the family, financial problems, sharp opposition from friends believing this was a mistake. This is classic. It's like what happens when you're out for a walk and suddenly

come out from behind a high wall into the teeth of a gale. That's when you need to pray, with the Psalmist, 'Do not let my enemies exult over me!' (verse 2).

But as well as hostile forces (and perhaps hostile people) there are forces within which can be just as threatening. Here we find four: the sense of shame that will come if we blunder off in the wrong direction (verses 2, 3); our past mistakes and downright sins (verse 7); and, in the later part of the Psalm beyond the verses set for today, loneliness (verse 16) and other 'troubles of the heart' (verse 17). They are all familiar, especially to those who set off on the Lenten path of following the Lord without knowing where he's leading.

But, as so often in the Psalms, the answer is found in the character of God himself, the God we know and see in Jesus. He is trustworthy (verse 2); his ways are truth, and he provides salvation, rescue (verse 5); above all, he is merciful and constant in his love (verses 6, 7). He is good and upright (verse 8). There are times when we need to pick up these attributes of God, almost like picking up a set of large bricks or stones, and place them like stepping-stones, one after the other, in the river we are trying to cross. That is part of what it means to 'wait' on God (verse 5).

Then we can walk ahead, not because we know the way or are feeling especially brave, but because we know there is solid ground under our feet. This is not folly; it is humility (verse 9). And if we're waiting for the Lord and relying on him, we will naturally want (as, left to ourselves, we often do not naturally want) to keep his covenant and his decrees (verse 10). Obedience, in fact, arises most naturally not from an 'ethic' being forced on us against our will, but from that sense of humility which comes when we know we don't know the way but trust that God does. The first Sunday of Lent is the time for looking the enemies in the face and naming them before God. It is also the time to look God in the face and learn to trust him for every step of the way.

Today

Lead me, O Lord, in your truth, and teach me, for you are the God of my salvation.

WEEK 1: MONDAY

Mark 2.18–28: focused on 2.18–22

¹⁸John's disciples, and the Pharisees' disciples, were fasting. People came and said to Jesus, 'Look here: John's disciples are fasting, and so are the Pharisees' disciples; why aren't yours?'

¹⁹'How can the wedding guests fast,' Jesus replied, 'if the bridegroom is there with them? As long as they've got the bridegroom with them, they can't fast.'

²⁰'Mind you, the time is coming when the bridegroom will be taken away from them. They'll fast then all right.'

²¹'No one sews unshrunk cloth onto an old cloak. If they do, the new patch will tear the old cloth, and they'll end up with a worse hole. ²²Nor does anyone put new wine into old wine-skins. If they do, the wine will burst the skins, and they'll lose the wine and the skins together. New wine needs new skins.'

I am writing this not long after the worldwide commemorations that took place on the tenth anniversary of the terrible terrorist attacks on New York and Washington on September 11, 2001. In many countries around the globe, people stopped what they were doing and paused to remember, and shudder. Many wept. There were church services, solemn music, the reading out of names.

Some great and terrible events are felt to be so important that only a pause, only a solemn commemoration, will do. It seems to be quite wrong that you should have a party or a dance, or indeed a wedding, at such a time. Can you imagine the effect if, as the commemorations in New York were at their height, a clown and a juggler had burst out of the crowd and started to perform funny, silly antics to make the crowds laugh?

People would have been shocked. The police would probably have come and hustled the troublemakers away.

Nobody knows how long America will go on commemorating that horrible day. But the Jewish people of Jesus' day had been commemorating other disasters, as great as those of September 11 and much greater, for centuries. They looked back to the terrible events when Babylon had come and destroyed Jerusalem, burnt the Temple to the ground, and taken the people into captivity in a land far away. Only the most solemn commemoration would do if the people were to recall, with due solemnity, events that traumatic. So, like New Yorkers on September 11, the Jewish people kept special days when they fasted and prayed and remembered. That was part of their national identity. It was part of what made them who they were. Everyone who wanted to take the great national story seriously would join in.

But Jesus' disciples were not joining in. They were not fasting when all the others were. And so, like people laughing and playing at a 9/11 commemoration, they scandalized those who saw them. 'Why aren't your disciples fasting?'

