

St Mark's Church

Living Thinking Faith

A Journey through Mark

*Notes to accompany the reading
of Mark's Gospel*



by
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THESE NOTES have been prepared to help you study the Gospel of Mark. You are encouraged to read through the portion of Mark specified under each heading and then to consult these notes before returning to the text for further reflection. A number of 'Pauses for Thought' have been included to assist in relating the fruits of your labours to the journey of faith.

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I hope they prove helpful – happy reading!

Ian Wallis, Vicar.

Setting the scene

BEFORE WE BEGIN OUR STUDY OF MARK'S GOSPEL, it will be helpful to pause for a moment and consider the following question: How and why were details about Jesus' life and ministry recorded? In the first century, there were no cameras or tape recorders, and writing materials were costly and relatively scarce. Further, as far as we know, Jesus didn't keep a diary or a journal, and neither did those who became his closest followers. Galilee, the location for much of Jesus' life, was an oral culture with information communicated primarily by the spoken rather than the written word. Of course, there were exceptions, for example, material considered particularly authoritative and important for community life such as the sacred texts of Scripture; but Jesus wasn't considered in this light at the outset.

As you would expect, members of communities depending heavily on the spoken word evolve good retentive memories and cultivate the art of remembering through story telling and the like. Initially, therefore, stories about Jesus will have been committed to memory and subsequently communicated through repeated recitation and reminiscing.

But memories are always selective, for we tend to remember details that are particularly memorable or significant for us. Clearly, much of Jesus' ministry was striking or profound and, being an effective teacher, he used illustrations and forms of speech that were easily retained. As they were committed to memory and recalled by others, details of Jesus' ministry were communicated beyond those who encountered him personally. As part of this process of transmission, stories about Jesus will have been edited, modified and re-interpreted as hearers interacted with what Jesus did and said, and discovered his relevance for themselves.

Before long, collections of stories about Jesus started to be assembled. The earliest of these were not written down and consisted of groups of miracles or sayings or details relating to Jesus' final days. A number of factors, however, led to the eventual committal of these memories to writing and with this a fixing of their form.

Firstly, those who had known Jesus personally and who had, to some extent, acted as both a source and a control for the developing traditions about him started to die, making it necessary to have an authoritative account. This was particularly important given the number of false or incomplete interpretations of Jesus in existence. Secondly, the belief that God was going to intervene dramatically and bring the current era of history to a close started to decline and this, in turn, made the memory of Jesus even more precious and worthy of preservation. Thirdly, as the importance of Jesus for faith in God continued to grow, he became venerated to the extent that his words and actions were given the same status and authority as Scripture; indeed, they became Scripture for his followers.

And, as far as we know, Mark's Gospel represents the earliest attempt to commit the memory of Jesus to writing in biographical form. It may come as a surprise to discover that we know precious little about who Mark was or when and for whom he wrote. The author is not identified in the text and doesn't appear to have been one of Jesus' disciples, although Christian tradition claims that Peter

is the authority behind the Gospel. Most scholars think that Mark was written around the time of destruction of the Jerusalem Temple in A.D. 70, an event alluded to in the text (Mark 13:2). The Gospel was written in Greek and, given Aramaic was used by Jesus and throughout Palestine, probably originated outside this country.

With these preliminary comments in mind, let us turn to the text and allow Mark to speak for himself. Unless otherwise indicated, these notes are based on *The New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)* of the bible.

The advent of Jesus

Read Mark 1:1-11

MARK INTRODUCES JESUS by placing him within the story of salvation of God's chosen people, Israel. He emerges from the convictions of a faithful group of Jews, led by John the Baptist, who believed that God would save his people once again through the agency of an anointed one or Messiah. Scriptural prophecies (cf. Isaiah 40:3; Malachi 3:1) give substance to John's vision and galvanise response as fellow Jews repent (literally 'turn') by making public confession of their sins and undergoing baptism.

'Passing through the waters' was, of course, at the heart of God's first great act of salvation at the Exodus when the people of Israel were delivered from slavery through the Red Sea. Water baptism, which would become central for Christianity, was already recognised as a rite of initiation. It formed part of proselyte conversion, whereby Gentiles embraced the Jewish faith, and was required of those joining the Jewish sect based at Qumran (on the north-east shore of the Dead Sea). In addition to drawing on well-established scriptural links between water and spiritual cleansing (e.g. Ezekiel 36:25; Zechariah 13:1), John considered baptism to be a means of entry into a remnant of faithful Jews.

John's repentance movement represents one expression of the Jewish faith practised in first century Palestine. Later on, Mark introduces us to others (e.g. the Scribes, Pharisees, Sadducees and Zealots), although he fails to mention the group closest to the Baptist, namely, the Essenes. In all likelihood, the community based at Qumran was Essene and we know from their writings (the Dead Sea Scrolls) that they too had withdrawn to prepare for God's coming.

Jesus, then, was born and grew up in the midst of many competing and conflicting interpretations of what it meant to be a faithful Jew. It is possible that Jesus was himself a follower of John for a period; certainly, his own vocation emerges from John's vision and practice. This is something Mark underlines in two ways: firstly, by recording how the one who will baptize and minister in the power of the Holy Spirit (v. 8) is himself empowered for ministry through the Spirit as he is baptized by John. And, secondly, by noting how it is at this time that God breaks his prolonged and seemingly impenetrable silence (v. 11) to establish Jesus' special relationship to himself and function within the dawning of God's salvation.

Jesus - God's good news!

Read Mark 1:12-20

ALTHOUGH MARK LOCATES JESUS in time and place by introducing him onto the stage of first century Palestine, he also wishes to emphasise that his ministry has wider implications for humanity's relation to God. As we shall see, this is achieved in many ways, but one of the most profound is the technique whereby he draws the camera back, so to speak, and allows us to see Jesus from a broader perspective. In this case, within the purposes of God and the struggle between good and evil. A fine example of this came at the end of the previous section where Jesus receives affirmation and empowerment from God through the divine voice and the gift of the Spirit. Jesus' ordeal in the wilderness furnishes another example as he is tempted by Satan - the figure who in Jewish thought came to symbolize not simply that which tests our resolve to follow in God's ways, but a discrete power that opposes God and his ministers.

The 40 days of Jesus' temptation, reminiscent of the 40 years of Israel's wilderness experience, is meant to be taken figuratively. We know from the rest of Mark's Gospel that Jesus' conflict with the forces of evil continues throughout; it is, rather, the arrest of John the Baptist (cf. Mark 6:14-29) that signals the commencement of his ministry. And right at the outset, Mark records what we would now refer to as Jesus' 'mission statement' (v. 15) - the central conviction informing his entire ministry and providing us with a lens through which to interpret all that follows.

We shall consider later terms such as 'kingdom of God', 'repent' and 'believe', but let us take a moment to reflect on what is meant by the 'good news', which can also be rendered 'gospel' or 'evangel' (hence 'evangelist', etc.). The word is found in both secular and sacred contexts, including the prophetic oracles of the Hebrew Scriptures where it refers to the good tidings of God's coming salvation (e.g. Isaiah 40:9; 61:1). Mark, who has already alluded to Isaiah (v. 4), clearly wishes to present Jesus as the fulfilment of these prophecies.

In the first verse, Mark tells us that this good news is intimately related to Jesus (cf. 'the good news of Jesus Christ') and from what follows it is apparent that he sees Jesus as not only the messenger, but also the message! In Mark's assessment, Jesus is the gospel or evangel of God. He embodies or incarnates what God wishes to communicate and share with his people. He is God's gift of salvation.

First impressions of Jesus

Read Mark 1:21-45

NO SOONER HAVE WE HEARD OF JESUS than Mark invites us to join the first disciples (cf. vv. 16-20). Like Simon, Andrew, James and John, we are not challenged initially to pledge allegiance to Jesus or to reach a judgement about him; we are simply asked to follow and experience. Mark proceeds to narrate a number of characteristic scenes from Jesus' ministry.

We follow him into the synagogue at Capernaum (vv. 21-8), a town on the north-west shore of the Sea of Galilee that served as the centre for his ministry in the region. Initially, it is a typical scene of worship on the Sabbath with Jesus, taking advantage of the prerogative enjoyed by Jewish men, expounding the Scriptures. Yet his manner of teaching is considered extraordinary. The contrast with the scribes (v. 22) suggests his 'authority' was rooted in first-hand experience of God, rather than through the interpretative traditions of his forebears.

Suddenly, the service is interrupted by the cries of one possessed by an unclean spirit. Notice that the source of this person's dis-ease is the bearer of authentic testimony to Jesus, 'the Holy One of God' (v. 24), reminding us that his ministry is intimately linked with the divine will and the drama of salvation. It is striking how at a number of points on the journey of discipleship clues to Jesus' true identity are given by those 'out of their minds'. We can interpret this as evidence of the supernatural knowledge available to those able to access the spirit world or as a literary device by which the author encourages his readers to reflect on Jesus' identity.

As the rest of the chapter makes clear, Jesus' healing abilities made him an attractive figure and guaranteed him an audience. But his motivations should not be negatively construed as those of an opportunist; rather, medical provision at that time was extremely restricted and all healing was thought to originate from God (cf. Ecclesiasticus 38). By ministering to people's needs, therefore, Jesus was able to root God's loving concern and liberating presence in human experience. God was once again working amongst his people, making a tangible impact upon their quality of life. Such a happening could only kindle faith and raise horizons.

The gospel of forgiveness

Read Mark 2:1-17

THE EXPERIENCE OF RELEASE - of liberating people from whatever prevented them from encountering or responding to God - was central to Jesus' ministry (cf. Isaiah 61.1-2; Luke 4.16-21). It is this conviction that Mark underlines here. The first story describes how Jesus ministers God's forgiveness in two areas thought to be intimately related - sin and disease. It was a widespread belief in Jesus' time that disease resulted from sin, whether as a consequence of sinful action or as a punishment from God (cf. Luke 13:10-17; John 9:1-3). In consequence, recovery from illness required release from sin or, as one later Jewish source explains, 'No one gets up from his sick-bed until all his sins are forgiven.' (Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Nedarim, 41a)

Mark doesn't tell us whether the paralytic was a notorious sinner, but the following story underlines that Jesus did minister among those on the margins of Jewish community life - 'Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?' (v. 16) 'Tax collectors' were ostracised not only because of their association with the Roman overlords, but also because they had a reputation for extortion. 'Sinners' may have been a technical term relating to those who knowingly and wilfully 'sinned with a high hand' by ignoring God's commandments (cf. Numbers 15.30-31).

What is striking about Jesus' conduct throughout this section is that he ministers God's release independently of the existing Jewish provision for securing atonement. Further, it seems that he communicated the experience of forgiveness - whether from the constraints of sin or disease - prior to and in order to enable response to God. Here we come close to one of the distinguishing characteristics of Jesus' faith.

If Jesus successfully managed to call known perpetrators of evil to repent and observe the will of God encapsulated in the Torah (i.e. the Jewish law), he would have been congratulated as a national hero! However, if he preached forgiveness and rooted the experience of release in the lives of unrepentant sinners and those reaping the just deserts for ungodliness in the form of illness, he would have met with considerable opposition. And if he maintained that such acts of divine grace provided the motivation for repentance and turning to God, then knowingly or unknowingly he was setting himself on a collision course with leaders committed to maintaining the distinctness of the Jewish faith.

Disputes and controversies

Read Mark 2:18-3:6

FIRST CENTURY JUDAISM was in a state of flux. As we noted earlier, there were a number of interpretations current of what it meant to be a faithful Jew. One component common to many was the importance of defining a pattern of life that was identifiably Jewish. A set of rituals and practices to be undertaken at particular times and in particular ways, together with a code of rules governing social intercourse.

This is the background to the stories narrated in this section. Firstly, we find Jesus' disciples departing from the practice of corporate and ritualised fasting. Although Jesus encouraged others to see fasting as a private act of devotion known to God alone, he discouraged public exhibitions (Matthew 6.16-18; cf. 4:2). Here he echoes the concern of the Old Testament prophetic tradition that extrovert manifestations of religiosity can replace, rather than give expression to, genuine response to God (e.g. Isaiah 58:1-9). However, Jesus' attitude to fasting is principally informed by another conviction, namely, that the kingly rule of God was breaking into the experience of his people, liberating them from bondage and inviting them to celebrate his saving presence. Within such a vision, there could be no place for penitential rites that sought to catch God's attention and 'encourage' him to intervene.