Jesus' reply explains, in a vivid and explosive little image, what is going on. This has nothing to do (as people sometimes imagine) with Judaism being 'legalistic' and Jesus being eager to abolish 'rules'. It has nothing to do with Jews trying to impress God with their moral effort and Jesus telling them that you don't have to do that after all. It has everything to do with what Jesus has already been saying: *the time is fulfilled, and God's kingdom is arriving!* Jesus wasn't teaching a new kind of 'religion', or a different 'moral code'. He was launching the project that was designed to fulfil all Israel's dreams, to undo the long years of shame and sorrow and replace them with a great celebration, a sort of wedding party.

Jesus, in other words, is explaining his disciples' failure to fast on the appropriate days by claiming that this moment, the time of his public career, is the long-awaited special time,

the time when God and Israel are getting it together again at last. The picture of the wedding party looks back to various biblical passages, and highlights the extraordinary claim that Jesus himself is the ‘bridegroom’, who has come to celebrate his wedding. There is no way the wedding guests can fast while that’s going on – though (in a typical dark aside, because God’s kingdom will only come through his suffering and death) there will come a moment of fasting, of utter desolation, when ‘the bridegroom is taken away’.

Jesus then broadens out the picture. You don’t stick a new patch on an old coat, or put new wine into old wineskins. You can’t, in other words, patch up the old life of Judaism with a little bit of kingdom-teaching. You can’t expect to squash the new life of the kingdom into the old bottles of Judaism.

This is not, to repeat, because there was anything wrong with Judaism. The Jews were God’s people, struggling to be faithful to God’s covenant. No: the covenant itself was looking forward to the time when God would do the new thing he’d always promised. Now he was fulfilling that promise, even though it didn’t look like what most people had expected. And when that moment arrives, you can’t hold on to the old ways. Candles are great when it’s dark, but when the sun rises you need to blow them out.

People have often quoted this passage about ‘new wineskins’ to justify innovations in the church. Fair enough, up to a point. God is still the God of surprises and new ideas. But the main point, far deeper than all our small rearrangements of the furniture, is that, with the coming of Jesus, Israel and the world were given not a new set of rules, not a new type of ‘religion’, but new creation itself.

So isn’t it a bit odd, as we get into the stride of our Lenten disciplines, to talk about Jesus and his disciples refusing to fast? Not a bit of it. It’s because of that new creation, launched once and for all with Jesus himself, that we need to take time and make the effort to bring our lives into line with the new

reality. We do not fast because we commemorate some great national disaster. We fast because, as those already caught up in Jesus' kingdom-project, in God's new world, we need to be sure that we are saying a firm goodbye to everything in us that still clings to the old.

Today

Help us, gracious Lord, to be wise in our disciplines, to celebrate your new life and to put to death all that detracts from it.

WEEK 1: TUESDAY

Mark 3.1–19; focused on 3.13–19

¹³Jesus went up the mountain, and summoned the people he wanted, and they came to him. ¹⁴He appointed twelve (naming them 'apostles') to be with him and to be sent out as heralds, ¹⁵and to have authority to cast out demons. ¹⁶In appointing the Twelve, he named Simon 'Peter'; ¹⁷James, son of Zebedee, and his brother John, he named 'Boanerges', which means 'sons of thunder'. The others were ¹⁸Andrew, Philip, Bartholomew, Matthew, Thomas, James son of Alphaeus, Thaddaeus, Simon the Cananaean, ¹⁹and Judas Iscariot (the one who handed him over).

You know the revolution has become serious when its leaders appoint an alternative government. The Western world watched and waited in the early months of 2011 as the Libyan rebels set up a kind of shadow body. There was still a 'government' in Tripoli, loyal to the long-time leader, Colonel Gaddafi, but away to the north-east, in one of the rebel strongholds, the increasingly influential rebel movement set up a body to administer the larger and larger area under its control.

Until we realize that Jesus' calling of the Twelve must have felt a bit like that, we won't get to the heart of what was going on. He was, after all, behaving as if he was already in charge – speaking with authority, and backing up his words with decisive and

startling actions. This had already aroused hostility and threats from the existing authorities, both real and self-appointed. Undeterred, Jesus moved ahead. His next action spoke volumes.

Anyone behaving as if they're in charge, and then calling people and giving them new names and an apparently special role, is quite obviously making a statement. He is, it seems, consolidating his position. He isn't just a maverick, going around doing bizarre and surprising things. He seems to have some kind of strategy.

But the strategy has a clear symbolic value. Numbers speak volumes. If Jesus had given his followers ten new 'commandments', the point would have been obvious: these were to replace the ten given by God through Moses on Mount Sinai. What Jesus does is equally obvious to anyone with the least knowledge of ancient Israel and of the Jewish hopes of the first century.

The people of Israel were a *family*, tracing ancestry back to the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Jacob had had twelve sons, some of whom became famous (Reuben, Simeon, Levi, and above all Judah, Joseph and Benjamin) and some of whom remained less so (Naphtali, Issachar, Asher, Gad, Zebulun and Dan). The great primal collection of biblical books, the first five (from Genesis to Deuteronomy) places special emphasis on the Twelve and their particular callings.

When the Israelites finally entered the promised land after their forty-year wander in the desert, Joshua parcelled out the land between the twelve tribes, with the descendants of Levi living and working as priests and teachers among the others. After many generations, disaster struck: the northern tribes were carried away captive by the Assyrians. Nobody really knew where they were, or whether they had been simply dispersed. Only the tribes of Benjamin and Judah, and such Levites as lived among them, remained. Up till then, the people had been known as 'Israelites', the twelve sons of Jacob (whose special name, given by God, was 'Israel'). Now they would be known as the 'Judah-people'. That's where the modern word 'Jew' comes from.

But there were some great, ancient prophets who had predicted that when God restored the fortunes of his people he would call the twelve tribes back into existence. There can be no doubt that this is the message Jesus wanted to convey when he called twelve from among his followers, and spoke of them as such. This was not simply a renewal of ‘Judaism’, the Judah-people. This was a renewal of Israel itself. This was a going-back-to-the-beginning move. It was almost as powerful, and as dangerous, a ploy as it would be today if an apparently self-appointed leader were to call a press conference in front of Buckingham Palace or on the White House lawn, or were to build a new official house and call *it* ‘Buckingham Palace’ or ‘The White House’.

Two other features of Jesus’ call of the Twelve stand out particularly. First, it forces us to ask, as do Jesus’ actions: who does he think he is? He is not the first of the Twelve, a kind of ‘first among equals’. No: he calls the Twelve into existence. That makes him at least a new Jacob. But perhaps he is going further. It is, after all, God himself who called the people of Israel to be his people.

The second feature reinforces this first one. Jesus gives to some of the Twelve new names. He names Simon ‘Peter’, which means ‘rock’ or ‘stone’. James and John, the two sons of Zebedee, he names ‘Boanerges’, which means ‘thunder-sons’. But this is, more or less, what God had done with some of the original patriarchs. God renamed Abram ‘Abraham’, ‘father of many nations’ (Genesis 17.5). He renamed Jacob ‘Israel’, ‘prince with God’ (Genesis 32.28; 35.10). The new name carries a meaning, and the meaning indicates the purpose of God.

We might, perhaps, have been tempted to pass over this list of the Twelve. We don’t know very much about most of them (a bit like the original twelve Israelite patriarchs, in fact). But the fact that there were twelve of them speaks more powerfully than any individual achievements. And it speaks right

through the ages to us as well. The early Christians were quite clear that though Jesus had called the Twelve as a foundation for his work, he had then built on this foundation, and was continuing to do so (Ephesians 2.20). And Jesus himself promises, in the book of Revelation (2.17), that he will give a special ‘new name’ to all those who ‘conquer’, who hold out in the war against wickedness and corruption.

This promise holds firm and good for every single one of Jesus’ followers today. Read the list of names slowly once more, only this time, in between each of the Twelve whom Jesus called, place the names of your Christian leaders, teachers and friends. Right in the middle, place your own name. And pray that God will enable you to hear him call you once more by name, as he called you in your baptism, and show you how you, too, can be part of his alternative government, his project of kingdom and renewal.

Today

Almighty God, you called Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and the Twelve; and, through Jesus, you called the twelve apostles. Call us afresh today; name us once more to carry forward your purposes in the world.