Another area where Jesus departed from the mainstream of Jewish thought was with respect to Sabbath observance. Unlike the Christian Sunday, which celebrates God's mighty act of resurrection, the Jewish Sabbath draws its significance from the God who rested on the seventh day from the work of creation. For Jews, then, the Sabbath was a day of rest and there was a growing interpretative tradition of what could and could not be undertaken (cf. Exodus 20:8-11; Deuteronomy 5:12-15).

Jesus finds himself in controversy with the Pharisees over two areas of Sabbath observance: plucking grain (2:23-28) and healing sickness (3:1-6). In a style characteristic of disputes relating to matters of Jewish law, Jesus responds to his opponents with a counter-question drawing on scriptural precedent (vv. 25-26; cf. 1 Samuel 21:1-6) or by citing a 'weightier' scriptural principle giving authority to his behaviour (v. 4). The import of Jesus' conduct is clear: through his ministry, God is disclosing his sovereign presence and saving will in a way that goes beyond the limits of current theological understanding and experience.

Commissioning co-workers

Read Mark 3:7-19 & 6:6b-13

HAVING NARRATED A NUMBER OF ENCOUNTERS WITH JESUS in some detail, Mark assesses the initial impact of his ministry by offering a summary (vv. 7-13). The overall impression is that of the attractiveness of Jesus, informed by a reputation for being a healer and exorcist, drawing needy people from afar in search of wholeness. His ministry would be described today as charismatic in the sense that God's Spirit, bestowed at baptism, empowered him to perform such miracles. It should be remembered, however, that whilst Jesus' healing powers would have been considered extraordinary they were by no means unique. We know from Jewish and Greek sources of figures such as Hanina ben Dosa and Apollonius of Tyana who apparently performed similar acts of compassion in the service of humanity and to the glory of God.

Although Jesus started recruiting followers from the outset (cf. Mark 1:16-20), at some juncture he appointed twelve men from a larger group of disciples to perform a particular task. It seems likely that the exclusively male constitution of the Twelve owes more to cultural norms than to theological principle; certainly, the testimony of women lacked status at that time (cf. Luke 24:11) and this would undermine their ministry. We should also note that the number of apostles, one for each of the tribes of Israel, may well prescribe the 'mission field' as envisaged by Jesus, namely, to the Jews alone (cf. Matthew 15:24).

This now seems strange in the light of Christianity's emergence and subsequent separation from Judaism, but these events of the latter part of the first century should not cloud the fact that initially Jesus understood his ministry as a reform movement within the Jewish faith.

The strategic significance of this act of commissioning is underlined by the location (v. 13). Mountains were associated with divine presence and it can be no coincidence that as the people of Israel were formed into a nation through the forging of a covenant on Mount Sinai (Exodus 19-20), so the seeds for its re-formation are sown in a similar venue. Two reasons are given for the appointment of the Twelve (v. 14). Firstly, to be with Jesus, presumably, for support and friendship; and, secondly, to assist him in communicating by word and deed the good news of God's salvation (cf. Mark 1:15). In the light of the centrality of Jesus within Christianity, it is significant that Mark records him commissioning others to share his ministry; interestingly, however, Jesus doesn't include himself within the Twelve, but remains discrete.

Pause for thought

IT IS ALMOST IMPOSSIBLE to read the opening chapters of Mark's Gospel and not capture something of the impact generated by Jesus. Like many of those who encountered him in the flesh, Jesus emerges from obscurity and demands our attention. Stories of a public anointing with God's Spirit, testimonies to miraculous healings, controversies with religious leaders, fresh insights into God's presence and purpose. Rumours abound as a reputation starts to take shape. Our worlds are disturbed and we are left with questions: Who is this man? Is there any truth in these reports? What has all this to do with me?

And although the odd clue is given, the only persuasive answer comes in the form of an invitation, 'Follow me'. Here we draw close to why Mark created the gospel genre to communicate the significance of Jesus. Unlike Paul's more abstracted approach, where Jesus' identity and importance are discussed in terms of titles (e.g. 'Lord') and theological propositions (e.g. '... Christ died for the ungodly...'), Mark maintains that the meaning of Jesus for faith in God only emerges when one undertakes a particular journey. That is to say, Jesus' identity is the 'destination' reached after responding to his invitation to discipleship and having participated in his vocation and vision in a similar way to his first recruits.

In his gospel, then, Mark is not simply offering us an entertaining read or information about Jesus; he is, rather, on behalf of Jesus, inviting us to follow - to become part of a trajectory of faith which started with the first disciples, gathered momentum through the resurrection, and now spans across nearly 2000 years. Through the pages of his gospel, Mark encourages us to reflect on the testimonies of transformation of those who encountered Jesus, to engage with Jesus' teaching and parables, to participate in the discussions and controversies, to evaluate his extraordinary charismatic presence and gifting, to take our place within his company and inner circle, and to travel with him beyond the 'homeland' of Galilee to Jerusalem and there to witness his execution. For it is only after we have completed this journey and, along the way, given Jesus permission to inform and influence our own needs, experience, understanding and faith, that we are in a position to decide who he truly is.

The ambiguity of miracles

Read Mark 3:20-35

AS MARK PORTRAYS SO GRAPHICALLY in his opening chapters, Jesus' ministry created quite an impact! In particular, his ability to perform miraculous healings proved to be a real 'crowd-puller' and led to speculation about the source of this rare talent and, by implication, Jesus' identity. This observation is significant because it discloses how assessments of Jesus (i.e. christology) were reached in the early years, namely, that the question of who Jesus was arose from what he did and said and was able to communicate of God. Put simply, his ministry set people thinking and invited a response.

In this section, two different groups reach a similar conclusion about the source of Jesus' miraculous powers. His family wish to restrain him because he 'has gone out of his mind' (v. 21), whilst the scribes claim that, 'He has Beelzebul, and by the ruler of demons he casts out demons.' (v. 22) Both parties maintain that Jesus is not in charge of his faculties: the scribes openly accuse him of being demon-possessed and, although his mother, brothers and sisters don't go so far, madness was generally thought to be a manifestation of evil spirits (cf. 5:1-20).

What are we to make of such claims? Much depends on whether we believe in the possibility of miracles and of spiritual realities capable of influencing human life. One thing is evident, however, Jesus' conduct is ambiguous and open to multiple interpretations. Further, judging from passages where he openly refuses to perform miracles on demand (e.g. 8:11-12; 15:29-32), Jesus appears to have recognised this. Certainly, his answer in verses 23-27 focuses on source and motivation rather than on physics. That is to say, Jesus is little interested in whether his actions go with or against the grain of the natural order, but he is adamant that they should be interpreted as expressions of God's sovereign presence and saving will.

The logic of his response to the scribes, 'How can Satan cast out Satan?' (v. 23), seems sound in that evil is not repulsed by evil, but by its opposite. And his pronouncement on the unforgivable sin (vv. 28-29) reinforces his conviction that the key issue is one of discernment. For to interpret Jesus' acts of deliverance as demonstrations of evil is to purposefully exclude oneself from participating in God's salvation.

Pondering the parables

Read Mark 4:1-20

THE PARABLE OF THE SOWER is the first substantial piece of teaching Mark records (cf. 3:23-27). Three sections can be distinguished: the original parable (vv. 3-9), an allegorical interpretation which was probably added later (vv. 14-20) and what appears to be the evangelist's own assessment of the purpose of parables (vv. 10-12).

Before we consider the meaning of this particular case, let us pause to reflect on why Jesus relied so heavily on parables. Why did he choose to communicate convictions about God and insights into faith in a way that invited different interpretations and perspectives? One reason seems to be that Jesus encouraged his hearers to think for themselves - to engage actively and creatively in the learning process. In this respect, parables are invitations to participate in an alternative, narrative world: to identify with the characters, to engage with the plot, to anticipate developments, to fill in what is omitted or left implicit and, finally, to emerge with a new understanding of God, self, the world and others.

In this way, Jesus' use of parables discloses much about his vocation and vision of God's kingdom. Clearly, if he believed knowledge of God was something that could be communicated in a definitive and systematic manner, he wouldn't have relied so heavily on parables; but that he did, suggests a

theological understanding that is rooted in human experience and is apprehended through gaining a fresh perspective on life.

What then of the Parable of the Sower? Scholars continue to debate why Jesus told it, but many see in the sower's conduct something of God's saving initiative in the world - an approach which resonates with the interpretation provided in verses 14-20: the seed speaks of the gift of life and of creative potential; the act of spreading, of God's prevenient grace; and the indiscriminate coverage of terrain, of the all-embracing compass of God's grace and care. But as verse 9 makes explicit, the parable also challenges us to confront how we have received God's offer of abundant life and invites us to respond wholeheartedly.

The interpretation of why Jesus told parables presented in verses 10-12 is problematic in that it suggests a desire to exclude and condemn, rather than to include and save. Whether it reflects a view of election and predestination, with some privileged and others left outside, is unclear. Certainly, the import of these verses can't easily be reconciled with what we know of Jesus' teaching elsewhere; but, what is equally strange is that the Twelve, who are here 'on the inside' are often portrayed by Mark as lacking understanding (e.g. 8:14-21, 27-33; 9:33-37).

Discerning God's kingdom

Read Mark 4:21-34

THESE VERSES include 4 sayings (vv. 21-25), 2 parables (vv. 26-32) and a summary by Mark (vv. 33-34). The overall section has the feel of a later composition in which Mark (or someone before him) has brought together material relating to a common theme, namely, the kingdom of God.

You will remember that back in 1:15, Mark records how Jesus intimately linked his ministry with the kingdom of God without clarifying what this means or implies. In the first century, as today, the phrase 'kingdom of God' was ambiguous. Does it refer to a place where God reigns? This interpretation fits well with Jewish history and expectation. We know that the covenant between God and the Israelite people included the gift of the 'promised land'. And although that land had often been overrun and conquered by foreign nations, Jews still hoped that God would re-establish his theocracy and reign once more from Jerusalem through the agency of his anointed one or Messiah.

However, as we shall see, this understanding is not characteristic of Jesus; rather, he envisaged the kingdom of God in more dynamic terms of relationships and processes of growth or discovery through which God is encountered with transforming effect. As the sayings about the lamp and the inevitability of disclosure make clear (vv. 22-22), the sovereign presence of God will emerge in spite of Roman hegemony. But equally, with those encouraging an open and expectant attitude (vv. 24-25), that presence is subtle or hidden and can only be apprehended by those genuinely searching for God and willing to make the requisite personal investment.

The parables of growth develop this vision of the kingdom. At one level, God's presence is as implicit, mysterious and innate as the natural processes of germination and maturation (vv. 26-29). As

God alone can create life and enable it to flourish, so the kingdom is God's gift and prerogative; yet seeds can only grow when planted and crops enjoyed when harvested, so God's saving presence depends on human co-operation to find expression and fulfilment. Jesus also draws on the mustard seed, which was celebrated for its smallness in size and massive creative potential, to underline both the hiddenness and transformative potential of the kingdom.

The sea of faith

Read Mark 4:35-41

Taken literally, Mark's first nature miracle leaves us with many problems. For one thing, it seems implausible that Jesus would be able to sleep undisturbed in an open-topped boat through a raging storm which had thrown experienced fishermen into a panic. But, at a deeper level, Jesus' subduing of the elements by a command speaks of one who, on occasion, works against the grain of God's created order to fulfil the divine purpose. Clearly, this has far-reaching implications for how we understand God's saving presence in the world.

A more fruitful approach to this passage starts to emerge when we allow our focus to shift from the historicity of the event itself to explore the richly symbolic texture of the narrative. Some have wondered whether the image of a storm-tossed boat with a dormant Jesus in the stern reflects the church under persecution, making fervent petitions for help which temporarily go unattended (v. 38). Within such a scenario, disciples are called to remain steadfast in faith (v. 40) confident that the peace of Jesus will overwhelm the trials of the present (v. 39).