WEEK 1: WEDNESDAY

Mark 3.20–35; focused on 3.20–30

²⁰He went into the house. A crowd gathered again, so that they couldn’t even have a meal. ²¹When his family heard it, they came to restrain him. ‘He’s out of his mind,’ they said.

²²Experts who had come from Jerusalem were saying, ‘He is possessed by Beelzebul! He casts out demons by the prince of demons!’

²³Jesus summoned them and spoke to them in pictures. ‘How can the Accuser cast out the Accuser? ²⁴If a kingdom splits into two factions, it can’t last; ²⁵if a household splits into

two factions, it can't last. ²⁶So if the Accuser revolts against himself and splits into two, he can't last – his time is up! ²⁷But remember: no one can get into a strong man's house and steal his property unless first they tie up the strong man; then they can plunder his house.

²⁸'I'm telling you the truth: people will be forgiven all sins, and all blasphemies of whatever sort. ²⁹But people who blaspheme the holy spirit will never find forgiveness. They will be guilty of an eternal sin.' ³⁰That was his response to their claim that he had an unclean spirit.

I stood by the side of the stream and scratched my head. There used to be a bridge there, but it had been washed away in a storm some years before. I suspect the locals – this was in a remote area of the Scottish highlands – were quite happy that it hadn't been rebuilt. No cars, not even tractors, could drive any further up their unspoilt valley. Now only walkers could pass that way; and the only walkers who could do it would be those prepared to ford the stream.

There were only two solid rocks I could see that would give me a firm foothold. For the rest, I'd have to splash and hope; but I knew if I made it, first to one rock, then to the other, I'd get across all right. It worked.

For generations people reading the gospels have wondered, quite naturally, just how much they can trust the gospels. Sceptics have suggested that it was all made up later to boost the church's picture of the Jesus it worshipped. The bridges to historical certainty have been broken and not rebuilt. Fundamentalists have said that it was all dictated by God, so the question doesn't arise. But most ordinary Christians are somewhere in between. Where are there solid footholds on which we know we can stand, even if it feels a bit of a splash, sometimes, to get to them?

This passage is one of those solid rocks. Nobody in the early church, however inventive they were feeling, would ever have

made up a story about Jesus being accused of being in league with the devil. That would simply give too much ammunition to the new movement's opponents, of whom there were plenty. So we can be absolutely sure this story is historically solid. You can rest your whole weight on it.

But if this story is solid, it means that we are forced, whether we want to or not, to believe that Jesus really was doing and saying things that were so remarkable that the only possible explanation – unless Jesus really was acting with a new, God-given power – was that he was in league with the devil. His opponents must have been desperate; this was all they could come up with. They couldn't deny that Jesus had been doing extraordinary things. They could only try to hit back with smear and innuendo. The solid rock at one point enables us, then, to walk through some other bits of the fast-moving historical stream with equal confidence.

So what do we find as we do so? We find a new level of a theme we already observed: that when Jesus was behaving as if he was in charge, it wasn't just the human 'authorities' that were being upstaged, and likely to strike back. It was the dark powers that hovered behind them.

There is an irony here. The legal experts from Jerusalem say that Jesus is in league with 'the Accuser', in other words, 'the satan'. The word 'satan' actually means 'accuser'; this reflects the ancient belief that the dark force in question was God's 'director of public prosecutions', whose job it was to point the finger at evildoers, and who enjoyed the role so much that he began to incite people to commit offences for which he could then charge them. But it is they, themselves, who are 'accusing' – accusing Jesus! This is part of a much larger theme which continues throughout Mark's gospel, as various different people 'accuse' Jesus of all sorts of things until they end up crucifying him.

But Jesus, in response, makes his strongest claim yet about what is going on through his work. What he is doing indicates clearly that the 'Accuser's' kingdom – the usurped rule, in the

whole world, of the power of evil – is being broken. Jesus has already made a decisive impact on it, ‘binding the strong man’ so that he can now ‘plunder his house’ (verse 27). This is the only explanation, Jesus is suggesting, that fits the facts. If Jesus had been in league with the satan, things would have got worse, not better.

The sharp, and worrying, warnings of verses 28–30 have often been taken out of context, as though there was a special ‘unforgiveable sin’ but Jesus wasn’t telling us what it was. Within the passage, though, the meaning is clear. Jesus is doing what he is doing by the power of the holy spirit. But if people look at the spirit’s work and declare that it’s the work of the devil, they are erecting a high steel wall between them and the powerful, rescuing love of God. That is a warning to all of us, whenever we are tempted to sneer at some new or different ‘Christian’ movement.

The main lesson for us, though, as we continue our journey through Lent, may well be this. If we are serious about following Jesus, people will misunderstand us, too, and may accuse us of bad motives, or prejudice, or ‘extremism’. The answer is simply to look back to Jesus, and to his victory over all the powers of evil. They can still make a lot of noise, and cause a lot of nuisance, but the ‘strong man’ has been tied up, and those who work for God’s kingdom can indeed, in the power of the spirit, set about plundering his house.

Today

Teach us, Lord Jesus, not to fear the accusations of the enemy, but to trust in your victory at all times.

WEEK 1: THURSDAY

Mark 4.1–20; focused on 4.1–9

¹Once again Jesus began to teach beside the sea. A huge crowd gathered; so he got into a boat and stationed himself on the sea,

with all the crowd on the shore looking out to sea. ²He taught them lots of things in parables. This is how his teaching went.

³‘Listen!’ he said. ‘Once upon a time there was a sower who went out sowing. ⁴As he was sowing, some seed fell beside the path, and the birds came and ate it up. ⁵Other seed fell on the rock, where it didn’t have much soil. There was no depth to the ground, so it shot up at once; ⁶but when the sun came up it was scorched, and withered away, because it hadn’t got any root. ⁷Other seed fell in among thorns; the thorns grew up and choked it, and it didn’t give any crop. ⁸And other seeds fell into good soil, and gave a harvest, which grew up and increased, and bore a yield, in some cases thirtyfold, in some sixtyfold, and in some a hundredfold.’

⁹And he added, ‘If you’ve got ears, then listen!’

From where I am sitting I can see, out in the autumn fields, the farmer harvesting the corn. It isn’t all in yet; some of the fields won’t reach their full growth for another few weeks. But when I walk down the lane, or drive through mile after mile of golden grain gently waving in the wind, there is a strong sense of fulfilment. As far as the farms are concerned, this is the moment the whole year has been waiting for. This is what all the hard work has been about. It’s time to draw it all together and celebrate the goodness of land, rain, sunshine and fresh air, all contributing to the great harvest.

It is not surprising, given that ancient Palestine had an almost entirely rural economy, that the theme of harvest was a powerful image in the ancient scriptures, pointing forwards to the time when God would fulfil his promises at last. What’s more, when things had gone badly wrong – when God’s people had gone away into exile in Babylon – some of the prophets spoke not just of a coming harvest, but of a fresh ‘sowing’. God would ‘sow’ his people again in their land, so that the new harvest, when it came, would be the result of a fresh act, a renewal of the covenant.

This, I believe, is why Jesus chose to speak about, and Mark chose to highlight, this idea of the seed being sown – and much

of it apparently going to waste. With this famous parable, Jesus is saying two things in particular. The crowds were eager for the first, but not for the second.

The people who crowded to the shore to hear him (the northern shore of the sea of Galilee, around Capernaum, has several natural amphitheatres where someone speaking from a boat can easily be heard by thousands) had, indeed, come in the hope of hearing the first point. As for the second, they may have found it not just unwelcome but incredible. Perhaps that is why Jesus had to say it in ‘parables’, teasing stories ending ‘if you’ve got ears, then hear’. When you say that sort of thing, you expect people to hear you hint that ‘I am saying something important but cryptic here, and you’ve got to decode it . . . perhaps because it’s dangerous’.

The first thing, for which his hearers were on tiptoe with excitement, was the good news that the ‘sowing’ was indeed happening at last. Jesus’ kingdom-movement was indeed the long-awaited restoration of God’s people. The hints, signs and symbols that Jesus had been putting out were true. This was the moment! Everything was going to be different! God would liberate his people at last!