Within Mark's presentation, however, the passage principally serves an epiphanic or disclosing function, affording his readers further insight into Jesus' true significance. We have already commented on how Jesus invites his followers through the pages of the second Gospel to undertake a journey of discipleship on which his true identity and significance for faith become apparent. At certain points, Mark gives us clues to what can only be confirmed at the conclusion. The divine voice at baptism and transfiguration (1:11; 9:7), the testimonies of evil spirits (e.g. 1:2; 5:7) and the secret interpretation of parables (cf. 4:33-34) are all examples of this.

Here, we are invited to join the disciples as they withdraw from the crowds and, in the midst of the turmoil and confusion concomitant with the journey of faith, encounter the glory of Jesus. Something of Jesus' unique relationship with God is communicated through his portrayal as sharing in the divine prerogative of being Lord of nature (cf. Genesis 1-3; Job 38-41; Jonah). And in the light of this rare glimpse into the depths of Jesus' being we find ourselves pondering the words of his first followers, 'Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?' (v. 41).

Spiritual conflict and Jesus' authority

Read Mark 5:1-20

BY ANY STANDARDS this is a bizarre episode. A man possessed by evil spirits who lives among the tombs - a 'no-go' area rendering any observant Jew ritually unclean and, according to superstition, a place frequented by demons! His superhuman strength and demented behaviour confirm the presence of a greater, malevolent force going by the name of Legion. And although this evil presence is hell-bent on destroying life, it still has access to Jesus' true identity and addresses him in almost confessional terms, 'Son of the Most High God' (v. 7; cf. 1:1; 15:39). The ensuing confrontation between Jesus and Legion is suggestive of a 'negotiated settlement' with the latter eventually conceding to depart one host on the understanding that another would be found. Jesus will have considered a herd of swine, forbidden food for Jews, a most suitable alternative and, once Legion was given permission to depart, both possessor and possessed meet a very public end through drowning. Not surprisingly, the local onlookers and inhabitants view Jesus with suspicion and probably a good deal of anger (the herd of swine was their livelihood!) even though he returns one of their number in sound mind. The newly liberated man is clearly obliged to Jesus and wishes to depart with him; Jesus, however, has other plans and commissions him to bear witness to what God has done for him in his predominantly Gentile homeland.

What is the modern reader to make of all this? Many would question whether we can reconstruct the historical core of this episode. And in any case, the significance of the narratives resides elsewhere with Jesus' authority. In first century, belief in a spirit world was widespread and, from what we can discover, this was thought to be inhabited by a hierarchy of spiritual beings. One of the acknowledged techniques for gaining control over a spirit was to ascertain its name and exorcise it in the name of a higher spiritual authority. With this in mind, the Legion incident underlines Jesus' power and spiritual status by the way in which the evil spirits not only recognise Jesus but also 'know their place' and volunteer to depart without opposition. Further, by recording a Gentile location for this happening, Mark emphasizes that Jesus' authority and ministry transcend the boundaries of Jewish religion and embrace a greater mission.

A trusting, saving faith

Read Mark 5:21-43

MARK HAS A PARTICULAR LIKING for the 'sandwich' technique in which one story is seeded within another. In this case, the plight of Jairus' daughter provides 'the bread' (vv. 21-24a & 35-43) whilst 'the filling' comes in the form of Jesus' encounter with the woman suffering from a haemorrhage (vv. 24b-34). Both of these incidents have much to teach us about faith and responding to God through Jesus; indeed, it was probably for this reason that they were preserved.

Let us, then, consider what they have to say. The first thing that strikes us is how faith emerges from human need and a sense of desperation: a daughter is about to die, a woman who later Christian tradition names Veronica has exhausted her resources on ineffective medical treatment. It is also significant how, in contrast to later sophisticated statements of belief (e.g. Nicene Creed), the faith of Jairus and the woman is simple. They appear to know little of Jesus beyond his reputation as a healer and their need-filled response is characterised more by hope, openness and trust than by theological understanding. Again, this fits in well with the overarching plan of Mark's Gospel, namely, that faith is a journey of discovery. From this perspective, it is interesting to note how their faith not only finds expression through adversity, but also grows through overcoming barriers or embracing greater challenges. For Jairus, this entails trusting Jesus to give life to the dead (v. 35-36; cf. v. 23) and, in a rather different way, a similar level of trust is required to the haemorrhaging woman as well.

From what we can gather, her condition was not life-threatening in a physical sense, although it must have felt like a 'living death'. According to Jewish law, she was perpetually in a state of ritual uncleanness (cf. Leviticus 15:25-30) and, as a consequence, a social outcast. And yet such was her longing to find wholeness and conviction Jesus could help, that she risks rendering all those Jews inadvertently touched by her in reaching Jesus unclean (v. 27), to say nothing of their wrath and indignation! Then, having been restored to health (v. 29), she is challenged to make herself known as her anonymous lunge of faith is transformed into something more profound through encountering Jesus face to face (v. 33). The word translated 'made you well' in verse 34 is the standard New Testament word for salvation (cf. Luke 7:50). By using it here, Mark not only suggests that a deeper work of healing has followed from meeting Jesus, but also presents the story as a 'parable of salvation' for the community of faith.

Pause for thought

THERE IS A TEMPTATION when trying to follow Jesus in the journey of faith to think that it must have been so much easier for his first disciples and for all those who met him in person. And yet, as we reflect on the early chapters of Mark's Gospel we are forced to recognise this wasn't always the case. There appears to be a measure of ambiguity and mystery surrounding Jesus - how he behaves, what he says, and who he is in relation to God and the rest of us. And although this may initially seem unsatisfactory and perhaps a little disconcerting, it tells us something of great significance. Namely, that the truthfulness of faith cannot readily be communicated in objective and detached ways independently of personal investment and involvement - it isn't that kind of reality! Rather, the truthfulness of faith is only assessable through active engagement and commitment, for it concerns a way of seeing ourselves and relating to God, Jesus and others. And within such a process, our own needs, aspirations, intuitions and interpretations - however provisional and incomplete - must play their part; otherwise, faith cannot form within us or come to shape and transform our lives.

That is why nothing is easily tied down. Is Jesus possessed by Beelzebul or the Spirit of God? What do the parables communicate about God? Who is this that even the wind and the sea obey him? What is this response that emerges from human need and is prepared to risk all to find release, wholeness and peace? These open questions are the invitations of faith. For like any venture of discovery or new relationship, faith is motivated by the passion within us, the mystery that is beyond us and the conviction that these two realities belong together.

No support for Jesus at home

Read Mark 6:1-6a (6b-13)

YOU WILL REMEMBER that we considered the second part of this section in conjunction with Mark 3:6-19; here, we shall limit our discussion to verses 1-6. Throughout Mark's Gospel, those who encounter Jesus within the context of his extraordinary ministry are challenged to respond. For some, that challenge becomes an opportunity for faith; for others, it leads to suspicion, opposition and rejection. As we shall see, it is the latter that appears to have the last word, with the opposition to Jesus culminating in his crucifixion. Yet even at this stage, rejection comes from both predictable and unexpected quarters. That Jesus managed to ruffle the feathers of other interpreters of the Jewish faith (e.g. 2:6, 16, 24; esp. 3:1-6) and, of course, the evil spirits (e.g. 1:24; 5:7) was to be expected; but what about the response of his family in 3:21, 31-35, and now the inhabitants of his hometown (cf. 13:12-13)!

Although Mark doesn't tell us where the incident narrated in 6:1-6 took place, we can assume from 1:9 that it was Nazareth. Once again, Jesus has been invited to preach in the synagogue on the Sabbath (cf. 1:21). Members of the congregation are astounded by his wisdom and, reflecting on his reputation as a healer and worker of miracles, find themselves confronting an identity crisis. How can someone who has grown up in their midst, earning a living as a fellow tradesman, and whose family they know personally, speak and act as he now does? What is more, the designation 'son of Mary' (v. 3) may reflect the belief that Jesus was illegitimate because it was highly unusual for an offspring to be identified in relation to the mother rather than the father.

In verse 3, we are told that they 'took offence' or 'stumbled' at Jesus, but what this means is difficult to assess. Evidently, there is no attempt to deny or undermine his ministry; perhaps, it was more of a personal rejection in the sense that those who had known him before his calling came to fruition at baptism, did not now wish to be associated with his vision and vocation. Jesus' response (v. 4) gives us a rare insight into his self-understanding: he considers himself to belong to the prophetic tradition of those who seek to mediate God's presence, to call his people to repentance and to show them how to live faithfully within the covenant of grace. Ironically, there is as much need for miracles of healing amongst those who have rejected him as anywhere (v. 5); but where faith is thwarted, there is little opportunity or permission for Jesus to minister.

The death of John the Baptist

Read Mark 6:14-29

THIS IS ONE OF THE FEW POINTS where Mark's presentation of Jesus interacts with secular figures and events. Although it was regal aspirations that eventually led to his removal from power, Herod Antipas, son of Herod the Great, was actually tetrarch of Galilee and Perea from 4 BC to AD 39 (cf. v. 14). A tetrarch was someone who governed a region on behalf of and under the authority of the Roman emperor.

It appears Herod had a healthy respect for John the Baptist (v. 20) even though his potential for causing political unrest meant it was safer for all parties if he was kept under lock and key. The circumstances leading to John's decapitation seem incredible and probably owe a good deal to the story-teller's art; further, comparison with what we know of king Herod's family from the contemporary Jewish historian Josephus raises additional problems. However, there is agreement over John's imprisonment and he may well have spoken against what, according to Leviticus 18:16 and 20:21, was unlawful; presumably, Herodias' first husband hadn't divorced her and the Jewish law made no provision for women to take the initiative (contrary to v. 22, Herodias' daughter was Salome).

It is interesting to note how even John's death is subsumed within Mark's overall presentation of Jesus. Firstly, it is Jesus' reputation that sets Herod Antipas thinking about the Baptist (v. 14) and, secondly, John's death (like his ministry) prefigures Jesus': he too is put to death under the auspices of a political ruler who holds him in considerable respect, regrets his immanent execution, but feels powerless to intervene and stop it.

It is also significant to note what titles and interpretative categories were at the disposal of those trying to make sense of Jesus (vv. 14-16). We mentioned in the previous section how Jesus saw himself within the prophetic tradition (6:4), no small claim given that the age of prophecy was thought to have come to an end with Malachi. The belief that Elijah would return as the harbinger of the messianic age, something that is affirmed to this day in Jewish Passover celebrations, originated in the book of Malachi as well (cf. 4:5-6). Finally, there was much speculation in the first century about life after death, both in the form of bodily resurrection and the immortality of the soul.

Jesus satisfies God's hungry people

Read Mark 6:30-44

THIS IS THE FIRST of two or, possibly, three feeding miracles Mark narrates; later, we shall read of the feeding of the 4000 (8:1-10) and later still of the institution of the Lord's Supper (14:22-25). It is impossible now to know what happened at that deserted place, although reports of miraculous multiplication of food continue to this day (e.g. the ministry of Father Rich Thomas amongst the 'dump people' of Juarez, Mexico, described on the video *Viva Cristo Rey*).

What is clear, however, is the way in which Mark presents Jesus as the one who mediates God's compassion and care for his pilgrim people. In this respect, it is more than likely that we are supposed to interpret this happening in the light of the Old Testament figure of Moses, who communicated the divine will through the Law (Exodus 19-20) and provided manna, 'bread from heaven', to sustain the Israelites on their journey to the Promised Land (Exodus 16). Here, Jesus offers direction and leadership to the lost sheep of the house of Israel (v. 34; cf. Numbers 27:17; 1 Kings 22:17) by teaching the way of God and providing sustenance for the tired and weary.

Once again, Mark gives us an insight into the motivation for Jesus' ministry: he was moved with compassion (v. 34). Unfortunately, a number of modern translations render this as 'pity' (including, on occasion, the *NRSV*; see 1:41); the Greek, however, literally 'to be moved in the bowels', communicates a much deeper and all-encompassing response. Seemingly, this compassion and the opportunities of faith it generates eluded the disciples. In an altogether responsible manner, they advise Jesus to dismiss the crowd so they can find food and shelter. The irony generated by the contrasting reactions of Jesus and his helpers is profound: instinctively, we identify with the crowd in acknowledging a need for God no shop or inn can satisfy.