But the second, so surprising and unwelcome, was that God’s great kingdom-action, bursting in upon them through Jesus’ words and works, was not having the effect that one might have imagined. The seed was being sown, but a lot of it seemed to be doing no good at all. Birds were eating some of it. Other seed produced quick-growing plants without any root. Other seed was choked by thorns. Jesus is under no illusions, and he wants his hearers to be clear as well: yes, this is God’s long-awaited new work, but no, it doesn’t mean that God’s people can simply be affirmed, or their national aspirations underwritten, as they stand. As the ancient prophets had always warned, when God finally does the new thing he’s promised, it is bound to be a work of judgment as well as mercy. That is what Jesus’ contemporaries (just like us) don’t want to hear.

Jesus was warning his contemporaries that, just because they were Jews, just because they were, as it were, part of God's team – and, as well, just because they had suffered for their heritage – that didn't automatically mean that they would be the sort of soil that would produce a great harvest. They might well find that Jesus' kingdom-message was exciting, while they were listening to it, but not immediately relevant to this or that situation in their lives . . . Or they might think it was *so* exciting that they should rush off and do something right away, but without really thinking about it . . . Or they might try to combine following Jesus with all the usual concerns of everyday life . . .

One way or another, things would go wrong. Even though God's kingdom-project was indeed going ahead, many of those you might have expected to be front and centre in taking it forward would, like T. S. Eliot's Macavity the Mystery Cat, mysteriously be 'not there'.

Now this, I believe, was a very specific and urgent warning to Jesus' contemporaries. God's kingdom was going ahead – there really would be a bumper harvest, thirtyfold, sixtyfold and a hundredfold. But they might not be part of it, however much they thought it was theirs by right, and however much enthusiasm they felt for it at the moment. As so often, however, what was specific to Jesus' first hearers can then be 'translated' as the message we need to hear, and to speak, today. Anyone who knows the state of Christian faith and life in the wider world today can be in no doubt that, despite the decline in church attendances in the Western world, the seed is being sown in all kinds of ways. New, enthusiastic movements are springing up all over the place. This parable issues a warning, not least to the leaders of such movements: how deep are the roots going? What protection are you offering against the birds and the thorns? Today's excitement can easily become tomorrow's boredom, or worse. Some of the 'new atheists' were once – for a short while – keen Christians. Evangelists, church planters and pastors, take note.

Today

Grant us, sovereign Lord, to nurture the seed of the word, to guard it and let it grow, and to bring forth a harvest to your glory.

WEEK 1: FRIDAY

Mark 4.21–41; focused on 4.35–41

³⁵That day, when it was evening, Jesus said to them, ‘Let’s go over to the other side.’

³⁶They left the crowd, and took him with them in the boat he’d been in. There were other boats with him too.

³⁷A big windstorm blew up. The waves beat on the boat, and it quickly began to fill. ³⁸Jesus, however, was asleep on a cushion in the stern. They woke him up.

‘Teacher!’ they said to him, ‘We’re going down! Don’t you care?’

³⁹He got up, scolded the wind, and said to the sea, ‘Silence! Shut up!’

The wind died, and there was a flat calm. ⁴⁰Then he said to them, ‘Why are you scared? Don’t you believe yet?’

⁴¹Great fear stole over them. ‘Who is this?’ they said to each other. ‘Even the wind and the sea do what he says!’

One of the things I love about the Psalms is the direct, in-your-face way the poet speaks to God. ‘Wake up, God!’ says the Psalmist; it’s time to call the wicked to account (7.6). ‘Wake up! I need someone to help me!’ (35.23); ‘Rouse yourself! Why are you asleep? Wake up, don’t cast us away!’ (44.23). ‘Wake up and show the pagans who’s boss!’ (59.5). The prophet Isaiah says much the same (51.9): ‘Wake up, wake up, Arm of the LORD – show us how strong you are!’

I suspect, of course, that if we’d sat these poets down in a cool, easy moment and asked them, ‘Did you really think God was asleep?’, they might have said, ‘Well, no; he is God, after all; but it certainly *seemed* as though he’d gone to sleep at the time!’ That, it seems, is a fairly typical expression of what we might

call biblical faith: faith in a God whom we believe at one level to be all-seeing, never-sleeping, omnipresent and omniscient – but who, at another level, seems, from the perspective of our muddled and messy lives, to have gone to sleep on the job.