Although both bread and fishes are distributed to the hungry, Mark focuses on Jesus' actions with the bread. This may simply reflect the normal pattern of Jewish blessings over food at mealtime, but the discerning reader will be struck by the similarities between Jesus' conduct in verse 41 and that at the Lord's Supper in 14:22: the four-fold action of taking, blessing, breaking and giving, which remains central to eucharistic celebrations. Not surprisingly, many have seen in this feeding miracle a precursor of the Eucharist, underlining how Jesus is able to transform the ordinary and abundantly satisfy the needs of God's people (cf. vv. 42-43).

Jesus - the new Moses?

Read Mark 6:45-56

OF ALL JESUS' MIRACLES, his walking on the water causes us most problems because it not only defies the laws of nature (as best we understand them), but also lacks humanitarian motivation - Jesus hadn't even intended to come to the help of his struggling disciples (v. 48)! Our difficulties, however, extend beyond this and embrace what the story communicates about Jesus. Two things are worthy

of note: firstly, by emphasizing his supernatural abilities for their own sake, the focus shifts from Jesus as the minister of God's saving presence to Jesus the demi-god who has power to do and act as he wills. This tendency to present him as a sort of 'divine-man' reflects the way in which key figures in the Graeco-Roman world were often portrayed (e.g. emperors), and is characteristic of how Jesus and key apostles are presented in the apocryphal gospels. The second area of difficulty revolves around Jesus' relation to the rest of humanity. In the light of Jesus' supernatural abilities, some in the early church concluded that Jesus only 'seemed' to be human - his humanity constituting no more than an appearance and cloaking his divine being. This interpretation, known as 'docetism', was very influential in the early Christian centuries.

How are we to understand Jesus' walking on the water? The clue may be found in the previous section relating to the miraculous feeding (6:30-44). We noted there how Jesus is interpreted as the new Moses. But if the giving of the Law and 'bread from heaven' represent God's miraculous provision for his Exodus people, then rescuing them from their Egyptian oppressors through the Red Sea was the foundational miracle God performed on their behalf by Moses (cf. Psalm 78:13-25). It cannot be without significance, therefore, that Mark presents Jesus as, initially, communing with God alone on the mountain (cf. Moses in Exodus 3:1; 19:16-25) and then securing safe passage through the waters for himself and his followers. Thus, the miraculous crossing provides us with another glimpse into Jesus' identity. Not in the sense of setting Jesus up as 'a god in human form', but by locating him firmly within the story of salvation of God's people that was born out of the faith and obedience of his servant Moses; and now someone greater than Moses is here (cf. John 1:17)!

The heart of God's law

Read Mark 7:1-23

THIS LONG AND COMPLEX SECTION, relating a debate between Jesus and the Pharisees, contains much insight and challenge. To appreciate the context, we need to know that the Pharisees believed in preserving the Jewish faith through defining the implications of God's law (i.e. the first five books of the Bible) for every situation in life. In this way, they would be able to keep themselves separate (that is what the word 'Pharisee' means). These 'expansions', referred to here as 'the tradition of the elders', were initially transmitted orally and later written down in the Mishnah and other Jewish texts.

The point of disputation initially revolves around purity at mealtimes, with Jesus adopting a more relaxed position to his pharisaic counterparts. Jesus' concern, however, doesn't relate to the incident *per se*, but to what it reveals of their attitude to God's law in general. He makes his point by focusing on a Jew's responsibilities towards his or her parents (v. 10; cf. Exodus 20:12), something that would have been acknowledged by all. Apparently, the Pharisees' obsession with defining the implications of the Torah in all circumstances was in danger of undermining or even replacing the central principles of the faith. For example, by requiring the dedication of money to the Temple (i.e. 'Corban'), a Jew was thereby prevented (or given an excuse!) from using it for parental care. Jesus' message is clear:

order your life around the foundations of God's law and not superficial interpretations or embellishments.

But Jesus doesn't stop there. Having challenged the tradition of the elders, he calls into question the teaching of the Law itself regarding levitical purity and, in particular, the distinction between 'clean' and 'unclean' foods set out in Leviticus 11. In memorable and striking phrases (vv. 17-23), Jesus reminds us that the source of defilement and the reason why we find ourselves cut off from God has little to do with what we eat and other external influences, but has everything to do with how we allow our characters to be formed, together with what we invest our God-given talents and energies in: 'For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come.'

A gospel for all

Read Mark 7:24-30

WHEN DISCUSSING THE APPOINTMENT OF THE TWELVE (cf. 3:6-19), we mentioned that Jesus envisaged his vocation to Jews alone. This provides the key for understanding his encounter with a Phoenician woman from Syria, a Gentile, who is the heroine of the story. To begin with, this looks like any other gospel healing narrative with someone approaching Jesus for help. But rather than being moved by compassion, Jesus' response seems out of character, prejudiced and rude - 'dog' (v. 27) was an unflattering term regularly used by Jews of Gentiles. It seems that Jesus was unwilling to minister to her daughter's need because of her nationality.

Although many attempts have been made to lessen the blow of this disturbing incident, there is no convincing way round it; further, it is highly unlikely that it would have been made up and projected back onto Jesus at a later stage - it's too embarrassing! One thing that can, perhaps, be said in mitigation is that if Jesus believed his healing ministry to be an integral component of his calling Jews back to God, then he may have thought it inappropriate to use it in other circumstances. Be that as it may, when Mark was writing, the faith of Jesus Christ had already established itself among Gentile believers. And although this tradition paints Jesus in an ambiguous light, its presence here confirms that the seeds of a universal gospel were present from the outset. That is to say, in Simeon's words, Jesus was 'a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to God's people Israel' (Luke 2:32).

Mark's placement of this tradition is also significant. Sandwiched between Jesus' miraculous feedings of the Jewish multitudes (6:30-44 & 8:1-10), where all the children of the covenant were satisfied and an abundance of food remained (6:42-43 & 8:8), it is clear that Mark sees this incident as an overflowing of God's grace beyond the fulfilling of Jesus' ministry amongst the Jews to embrace all of God's people. It appears, then, that the Gentile church owes much to this Syrophoenician woman, for the tenacity of her faith raised the horizons of Jesus to the magnitude of his vocation.

Pause for thought

WE HAVE COVERED a great deal of territory in the past group of six readings. One of the striking insights that emerges is the way in which Jesus is presented as one who belongs to the Jewish faith and who is instrumental in bringing God's promises communicated through that tradition to fulfilment. We are told Jesus thought of himself as a prophet or a human channel for God's saving will (6:4). And, no doubt, this explains why Mark depicts him as the new Moses, who gives God's people safe passage through the stormy waters (6:45-52), feeds them with bread from heaven (6:30-44) and renews the gift of God's law by drawing them back to the heart of the Torah (7:1-23).

Further, when we remember that God blessed Abraham, the archetypal believer, so that through his lineage 'all the families of the earth' would also be blessed (cf. Genesis 12:1-3), then the significance of Jesus' encounter with the Syrophenician woman becomes clear. For here we have a 'test case' of the God of Abraham and Moses reaching out through his anointed servant Jesus to bless those beyond the Jewish nation, but not beyond the grace of God (cf. Act 15:1-21).

But if the Syrophenician woman's testimony lifts our horizons to contemplate the universal compass of the gospel, then Jesus' rejection at the hands of those who grew up with him alerts us to a potential danger (6:1-6a). Namely, that preoccupation with Jesus' pedigree (i.e. his origins, background, past, etc.) can actually blind us to what God wishes to disclose through him.

Jesus - the magician?

Read Mark 7:31-37

OF ALL THE HEALINGS ATTRIBUTED TO JESUS, this one most resembles the work of a magician or shaman - the privacy, and arcane gestures of inserting fingers into ears and placing spittle on the tongue, and then the incantation, 'Ephphatha'. But we must be careful not to jump to premature conclusions for Jesus' behaviour is remarkably consistent with other miracles narrated in the gospels.

We know that touch was central to Jesus healing ministry both as a means of establishing personal contact and as a conduit for communicating energy. Again, the therapeutically beneficial properties of spittle were recognised then as today, and the so-called 'spell' is another instance of Mark recording the Aramaic original of, in this case, one of Jesus' characteristic healing commands (cf. 14:36; 15:34). As we are told, Ephphatha means, 'Be opened'.

The issue, though, of whether Jesus was thought to be a magician is an important one. This may well be the substance of the Beelzebul controversy where he is accused of exorcising by the power of the evil one (cf. 3:20-30). We know that there were magicians operating in that part of the world in the first century (cf. Acts 8:4-25; 16:16; 19:11-20). Further, we know that the second century secular philosopher Celsus accused Jesus of being a magician - a view that continues to gain support (cf. Morton Smith's book, *Jesus the Magician*).

But although magic is difficult to define, it seems unlikely to be an appropriate category for Jesus. The difference resides in the distinction between co-operation and manipulation. Whilst there is little doubt Jesus was thought to be empowered by the Holy Spirit, his ministry was characterised by co-operation with God. Through prayer and in many other ways, he endeavoured to align his will with God's and to become a channel for God's saving purposes. In contrast, the magician is concerned essentially with gaining control of spiritual power by the acquisition of secret knowledge and practices so that it can be used to serve the desired ends.

Jesus did not abuse spiritual or charismatic power in this way, but communicated it in the service of a higher goal, namely, to minister the liberating presence of God so that others could break free from oppressive and manipulative influences and discover their true humanity.

The blindness of the disciples

Read Mark 8:1-21

ALTHOUGH THE MATERIAL GATHERED TOGETHER in this section initially appears rather disparate, there is a co-ordinating theme: the 'blindness' of the disciples and the religious leaders to Jesus' identity. We shall return to the attitude of the latter in due course, but let us pause to consider the response of the former.

A comparison between Mark's presentation of Jesus' disciples with the other evangelists reveals a tendency to portray them in a negative light. On numerous occasions, they are admonished for their lack of faith and understanding (e.g. 4.13; 7.17-18; 9.19); and, although commissioned to help Jesus (3.13-19), they demonstrate a remarkable degree of incompetence (e.g. 9.14-29; 10.13-14). Nowhere is this clearer than in the feeding of the 4000.

Why Mark chose to include a second feeding miracle is unclear. He may have believed Jesus performed many miracles of this sort, as he did exorcisms and healings. Certainly, it's inclusion emphasizes Jesus as the one who abundantly satisfies the hunger of God's people. But what of the role of the disciples! Their lack of perception when facing an almost identical situation to one earlier is striking, but just about credible (8.1-4; cf. 6.35-37). However, when they are unable to trust Jesus to provide for their own material needs soon afterwards (8.14-21), it is difficult not to conclude that Mark is stressing their lack of belief beyond historical precedent.

But why? Some scholars have interpreted Mark's portrayal of the disciples as a veiled criticism of the leadership of his day, who had gone off the rails. Comparisons have been made with the so-called wonder-working, 'super-apostles' that Paul encountered at Corinth (cf. 2 Corinthians 10-12). Another theory is that Mark uses the disciples' incomprehension as a sort of literary device for presenting Jesus' teaching - their misunderstanding is the cue for Jesus' correct understanding. Both of these suggestions have some merit, but verse 17 affords another clue. We are informed that the disciples' hearts were hardened; that is to say, they were prevented from understanding the true significance of Jesus (also 6:52). In this respect, their situation is similar to the Pharisees, who demand

a miraculous sign from Jesus (8:11-12); and yet none is given, for they lack the faith to perceive. Indeed, for Mark all assessments of Jesus must remain provisional until the journey of discipleship is completed and faith embraces Golgotha.

The illumination of faith

Read Mark 8:22-26

IT CAN BE NO COINCIDENCE that this 'two-stage' miracle, the only one of its kind recorded in the gospels, comes immediately before the disciples' partial insight into the truth about Jesus (8:27-33). Mark uses it as a visual aid or a means of commenting on what is unfolding in the journey of discipleship. We noted in the previous section how the disciples, like everyone else, were incapable of discerning Jesus' significance (cf. 'Are your hearts hardened?', v. 17). The implication here is that only through the eyes of faith - and then a faith tested and proved by following in the way of the cross - can one see Jesus in an authentic light.

Mark uses the themes of blindness and sight with great effect throughout his gospel and, especially, in the portion introduced by this miracle and concluding with the healing of Blind Bartimaeus in 10:46-52. Those who look upon Jesus through normal vision are blinded to his true significance (e.g. the disciples; cf. 4:11-12), whilst those who've been denied physical sight perceive him through the eyes of faith (e.g. the sick and needy). It has even been suggested that 8:22-10:52 should be understood as a short course in discipleship, with Jesus repeatedly attempting to guide and instruct his followers despite their chronic short-sightedness and fumbling endeavours.

Mark, then, uses the healing of the blind man (vv. 22-26) to symbolise the gradual lifting of the veil of unbelief during the journey of discipleship. However, his masterful usage of the story does not make it a literary invention. On the contrary, many have interpreted the difficulty Jesus experienced in healing as evidence for its historicity.

The way of the cross

Read Mark 8:27-9:1

THIS IS ONE OF THE KEY STAGES in the journey of faith as narrated by Mark. So far we have been encouraged, with the first disciples, to feel the impact of Jesus' ministry. We have been exposed to his teaching and debates, his healings and exorcisms, his vision of God's kingdom; and now we too are challenged to decide what all this adds up to in terms of Jesus' function within God's plan of salvation, 'But who do you say that I am?' (v. 29).

The episode raises many questions. What does it tell us about Jesus' self-understanding? Did he think of himself as a Messiah or was he experiencing something of an 'identity crisis' and seeking help

from his confidants? And, in any case, what would have been understood by the title 'Messiah' or, indeed, 'Son of Man' in the first century?

We have already noted how there were many interpretations of what it meant to be a faithful Jew at Jesus' time. And these embraced different hopes for how God would save his people. Views varied enormously from simply wishing to bless the status quo to longing for an overthrow of the existing political regime and corrupt Temple priesthood so that God's rule and will could be re-established. In some cases, it was believed that God would anoint a chosen one, a Messiah, to undertake such mighty acts on his behalf.

As we shall see, some of Jesus' acts when in Jerusalem resonate with these different expectations, but the important thing to note here is that there was no single identikit picture of what constituted the Messiah in Jesus' day - there were many! Further, it is interesting that Jesus responds to Peter's confession by referring to himself as the 'Son of Man' (v. 31), which - if a title at all (cf. Daniel 7:13) - was largely free from such ideological baggage.

Peter's response in verse 29 suggests the illumination of faith is beginning to dawn; and yet, in characteristically Markan style, his failure to understand how Jesus' messiahship could include suffering and death (cf. his rebuke in v. 32) is forcefully rebutted by Jesus, who explains why the way of the discipleship must be the way of the cross. The glory of resurrection and communion with God is the goal of a journey that necessarily includes a 'letting go' of life - not only for Jesus (v. 31), but for all who claim to follow in his footsteps (8:34-9:1).

Jesus transfigured

Read Mark 9:2-13

THE TRANSFIGURATION offers divine confirmation of Jesus' ministry and vocation. As with his baptism and, to a lesser extent, through his confrontation with 'knowing' evil spirits, the veil of unbelief or partial sightedness is momentarily lifted and Jesus is seen in a true light. In particular, the transfiguration vindicates Jesus' conviction, communicated at the end of the last chapter, that God had called him to embrace the way of costly service and to make the ultimate sacrifice of life itself. Although some have seen in this story a misplaced resurrection narrative or a literary creation by the early church, it could have originated in a shared vision which was subsequently interpreted in the light of Old Testament theophanies and key figures.

Traditionally, the transfiguration has been associated with Mount Tabor, but the key point to note is the link between mountains and God's presence in the Hebrew Scriptures (e.g. Genesis 22; Exodus 3; 19). Indeed, the similarities between this tradition and those relating Moses' encounters with God on Mount Sinai are striking. The mountain top meeting, the voice of God, the cloud, the reflected glory of God in transformed appearance (see Exodus 19 and 34) all suggest Mark is using this story, as he has done others, to present Jesus as God's new anointed one.

This point is reinforced by the appearance of Elijah and Moses. Their presence here is both symbolic and clarificatory. Symbolic, because they are key figures in God's drama of salvation, representing the Law and the Prophets; clarificatory, because it confirms that Jesus is one with them, but not one of them. Mark has already mentioned how some entertained the belief that Jesus was a reincarnated Elijah (6:15; 8:28), and the conviction that Elijah must return before the coming of the Messiah finds expression in verses 9-13 (cf. Malachi 4.5-6). By placing Jesus in the company of Elijah and Moses, he is associated with God's anointed ones, but distinguished from them. In contrast, however, the implication of verses 9-13 is that the ministry of John the Baptist should be interpreted as the return of Elijah, the forerunner of the Messiah and the one who prefigures his fate - 'But I tell you that Elijah has come, and they did to him whatever they pleased' (v. 13).

Apprentice disciples

Read Mark 9:14-29

MARK HAS ALREADY TOLD US Jesus appointed disciples to assist in his ministry, including performing works of healing and exorcism (cf. 3:15; 6:13). Although the Acts of the Apostles (e.g. 3:1-10; 14:8-10) and other New Testament books indicate that these phenomena continued after the crucifixion (e.g. 1 Corinthians 12:9; James 5:13-16), this is the only miracle story in the gospels describing the disciples attempting to follow their teacher's example in this respect - and with little success (vv. 17-18)!

Some have questioned whether Jesus actually expected his followers to undertake healings and deliverances, maintaining that such practices were characteristic of the spirit-inspired, post-Pentecost church and have been projected back into Jesus' ministry to give them greater authority and status. This seems unlikely for a number of reasons. For one thing, Jesus understood healing and exorcism to be expressions of God's liberating presence (cf. Isaiah 35:5-6; Jeremiah 30:17; 2 Baruch 73:1-2), and not as proofs of his special status. In this sense, they were as essential to communicating the gospel (cf. 1:15) as ministering God's forgiveness, acceptance and hope. In consequence, if Jesus authorised others to share in his ministry, then healing and exorcism would have been part of the package. We should also note that Jesus' miracles soon came to be understood in the early church as evidence of his messiahship and divinity (cf. John 20:30-31). It seems unlikely, therefore, that such 'proofs' would also have been attributed to his followers.

Let us, then, return to the healing of Mark 9. What is particularly striking is the insight it affords not only into how Jesus trained his followers, but also into how he was able to perform healings himself. With respect to the first issue, it appears that Jesus adopted a form of apprenticeship with his followers observing him and then attempting to emulate. In this case, they were unsuccessful, so an exasperated Jesus (surely v. 19 is directed as much at the disciples as anyone) has to take over. Verses 28 and 29 are particularly striking for they describe a sort of 'post mortem' with the disciples reflecting on their failure and Jesus offering wisdom and advice.

What, then, does this story say about Jesus' ability to heal? The key verses are 21-24, which narrate a conversation between Jesus and the ailing boy's father. Note the prominent position given to faith - a faith which the disciples lacked (v. 19), the father struggles to embrace (v. 24) and, by implication, Jesus possesses to healing effect (v. 23).

Pause for thought

THERE IS NO QUESTION that the pace of following Jesus has increased significantly during the past leg of the discipleship journey. What started at the outset of the Gospel with an invitation to accompany Jesus has developed into a demanding relationship with growing levels of challenge, expectation and responsibility. Many have seen the incident at Caesarea Philippi (8:27-9:1) as the turning point in Mark's presentation, with Jesus communicating for the first time both what his ministry amounts to in terms of God's salvation and where it is leading.

Each of us is tempted to part company with him at this point and for a number of understandable reasons. Like Peter, we may not be able to come to terms with the idea of a suffering saviour. Or perhaps we struggle to believe in a God who allows - let alone requires - his faithful servant and prophet to suffer on his behalf. Or maybe we cannot bear to accompany one whom we've grown to love and respect as he knowingly embraces persecution and death. Or, there again, we may have reached the limits of our willingness to follow as Jesus exposes our half-heartedness by calling us to share the way of the cross.

And yet one thing is clear. To continue to journey with Jesus requires us to share his faith - a passionate faith that enables us to risk losing all in pursuit of a greater truth, a fuller vision and a more authentic expression of human being. It is here that Jesus' magnetism is at its strongest and most profound. For, like those whom he encountered in the flesh, we discern in him something that we long for - something that resonates with our souls and leaves us feeling restless and incomplete. A depth of humanity that is bound up with the mystery of God. And it is this longing that enables us to break free from all that is superficial and to explore where a life motivated by grace and finding expression through costly service and self-offering will lead.

Passion Predictions

Read Mark 9:30-32

THESE VERSES contain the second of three predictions relating to Jesus' fate (cf. 8:31; 10:32-34). The structure of each is similar, with Jesus referring to himself as the Son of Man and describing how he is to be handed over to face suffering and death before rising again on the third day. Characteristically, each one results in misunderstanding or incomprehension on the part of the disciples.

It seems unlikely that Jesus could foresee his fate in such detail, not least because the certainty of resurrection reflected in these verses is at variance with the anguish he suffered in Gethsemane and on the cross (all this becomes rather hollow if Jesus knew all along what the outcome was going to be!). The present form of these predictions, therefore, reflects the benefit of hindsight at the disposal of Mark or one of his predecessors. This is not to say, however, that Jesus had no inkling of what was in store; on the contrary, with the outworking of his ministry, together with the ground-swell of opposition this generated, came a growing conviction that it would end in confrontation and death in one form or another (cf. the fate of John the Baptist). Further, Jesus may have hoped that God would vindicate him in some way if he remained faithful to the end (cf. 13:13; 15:34-36).

The designation 'Son of Man' remains a puzzle. Mark records Jesus using it in relation to his present ministry (2:10, 28), his forthcoming sufferings (8:31; 9:31; 10:33, 45) and his future vindication (8:38; 13:26; 14:62). And whilst it is questionable whether Jesus identified himself with the figure in the third of these categories, the first two clearly relate to him. But why does he use this enigmatic phrase? With respect to his ministry and sufferings, it may simply be a self-effacing way of referring to himself (cf. how we sometimes use 'one' instead of 'I') or, again, a form of self-designation in which Jesus sees himself as an example of humanity as a whole (cf. Psalm 8:4) - what he does, all are invited to do, and his fate is one that awaits others.

The sayings about the coming of the Son of Man in the future, however, do refer to a particular figure and clearly resonate with expectations current in the first century. The most fruitful source for both title and expectation is Daniel's vision in which one bearing the title 'Son of Man' appears from heaven and is instrumental in the fulfilment of God's saving purposes (Daniel 7:13). This vision and hope is developed further in the First Book of Enoch, where the Son of Man is equated with God's Messiah, although it remains unclear whether the relevant chapters ('the Similitudes') pre-date Jesus and were known to him. But if they weren't, he may well have been familiar with this 'end-time' or apocalyptic way of thinking in which God would intervene dramatically to bring the present corrupt order to a cataclysmic end, resulting in the vindication of the righteous and the punishment of the wicked (cf. Mark 13).

Ambassadors of Christ

Read Mark 9:33-41

THIS RATHER DISPARATE COLLECTION of traditions opens with another example of the disciples' inability to grasp the import of Jesus' words. Building on what he shared with them previously in 8:31-9:1, Jesus reiterates the conviction that his way and, by implication, the way of discipleship is the way of the cross. And yet we still find the disciples arguing over who is the greatest or most important of their number. We encounter a similar debate in the next chapter with James and John trying to secure positions of authority in Jesus' kingdom (10:35-45). And yet as incorrect and inappropriate an outlook as this is, it confirms they too believed something important was soon

to take place, although, as we shall see, their hopes revolved around Jesus overthrowing the Romans and re-establishing the kingdom of Israel.

Jesus responds to their desire for aggrandisement by calling them to follow his example (v. 35; cf 10:43-45) and to reflect on the disposition of a child (vv. 36-37). Children are a teaching aid once more in 10:13-16, but in the present context it is unclear how they support Jesus' call for humility. Certainly, children were expected to be obedient and subservient to their seniors in Jesus' day, but verse 37 seems to be making an altogether different point (also v. 41). Either Jesus likens his followers to 'child-like ones' (cf 10.15) who minister in humility or he encourages them to care for the weakest and most vulnerable members of society, namely, the young. Both alternatives are informed by the Jewish protocol of representation in which a man is present in the one authorised to stand in for him (i.e. his representative; e.g. child, envoy, messenger; cf. 12:1-12). Significantly, the verse closes with another insight into Jesus' self-understanding, namely, the conviction that he is God's ambassador.