That's why I find this passage in Mark so wonderfully encouraging. Right from the start the early Christians, reading this short but remarkable account, found it to be a great source of strength and comfort. The little ship of the church is tossed to and fro by the wind and on the waves. There are many, many times when both church leaders and rank-and-file Christians really do feel as though all is lost. All they can do at such times is to pray in the way the first disciples did on the boat.

Whether or not they realized, at the time, how exactly they were echoing the Psalms, Mark certainly did. He realized, too, the way in which the whole story carried all sorts of other echoes as well. Again, the Psalms: when people cry to YHWH, Israel's God, from the midst of the storm, he will make it to be still and quieten the waves (65.7; 89.9; 107.29). In particular, God made the Red Sea to part for his people to walk through; that is central, of course, to the great story of the Exodus. Now here is Jesus, doing much the same thing only close up and personal.

The disciples ask the natural question: 'Who *is* this?' Mark wants his readers to supply the answer, not in a glib or easy way, but with the same awe and breathless wonder of the frightened little group on the boat. 'Great fear stole over them,' he says. You bet it did. And unless it steals over us, too, as we roll around in our minds the possibility that when we're looking at Jesus we're looking at Israel's God in person, we are using the truth of the Incarnation as an intellectual screen behind which to hide for safety, rather than as the lens through which the light and warmth of God can flood and transform our hearts and lives.

Mark places this story at the end of his long chapter on parables. And, though he clearly wants us to see this as something which actually, and dramatically, happened, it too is a sort of parable. The parables left people with questions that they had

to answer for themselves. This story left the disciples with questions that would take them a while to figure out properly. Mark, arranging his gospel like this, is saying to us (among other things) that part of the way the kingdom of God works is precisely by people having sudden and alarming questions raised in their minds which they will have to ponder and puzzle over.

Sometimes these questions are forced on us by events that are frightening and worrying at the time. Sometimes they grow slowly out of things we have read in the Bible or heard in church. This is normal and natural, however unsettling it may seem at the time. ‘Don’t you believe yet?’ asks Jesus, almost teasing his frightened followers. This theme continues: ‘Don’t you get it? Don’t you understand? You still don’t get it?’ (8.17, 21). Part of the point of Christian discipleship is to have our minds and imaginations challenged, opened, stretched, reshaped. The world – God’s world! – is quite different, and a lot more unpredictable and interesting, than we often suppose. And at the heart of it is Jesus himself, sometimes apparently asleep but ready to wake up, transform our scary situations, and bounce the question back to us. When we pray ‘Wake up, Lord!’ we need to be prepared for him to reply that it is we who have been asleep. Our wake-up call to God is often the moment when God’s wake-up call to us is finally getting through.

Today

Wake us up, O Lord, from our easy-going sleep. Help us always to remember that you are in control, no matter how frightening or alarming things may be.

WEEK 1: SATURDAY

Mark 8.31–38

³¹Jesus now began to teach them something new.

‘There’s big trouble in store for the son of man,’ he said.
‘The elders, the chief priests and the scribes are going to reject

him. He will be killed – and after three days he'll be raised.'

³²He said all this quite explicitly.

At this, Peter took him aside and started to scold him. ³³But he turned round, saw the disciples, and scolded Peter.

'Get behind me, Accuser!' he said. 'You're thinking human thoughts, not God's thoughts.'

³⁴He called the crowd to him, with his disciples. 'If any of you want to come the way I'm going,' he said, 'you must say "no" to your own selves, pick up your cross, and follow me.

³⁵Yes: if you want to save your life, you'll lose it; but if you lose your life because of me and the Message you'll save it. ³⁶After all, what use is it to win the world and lose your life? ³⁷What can you give in exchange for your life? ³⁸If you're ashamed of me and my words in this cheating and sinning generation, the son of man will be ashamed of you when he "comes in the glory of his father with the holy angels".'

Fans of detective stories will know the drill. The main lines of the plot are reasonably clear, or so it appears. But somewhere on the way there will be a clue, a hint, a nudge, which the alert reader will pick up. The culprit will have left a trace; something said that doesn't quite ring true, something done which seems a little out of character. The story may well be so gripping that the moment passes and the reader doesn't notice, or quickly forgets. But when the end comes, and all is revealed, that little incident, that small hint, will come into its own. 'Yes,' you will say, 'I should have known all along. That was the clue.'