News that there were itinerant exorcists using Jesus' name is perhaps not as surprising as we might first think (vv. 38-40). A similar practice is reflected in Acts 19:13-17 and, possibly, Acts 8:9-24, where Simon Magnus is keen to tap into the miraculous power of Jesus' name. Further, we know that Jesus' followers believed themselves to have been commissioned by their master to participate in this aspect of his ministry and to continue it after his death (3:15; 6:7-13; 16:17). What is more striking is Jesus' response (vv. 39-40) in that he shuns the party-minded, myopic perspective of his disciple John and places these practices within the broader perspective of the kingdom.

The perils of insipid discipleship

Read Mark 9:42-49

IF THE PREVIOUS SECTION concluded on a conciliatory note towards those outside Jesus' immediate group of disciples, the present collection of sayings presents uncompromising guidance for those counted amongst his followers. These verses present us with considerable textual difficulties and it is unclear at a number of points what constituted Mark's original text. This explains why verses 44 and 46 are missing from the *NRSV*, but included in the margin.

The unifying theme of the four sayings in verses 42-48 is guarding against whatever may cause disciples, or those influenced by them, to stumble on the journey of faith. In fact, the word translated here as 'to stumble' or 'stumbling block' became a technical term in Christian circles for apostasy or falling away. Verse 42 warns of the consequences of leading others astray, although the identity of 'these little ones who believe in me' remains unclear; the link with children in verses 36-37 is possible (as in Matthew 18:4-6), but a more general description of those young in the faith is more likely.

Whilst not wishing to diminish the force of the three sayings advocating mutilation of the body so that the life of the person can be saved, this is surely a case of Jesus using language hyperbolically. There is some evidence that the removal of a hand, foot or eye was practised as a form of

punishment befitting the crime (cf. Deuteronomy 25:11-12; Exodus 21:24), but this remains conjecture. Jesus' point is surely that disciples must strive wholeheartedly to remain faithful to the Gospel entrusted to them, for their actions have far-reaching consequences. However, we should note these verses do not imply that entry into God's kingdom is a reward, but only that life with God can be lost if disciples allow themselves to be distracted from following Jesus. The word translated 'hell' literally means 'Gehenna', a valley near Jerusalem which prior to the reforms of king Josiah was the site of child sacrifice to the god Moloch (2 Kings 23:10). In Jesus' time, it was the city's rubbish dump and, given its foulness of smell and inextinguishable flames, it provided a graphic symbol of what awaited the wicked and unfaithful. Although it is the flames that are unquenchable, not the punishment!

Salt as a source of taste and an agent of preservation, purification and destruction provides the background for verses 49-50. The sense seems to be that disciples will be refined, as by fire (cf. 1 Corinthians 3:13-15), but with the hope that the salt of the Gospel will purify, preserve and bring flavour to the life of faith.

The sanctity of marriage

Read Mark 10:1-12

IN CERTAIN RESPECTS, the Pharisees' question to Jesus concerning divorce seems strange, for we know that the Jewish Law permitted the husband, but not his wife, this prerogative (cf. Deuteronomy 24:1-4). However, there was considerable debate in Jesus' time about what constituted grounds for divorce, whether it should be restricted to adultery or whether the husband should have greater freedom. Perhaps, then, this is the context for the current tradition.

Jesus' position is uncompromising and after asking the Pharisees what Moses had to say on the subject, explains that the provision allowing husbands to issue a bill of divorce was a concession for human obduracy and does not reflect God's will. In verses 6 to 9, he presents the scriptural basis for this contention (cf. Genesis 1:27; 2:24) and confirms that divorce is contrary to natural order and spiritual truth. Sexual union and the giving and being taken in marriage creates a bond that is God-given and should never be compromised. The *NRSV's* gender-inclusiveness may have shrouded Jesus' meaning in verse 9, where the word translated 'no one' literally means 'man' (singular) and refers to the husband. The sense being that husbands are enjoined not to take advantage of Moses' concession permitting them to divorce, but to honour the integrity and inviolability of the marital bond.

Human nature being what it is, there is good reason to think that the issue of whether divorce was permissible for followers of Jesus continued to be debated when Mark and the other evangelists were writing. This helps to explain the private instruction which the disciples receive afterwards (vv. 10-12; cf. 4:10; 9:28), where the implications of Jesus' teaching for husbands and wives, should they contemplate divorce, is clarified: both parties commit adultery against their 'former' spouse if they re-marry. Given the Jewish Law did not permit wives to initiate divorce proceedings, this provision

reflects the situation of the recipients of Mark's Gospel, who were under Roman jurisdiction. Further, it seems likely that when Jesus permits divorce in the case of unchastity (Matthew 19:9), the views of the Matthean community are being projected back onto Jesus to give them status and authority.

Finally, it is worth noting that Jesus' uncompromising attitude towards marriage can be interpreted as an attempt to protect the position of women. For where husbands are free to issue bills of divorce at whim, their wives have no security and little sense of personal worth.

Keys of the kingdom

Read Mark 10:13-31

THE TRADITIONS ABOUT JESUS blessing the children (vv. 13-16) and encountering the wealthy man (vv. 17-31) are linked by a common concern with securing salvation. In characteristic fashion, the disciples are out of tune with Jesus and try to keep the children from him. It remains unclear why they were brought to Jesus in the first place and why his followers wished to keep them at a distance. Perhaps they were in need of healing (cf. 6:53-56). We are told that Jesus laid hands up them and blessed them. This incident was used from early times to support infant baptism with 'do not stop them' (v. 14) becoming a baptismal formula (cf. Acts 8:36). But Jesus goes further and confirms the status of children by claiming that, of all people, it is they who model the right attitude towards God. We cannot be sure which child-like qualities he had in mind, but trust, imagination, enthusiasm and fascination are likely candidates.

We can identify at least three components in the next section which may originally have been independent of one another and brought together for thematic reasons at a later stage: the story of the rich man (vv. 17-22); Jesus' teaching about wealth (vv. 23-27); and his reassurance of the disciples (vv. 28-31). There is much in these verses worthy of note. Firstly, it is interesting how Jesus reacts to being called 'good'; clearly, he believes that God alone merits this appellation and, whilst knowing himself to be called and commissioned by God, does not wish to be equated with him. Secondly, it is clear that observing laws, even the Ten Commandments (vv. 19-20; cf. Exodus 20:12-16), can leave one outside the kingdom unless matched by a willingness to abandon worldly securities and follow Jesus in a life of costly service. This insight would be particularly difficult for Jews who are encouraged in their Scriptures to see wealth as a blessing from God (cf. Deuteronomy 28:1-14).

Thirdly, the saying about how difficult it is to enter the kingdom of God (v. 25) is clearly an exaggeration to make a point - and probably a humorous one at that! The issue is that salvation (v.26), eternal life (vv. 17, 30) and the kingdom (vv. 23, 25), which presumably refer to the same reality, are gifts from God (v. 27) that cannot be earned, but only accepted and then responded to in a similarly gracious and God-inspired manner. And, finally, in a way that is entirely consistent with his ministry elsewhere, Jesus encourages his disciples to see this life and, in particular, the relationships they enjoy as the first fruits of the harvest that will come to fruition in the fullness of God's time and purposes (vv. 28-30; cf. Romans 8:22-25; 2 Corinthians 1:22).

The way of the servant

Read Mark 10:35-45

THE REQUEST OF JAMES AND JOHN to be given positions of power alongside Jesus gives us a good clue to the kind of kingdom that his followers were hoping he would inaugurate (vv. 35-37). Clearly, it was one with socio-political implications, entailing the overthrow of the Roman authorities and the re-establishing of God's anointed one or Messiah as king and religious leader (cf. 11:1-11). This expectation has its roots in king David and in the belief that God would raise up from his stock another great leader who would bring deliverance and prosperity to his people (cf. 2 Samuel 7:8-16). Further, we know from the first century work, the Psalms of Solomon, chapters 17-18, that this hope was strong in Jesus' time - 'See, Lord, and raise up for them their king, the son of David, to rule over your servant Israel in the time known to you, O God' (v. 21). Hence, the sons of Zebedee's desire to be in positions of power and authority in the Messiah's newly formed government.

Jesus responds by refocusing their attention on the way of the cross and challenging them to share this with him. The metaphors of drinking from the cup of fate (Psalm 75:8; Jeremiah 49:12; Ezekiel 23:31-33) and of being baptized or overwhelmed by circumstances outside of one's control (Isaiah 21:4; 43:2) are drawn from the Hebrew Scriptures and Jesus' meaning is clear: suffering and death await him and those who intend to share his faith and vocation. Interestingly, Jesus does not rule out future vindication by God (v. 40) and the reference here to his death as a 'baptism' (v. 38: cf. Luke 12:50) may have forged the link with Christian initiation (cf. Romans 6:3-4; Colossians 2:12)

Mark 10:45 is perhaps the most written about verse of the whole Gospel. Jesus reinforces his conviction that only a life of service is a true measure of greatness (vv. 41-44) by offering the Son of Man (surely, an indirect reference to himself) as a paradigm. Evidently, the notion of the Son of Man serving rather than being served was thought paradoxical, informed by the elevated portrayal of this figure in Daniel and the Similitudes of Enoch (see notes on 9:30-32). Further, given that Jesus serves in God's name, his ministry discloses a serving God who ministers to his people's needs. Finally, verse 45b may well put us in touch with Jesus' understanding of his death: firstly, it would be the ultimate expression of his service (and, therefore, greatness); and, secondly, in some unexplained and perhaps inexplicable way, it would prove to be of saving benefit to others. Jesus not only foresees his ministry ending in death, but also appears to associate himself with the suffering servant figure of Isaiah 40-55 and the righteous martyrs of the faith found in 4 Maccabees 17 - a life offered or sacrificed for the sake of others (cf. 1 Corinthians 15:3).

Pause for thought

WE HAVE REACHED ANOTHER CRISIS POINT in our understanding of Jesus and the journey of discipleship. There can now be little doubt what following a vocation and ministering the gospel of God will mean for Jesus. In fact, the honesty with which he speaks of his immanent suffering and

death is extraordinary. It betrays a level of awareness, a depth of self-knowledge and a capacity for faith that is as attractive as it is uncomfortable. For, if we're honest, few of us have the courage to live with the inevitability of death, even fewer of us to court it prematurely through taking unnecessary risks, and fewer still to believe that death can be redemptive (cf. 10:45).

Jesus' repeated reference to his death (e.g. 8:31; 9:30-32; 10:32-34), then, is remarkable and exposes the superficiality of our own faith as we confront matters of ultimate significance. Even the prospect of resurrection is a poor remedy when sacrificing the life we know for the possibility of one that may be no more than an edifice of hope. And yet it is precisely when Jesus is at his most human that his greatness is most transparent. Paradoxically, his vulnerability discloses a quality of being that transcends anything we have experienced and draws us into the mystery of a life formed by God.

Further, in the presence of such a life, we find ourselves embracing the dilemma of James and John (10:35-40) - for we too want a 'designer Messiah' who conforms to our expectations and will require of us only what we wish to give. Christology and discipleship are, indeed, intimately linked; and if Jesus is prepared to taste the cup of suffering and be overwhelmed by the baptism of death then so must we. But although Jesus has bared his soul and exposed our self-seeking motivations, still we must follow. Here, trust leads us forward and takes us beyond our understanding and desire for self-preservation. For we have entrusted too much of ourselves to Jesus to desert him now.

The testimony of a 'seeing' blind man

Read Mark 10:46-52

THE STORY OF BARTIMAEUS is one of the great testimonies of faith recorded in the gospels and Mark uses it to form a transition from his 'discipleship course' (see comment on 8:22-26) to the culmination of Jesus' ministry in Jerusalem. Here, as in Mark 8:22-26, the contrast between different types of blindness and sight reinforces the conviction that only faith can discern who Jesus is within God's saving purposes.

Note how spatial imagery communicates the truth of what is unfolding. Initially, blind Bartimaeus is by the roadside (v. 46); but this is no ordinary road, for it is the route of Jesus' final journey and one which he predicted would embrace suffering, death and resurrection. This road, then, symbolises for Mark the way of the cross, which is also the way of authentic discipleship. Bartimaeus hears of Jesus' approach and faith perceives God's anointed one who can deliver his people from oppression ('Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!'). It is probable that 'Son of David' would have been recognised as a title for God's Messiah in Jesus' time (cf. Psalms of Solomon 17:21).

Like others who discern God's hand upon Jesus (cf. 10:13-15), Bartimaeus' access is prevented by the spiritually blind; but Jesus will tolerate no gatekeepers as he invites Bartimaeus to approach him (v. 49). The 'seeing' blind man throws off his cloak, which as a beggar would constitute the sum of his worldly possessions; and, leaving all behind, he draws near (v. 50). Jesus' question ('What do you want me to do for you?') seems absurd for surely the answer is obvious - but faith only becomes

truly liberating when exposed to the vulnerability of personal encounter and invested in the realisation of concrete hopes. Bartimaeus' faith, then, leads him to Jesus in a way that physical sight never could - a paradox that is underlined when the eyes of the 'seeing' Bartimaeus are opened. And, finally, once Bartimaeus has experienced freedom from the dehumanising effects of illness, destitution and despair, he chooses to become a disciple as he follows Jesus on the way.

No doubt the story of Bartimaeus has its roots in an historical incident, but Mark's skilful retelling of it creates a vehicle for divine encounter as faith enables us to draw near to Jesus and experience God's liberating presence - 'Go, your faith has made you well.' (v. 52)

Great expectations as Jesus enters Jerusalem

Read Mark 11:1-11

THE SO-CALLED TRIUMPHAL ENTRY into Jerusalem stands in stark contrast to the secrecy of the previous chapters. The portrayal of Jesus as the long awaited Son of David, riding in majesty, acclaimed by his subjects and in fulfilment of messianic prophecy (cf. Zechariah 9:9) as he claims his father's kingdom, appears to put an end to the rumours surrounding Jesus' identity that have circulated from the beginning. And yet even here not all is as it seems for there is much misunderstanding and pathos in these verses: hailed as God's anointed deliverer by those who would soon call for his execution, accursed of God (15:13-14; cf. Deuteronomy 21:22-23); a king of the Jews and yet without political or military aspirations; a dramatic entrance into God's holy city and Temple which proves to be no more than a reconnaissance exercise.

The historical core of this tradition is difficult to recover. This is the first time Mark records Jesus going up to Jerusalem, although it is unlikely that the substance of chapters 11-15 all took place in the final week of Jesus' life; perhaps, Mark has combined two or more visits to create a single episode (cf. John 2:13; 5:1; 12:12). Waving branches and shouting 'hosanna', as part of the recitation of the Hallel (Psalms 113-18; vv. 8-10), were characteristics of the autumn Feast of Tabernacles (harvest festival) and, possibly, the winter Feast of Hanukkah (rededication of the Temple), rather than the Feast of Passover (deliverance from Egypt). And whilst Mark clearly understands 'hosanna' as a cry of praise and adulation, the Hebrew actually means something like 'save now' (cf. Psalm 118:25). Then, there is the matter of the colt (vv. 2-7). It was expected that pilgrims would travel on foot and, from what we can gather, this was Jesus' preferred means of travel; and yet he purposefully enters Jerusalem on an animal. Even a colt was considered a suitable ride for a king and it may well be that the requisitioning of the beast in the manner recorded is an example not so much of Jesus' supernatural knowledge as his royal prerogative.

What, then, are we to make of all this? Firstly, Mark's presentation of this incident, with a partial lifting of the veil of ignorance, is consistent with his overarching plan in which Jesus' meaning for faith is reached through participation in the journey of discipleship, from beginning to end. From now on, we may share the faith of Bartimaeus (cf. 10:46-52) and acclaim Jesus as royal Messiah and saviour;

but what these categories mean and whether they are sufficient is yet to be seen. Secondly, if Jesus did actually enter Jerusalem as Mark narrates, riding in majesty, with the people preparing his way with their cloaks, and to shouts of 'save now' (i.e. Hosanna), then this would unquestionably have been interpreted as a messianic act with political implications. As prophesied and long-expected, God's anointed one has come to deliver his people from oppression and to re-establish the throne of David.

Faith, rather than sacrifice, gives access to God

Read Mark 11:12-26

THESE VERSES provide us with another example of Mark 'sandwiching' technique. In this case, the cursing of the fig tree (vv. 12-14 & 20-25/6) encloses Jesus' action in the Jerusalem Temple (vv. 15-19). Whatever gave rise to the former, Mark clearly interprets the cursing in a symbolic way reflecting God's judgement upon the worship of his people, which Jesus executes when in the Temple.

Taken literally, the observation that Jesus' hunger could not be satisfied by a fig tree when out of season is no cause for surprise. His unprecedented action in cursing the tree, however, is extraordinary and invites a more spiritual or symbolic interpretation. From this perspective, it is significant that God's chosen people, Israel, are referred to in the Hebrew Scriptures as barren fig trees when they are unfaithful to God and bring judgement upon themselves (Jeremiah 8:13; Hosea 9:10; Micah 7:1). It seems likely, therefore, that Mark is drawing upon this background here in presenting the cursing as a form of prophetic act symbolising God's judgement.

But what exactly has brought about God's judgement? There are a number of possibilities, including, the corruption of the temple priesthood, the commercialisation of the Temple, and the hypocrisy of exterior religiosity without a corresponding moral commitment. One would expect Jesus' action in the Temple to point us in the right direction, but this is difficult to assess for the moneychangers and sellers of livestock were all part of the sacrificial system as defined in the Jewish Law. By venting his righteous indignation against those who service the 'system' and by quoting a passage from Isaiah which affirms the universal compass of God's grace and favour ('for all people', v. 17; cf. Isaiah 56:7), it seems probable that Jesus' concern was principally about access to God. Namely, that the sacrificial system, restricted to one place in Jerusalem, controlled by a religious élite and open to commercial exploitation, was an inappropriate vehicle for establishing and maintaining relationship with God.

Certainly, this is how Mark interprets the happening, for faith in God (vv. 22-24), hope-filled expectant prayer (v. 25) and a life reflecting God's forgiveness (v. 26) are the channels for divine encounter and for realising God's sovereign presence. Interestingly, Jesus announces that faith will precipitate the levelling of the spiritual landscape and a corresponding opening up of access to God with the destruction of 'this mountain' (v. 23) into the depths of the sea. 'This mountain' can only

mean the Temple Mount, the gateway to God; and its demolition would have the effect of the earth becoming 'full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea' (Isaiah 11.9).

Who is able to speak for God?

Read Mark 11:27-33

THE SETTING FOR THIS CONTROVERSY between Jesus and representatives from the chief priests, the scribes and the elders is the Temple. These groups constituted the principal religious authorities in Jerusalem at that time and comprised the supreme Jewish court known as the Sanhedrin. Not surprisingly, the manner of Jesus' arrival in Jerusalem (11:1-11) and his subsequent conduct (11:15-18) had precipitated a crisis over authority and, in particular, over who is able to speak for God. Further, it is conceivable that Jesus' entire ministry is under scrutiny at this juncture as he is challenged to defend his self-assumed position as a religious leader with a reputation for teaching, healing and associating with those on the margins of society.

The practice of responding to a question (v. 28) with a counter-question (v. 29) is characteristic of Jewish debating technique. Jesus' allusion to John the Baptist here may simply be a skilful side-step to shift attention from himself; however, a more likely explanation is that he wished to come under the auspices of John's reputation as a man of God. The implication being that if John was authorised by God, so was he.

The shrewdness and dexterity of Jesus' answer is spelt out in verses 31-32, where his opponents find themselves facing a dilemma revolving around two major issues. Firstly, the standing and relative importance of, on the one hand, charismatic and, on the other, institutional authority. John and Jesus stood outside the established religious authorities of the day. As far as we know, they hadn't been formally trained and, consequently, hadn't been authorised to speak on behalf of any group; however, they claimed divine authority as those commissioned directly by God, rather than indirectly by religious bodies claiming divine legitimation.

Then as today, this is an extremely difficult area, with the excesses of unfettered religious enthusiasm and the capacity of structures for corruption and for stifling the divine Spirit etched onto every chapter of religious history. But controls exist and this was the second problem. For unless those in authority possess the power of enforcement, their ability to influence is dependent on the permission and co-operation of others. And given the Roman occupation, Jesus' opponents could not afford to ignore popular opinion which recognised the charismatic authority of John (i.e. a prophet; v. 32). Faced with the alternative of either endorsing John's ministry, thereby undermining their own power base and opening themselves to the accusation of failing to heed the Baptist's call for repentance, or risking disapproval and worse at the hands of a volatile and greatly enlarged pilgrim population in Jerusalem, they attempt to sit on the fence. Their silence may reflect a genuine uncertainty over John and Jesus or it may communicate most eloquent rejection; for Mark, it is the latter.

A window into Jesus' self-understanding?

Read Mark 12:1-12

THIS PARABLE affords us one of our closest insights into how Jesus viewed his relationship to God, his ministry and his fate. We need to remember that interpretations of Jesus emerging after his death are likely to have influenced the evangelists' presentations, making it difficult to distinguish between Jesus' self-understanding and later assessments of him. And whilst there are signs of such re-interpretation in this parable, notably, with the inclusion of Psalm 118:22-23 (vv. 10-11) to explain Jesus' rejection by fellow Jews and, presumably, to vindicate his followers (cf. Acts 4:11; Ephesians 2:20; 1 Peter 2:7), the remainder has a ring of authenticity about it.

The parable of the wicked tenants, of all the parables, invites allegorical interpretation. We know that the vineyard was a recognised symbol for Israel and in Isaiah 5:1-7 we find a similar allegory, with the prophet condemning God's people by likening their disobedience to the fruitlessness of a vineyard. Jesus' parable also suggests a controversial setting, possibly over authority (cf. 11:27-33) and the continued failure of the religious hierarchy to be open to the Spirit of God (cf. Luke 19:41-44).

What, then, does this parable tell us about Jesus' self-understanding? Firstly, it suggests that Jesus associated himself with those Spirit-inspired messengers (i.e. the owner's slaves) who were rejected by the leaders of God's people, Israel (i.e. the vineyard tenants; cf. 6:4). Significantly, however, Jesus does not characterise himself as a 'slave', but, constituting the final initiative, as the owner's only son and heir (vv. 6-7). Here, it is not so much the intimacy of sonship as the authority it bestows upon Jesus that is in view. It appears that Jesus believed himself to occupy a unique and final role within God's initiatives to save his people.

Further, the parable suggests that Jesus recognised his ministry would end in rejection and death. No doubt, the fate of John the Baptist will have forced him to confront this possibility and stories of the martyrdoms of the great Hebrew prophets (e.g. Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel) were current and plentiful. In addition, Jesus may well have known of Honi, a Galilean charismatic miracle worker, who was stoned in Jerusalem a few decades earlier. What is equally significant, however, is that verse 8 suggests a death within the walls of the vineyard; yet Jesus was executed outside of the walls of Jerusalem! It is difficult to think this detail would have been introduced if the parable was a product of the early church.

Jesus and the two kingdoms

Read Mark 12:13-17

THESE VERSES contain the first in a group of four questions (also vv. 19-23, v. 28 and v. 35) that Mark presents together. Their purpose was to trap Jesus into error and so to undermine his authority and influence. Significantly, however, the quality of his answers shifts attention away from the suspect motivations of his inquisitors onto Jesus as a man of wisdom and a teacher of truth.

The first trap set for him concerns the payment of a poll tax that was imposed on the inhabitants of Judaea, Samaria and Idumaea when formed into a Roman province in 6 AD. As we can imagine, Jews viewed this tax as an imposition and objected to the erosion of their national identity by being parcelled together with alien peoples. Further, the Roman denarius, the legal tender for the payment of the tax, bore the image of the emperor. And, according to Jewish Law, the engraving of any human likeness was forbidden and the casting of one's image on a coin idolatrous.

Jesus finds himself on the horns of a dilemma: to advocate payment would cost him popular support amongst his fellow Jews; to renounce it would cast him in the mould of a political agitator and probably lead to his arrest by the Romans. However, the profundity of Jesus' answer transcends such constraints and communicates a timeless truth concerning the relationship between faith and life.