At one level, this story in Mark is quite plain. Jesus is telling his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and be killed – and that anyone who wants to follow him must be prepared for the same fate. We might well suppose, granted the violent history of Jewish uprisings in the folk memory of his hearers, that this sort of thing would hardly come as a surprise. But there is something more going on here than a clear-eyed recognition of the likely results of being involved in a 'kingdom-of-God' movement. Where is the hint?

The hint comes, I suggest, in Jesus' rebuke to Peter. Peter has started to scold Jesus: he would, perhaps, have been quite prepared (in theory at least) to risk his life to support Jesus, but it surely can't be right for Jesus himself to die! Jesus is the one they need to be king, not to throw his life away. Without Jesus, the whole movement is nothing.

Jesus could have said, by way of response, something like he says to the two disciples on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24). He could have launched into a lengthy Bible study, as he did then, to show that the whole theme and pattern of the scriptures was for God's people to be plunged into terrible trouble and misery and for God to do his new, rescuing work through that means. That's how it had always been, and if he was introducing the last in the line of God's great actions you might expect that it would have the same shape and pattern.

He could have done that; but he doesn't. Instead, he uses the sharpest possible language to scold Peter. 'Get behind me, Accuser!' he said. In other words, Peter has put into words not only the counsel of prudence, of common sense. Peter has blurted out what the Accuser, the satan, has been whispering to Jesus all along. 'You can't go and *die*; that will ruin it all! You're doing fine; some more healings, some more parables, people will get the message. Don't be silly; don't be rash; don't be melodramatic; slow and steady and it'll work out.' Sounds good, doesn't it? Almost a sigh of relief.

And Jesus recognizes the voice for what it is, even though it's coming through the lips of his own closest associate. It is the voice of the Accuser, the one who is always on the attack, always eager to undermine the work of God, always ready to lead people into more sin and more guilt so there will be more for him to accuse them of. *And Jesus is going to his death to take the weight of that accusation on to himself*, so that his people need bear it no longer.

At one level, of course, the Accuser is right. If Jesus goes and dies, that will ruin it all – it will ruin the enemy's plan to

destroy God's people, God's plan, God's whole wonderful creation. Steer Jesus gently away from the cross, and he will die in his bed, of old age, leaving behind lots of good memories, lots of fine sayings, lots of healed cripples. And a world unredeemed. The cross is the means by which Jesus will rescue, not merely reform. It is the weapon with which he will not simply threaten the forces of evil, but overcome them. Peter's common-sense reaction (whoever heard of a crucified Messiah?) coincides exactly with the satanic opposition to God's saving plan. He is thinking human thoughts, not God's thoughts. By the time we get to Mark 15, we will understand why this hint is what it is and where it is. The little exchange between Peter and Jesus tells us, if we are alert, not just what will happen at the end of the story but what it all means.

Then comes the challenge from which most of us, given half a chance, still shrink. There is a sense in the gospel in which, because Jesus dies, we do not. His unique death saves us from what would otherwise be ours. But there is another sense, repeated again and again in the rest of the New Testament, that because Jesus dies, we must die too. We must pick up our cross – bearing public shame, as Jesus indicates in verse 38, as well as the prospect of pain and suffering – and follow him. That is not only the route by which we must travel for our own sakes. It is the path we tread through which Jesus' victory is made real, again and again, in the world. Common sense shrieks that this is crazy. Why not settle for a quiet life? But Jesus is quite clear. There are times when common sense means sliding along the smooth downward path with 'this cheating and sinning generation'. Don't rock the boat. Don't be an 'extremist'. Don't do anything rash. And behind this obvious, worldly advice there is the hidden message: don't talk about the cross. Don't mention Jesus. You don't want people to think you're a fanatic . . .

Well, there is of course always the danger of fanaticism, of a self-induced and self-promoting 'zeal'. But there is also

the danger, and much modern Western Christianity runs this risk all the time, of being ashamed of the sharp-edged and scandalous message of the kingdom and the cross. I suspect many of us today need to be warned against the second more than the first.

Today

Forgive us, gracious Lord, when we have preferred human common sense to the strange wisdom and power of your cross. Give us strength and clarity of understanding to hear your call afresh and to follow wherever you lead.

END OF EXCERPT