And yet we must acknowledge that Jesus' meaning here remains a matter of debate. Some have seen in these words Jesus' advocacy of a 'two kingdoms' theology where the demands of, on the one hand, the kingdom of God and, on the other, the kingdoms of this world are neither mutually incompatible nor impinge one upon the other. Even a superficial knowledge of Jesus' message and ministry, however, highlights the implausibility of this proposal, for his vision was rooted in helping others to discover God's justice, truth and mercy in this life and not just in the next. On the contrary, Jesus' response clearly acknowledges the rightful demands of God and state; but there can be little doubt where his allegiances reside should there be a conflict of loyalties. The image of the emperor may have been stamped on each denarius, but the image of God is etched on every human soul.

Pause for thought

THE READINGS OF THE PAST WEEK witness the beginning of Jesus' passion. For passion is about losing control, becoming vulnerable and being at the mercy of others. And although never free of expectations and other constraints, Jesus was largely able to pursue his ministry unimpeded when in Galilee. With his approach to Jerusalem, however, all this changed. Blind Bartimaeus signals the transition when he petitions Jesus in explicitly messianic terms, 'Son of David' (10:48, 49). Now Jesus is typecast as the hopes of the pilgrim people of God and, especially, their longing that God would raise up a saviour to perform a new Exodus by breaking the grip of Roman rule are projected onto him. How much Jesus encouraged such speculation is now difficult to determine; but one thing is clear, control of his destiny soon passed out of his hands. Then, as now, people made of him what they wanted and the pathos of Jesus' predicament emerges with the Jewish and Roman authorities arresting and executing him on the basis of messianic pretensions that others entertained on his behalf. This is the anatomy of powerlessness as Jesus' life is placed on the sacrificial altar of public opinion and political expediency.

Jesus, then, finds himself facing opposition on all fronts and needing to defend his vision of God's kingdom against those feeling increasingly threatened by his unwillingness to conform to their stereotypes and by the authority he continued to possess after the bastions of power disowned him. And as we search for the flame that fires Jesus' ministry, one phrase comes to mind, 'Have faith in God' (11:22). Perhaps it is here that opposites meet, as we encounter God in humanity and humanity in God. What kind of faith is this? It is a naked trust in God's covenantal faithfulness and an overwhelming conviction that God is for us and can be found in relationships and patterns of life reflecting his ways. This is a faith unfettered by doctrinal controls and informed by the limitless grace of God - it is a 'mountain-moving' faith (11:23) that participates in the omnipotence of God. Little wonder that Jesus was celebrated as the pioneer and perfecter of faith (Hebrews 12:2; contrary to the NRSV, there is no 'our' in the original Greek!).

As we reflect on this dimension of Jesus' life, we soon recognise here something that we need desperately. For without sharing the faith of Jesus it is impossible to find the radical freedom to live in the midst of the manifold pressures exerted by political, economic, social and religious authorities, seeking to conform and manipulate, and still take responsibility for own decisions and destinies. Without this faith we are unable to follow Jesus in the way of the cross - of passion and costly love.

The God of the living

Read Mark 12:18-27

FROM WHAT WE CAN GATHER the belief that God would bodily resurrect his people from Sheol, the shadowy existence that awaits all at death, came to expression within the Jewish faith at a relatively late stage. We can see signs of it taking shape in the Psalms with believers struggling to make sense of suffering and death in the light of God's love for and unconditional commitment to them (e.g. Psalms 30 & 88). Further, with the increasing influence of Greek culture and ideas upon the Jewish way, belief in the immortality of the soul was absorbed into speculation about the afterlife during the intertestamental period (e.g. Book of Wisdom & 4 Maccabees). However, it was the need for justice and vindication for those Jews who had been persecuted and killed as they refused to compromise their faith that finally gave birth to the conviction that God would raise them up to eternal life and punish their enemies (Isaiah 26:19; Daniel 12:1-3; Psalms of Solomon 13-15; 2 Maccabees 7).

But as this passage from Mark makes clear, not all Jews subscribed to this belief. The evangelist confirms what the Jewish historian Josephus also reports, namely, that, unlike their pharisaic counterparts, the Sadducees did not believe in the resurrection. Constituting the religious aristocracy of the day, their conservative outlook made them suspicious of new developments; and even under Roman rule, they enjoyed a standard of living which gave them little cause to despair of this life!

Their question to Jesus concerning the resurrection (vv. 19-23) assumes the principle of Levirate marriage specified in Deuteronomy 25:5-10, whereby a Jewish man is guaranteed an heir by requiring

his brothers to marry his wife should he die without a son. Although the Sadducees cite Moses as their authority (i.e. the five books of Moses, including Deuteronomy), Jesus criticises them for knowing neither the Scriptures nor the God to whom they bear witness (v. 24). We should note that Jesus' answer is primarily a rebuttal of what he considered to be a largely irrelevant issue and cannot be interpreted as his definitive statement on post-mortem existence. However, in addition to reflecting the current view about sharing an angelic existence, it suggests that the resurrected life will neither be regulated by the Mosaic Law nor restricted to conventional family relationships. The logic of Jesus' answer in verse 26 is far from obvious to us now. Like his inquisitors, he appeals to Moses' authority, but concludes that, as God is described by him as the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (cf. Exodus 3:6), these patriarchs must still be alive. At best, this is evidence for continued existence in some form, but not for resurrection in particular.

The greatest commandment of all

Read Mark 12:28-34

THE QUESTIONING OF JESUS continues with a scribe or teacher of the Law asking him which he considered to be the greatest of all the commandments. Although the versions in Matthew and Luke (22:35/10:25) suggest an ulterior motive, Mark's scenario seems plausible. Jewish tradition identified 613 commandments within the Torah (i.e. 1st five books of the Bible), highlighting the need to both summarise and prioritise.

Jesus, being a faithful Jew, draws his answer from the Torah, citing Deuteronomy 6:4-5 and Leviticus 19:18. In many respects, the former, known as the Shema, is the foundation for every Jew's response to God. It was recited twice each day, worn upon a Jew's forehead in a phylactery and inscribed upon the door posts of his home (cf. Deuteronomy 6:8-9). From what we can gather, both the Shema and Leviticus 19:18 were used in such debates at Jesus' time, although their juxtaposition may reflect a development. However, the injunction to love both God and neighbour is found in the Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs ('Love the Lord and your neighbour', Issachar 5:2; 'Throughout all your life love the Lord, and one another with a true heart', Dan 5:3); but although this work was composed in the second century before Christ, it shows signs of later Christian interpolation. The more radical and innovative teaching attributed to Jesus concerning the love of enemies is not recorded by Mark (cf. Matthew 5:43-48 & Luke 6:27-36); but even this can be seen as a natural expression of Jewish ethical principles (cf. Sirach 18:8-14).

One of the most striking things about Jesus' teaching here is that we are commanded to love. That is to say, love is rooted in volition rather than affection; whilst feelings of love can neither be manufactured nor demanded, a wilful commitment to loving someone is within the gift of those who are open to God's unconditional and unmerited love for all people. Further, by linking love of God with love of people, Jesus underlines the Jewish conviction that worship and service, faith and life, are intimately connected and cannot be separated.

Both Jesus and his scribal counterpart appear to agree on the most important commandments and of their pre-eminence to the sacrificial system, which needn't reflect any moral commitment on the part of priest or people (vv. 32-33; cf. Hosea 6:6). However, they may understand these injunctions in significantly different ways: the love of God and neighbour may be the basis for all the other essential commandments or they may represent a distillation of the rest and thus a replacement. Jesus' words, 'You are not far from the kingdom of God' (v. 34), suggests a genuine openness to God and willingness to serve him through serving others.

Jesus disturbs the status quo

Read Mark 12:35-44

THIS SECTION contains three quite separate traditions: Jesus' question about the Messiah's Davidic descent (vv. 37-37), his denouncement of the scribes (vv. 38-40), and his praise of the widow's generosity (vv. 41-44). The first of these is the most difficult to fathom. As we noted when discussing Mark 10:35-45, the expectation that the Messiah would be of Davidic lineage was current in Jesus' time. Further, in Mark 10:47-48, Jesus seems comfortable with Bartimaeus' appellation, 'Son of David'. And yet here he challenges the link between Messiah and lineage, much to the delight of his audience.

The argument revolves around Psalm 110.1 which may well have been a seedbed for messianic speculation in first century Palestine and certainly became a Christian proof text for Jesus' exaltation (e.g. Acts 2:34-35). We need to remember that David would have been considered the author of this psalm and, writing under divine inspiration ('by the Holy Spirit'), refers to the Messiah as, 'my Lord'. As sonship assumes subordination and lordship implies superiority, it would be impossible for David to refer to the Messiah as his Lord whilst knowing him to be his son. Hence the conundrum.

Whether Jesus wished to undermine the association between king David and the Messiah, and how he saw this argument reflecting on his own self-understanding and perception by others is difficult to assess. It is possible that his purpose is more subtle, distinguishing between natural descent and divine vocation to demonstrate that God is free to use whoever he wishes irrespective of background (cf. Romans 1:3-4).

Interestingly, Jesus continues to challenge stereotypes in his castigation of the scribes (vv. 38-40). We know from verses 28-34 that he didn't consider them all corrupt and perhaps his point is a more general one about the dangers of external religiosity masking sinister conduct and morally bankrupt motivations (cf. 11:12-26). Their practice of exploiting widows is clearly deplorable and may refer to unscrupulous estate management by the religious authorities.

A widow is also the subject of the final tradition in this section (vv. 41-44), which continues the theme of the previous one, namely, that appearances can be deceptive and need not reveal a person's true self. In this case, the issue is giving to God or, at least, to the religious structure claiming divine authority (i.e. the Temple). As usual, Jesus' insight is both penetrating and disturbing: generosity is not a measure of the contribution, but a condition of the heart.

End-time predictions - Part I

Read Mark 13:1-13

CHAPTER THIRTEEN is a remarkable piece of writing, time tabling the final countdown before God intervenes decisively through his heavenly Messiah, the Son of Man, to save the faithful from a corrupt humanity's collision course with disaster. We find examples of this kind of apocalyptic speculation in the Hebrew Scriptures (e.g. Daniel) and it was widespread in the first century. Many influences can be identified within this genre, including, concern over God's non-activity in the world and his failure to fulfil covenantal promises, a desire to imbue the present with meaning, and a longing to know the mind of God not only in the past and present but also in the future.

Apocalyptic invites hearers to discover their own situation within its imagery and allusions, and so to redeem life by locating it within sacred time - the outworkings of salvation history. Of the various end-time overtures rehearsed in chapter 13, references to the destruction of the Temple (v. 2) and its desecration (v. 14) are identifiable events, although it is unclear whether Mark writes before or after their fulfilment (cf. the Temple was destroyed in 70 AD by fire). This issue is one of the determining factors for dating the Gospel.

Did Jesus compose this apocalyptic monologue either in its entirety or in part? There is little reason to doubt that some of the material originates with him, including quite possibly, the prediction of the Temple's destruction (a view shared by other Jews), the warning over immanent persecution and apostasy, together with the belief that God would intervene through his heavenly agent. However, not only is the extended discourse style uncharacteristic of Jesus (if the first three Gospels are any guide), but also the world view underpinning it goes against the grain of Jesus' largely positive and life-affirming attitude towards this world as a place for divine encounter and experiencing God's blessings. To this end, the current form of the discourse suggests editorial reworking and may contain considerable supplementary material of either Jewish or Christian provenance.

Mark may already have alluded to Jesus' conviction concerning the destruction of the Temple in 11:23, where 'this mountain' refers to the Temple Mount. The significance of this event is usually understood in terms of judgement upon Israel or, at least, upon its corrupt religious hierarchy; however, the import for Jesus may have been more one of demonstrating the redundancy of the temple sacrificial system for moderating access to God. And yet before the decisive events of the end-time take place, disciples must prepare themselves for the 'birth pangs', including, religious charlatans masquerading as Jesus (v. 6), political unrest (v. 7), and natural disasters (v. 8). Evidently, Jesus did not foresee the cataclysmic consummation of all things in his own lifetime; and after 2000 years of Christian history which generation has been free of such incidents!

End-time predictions - Part II

ONE OF THE STRIKING CHARACTERISTICS of apocalyptic timetables is the way in which future events are thought to be predetermined. The die has been cast, either by God from the beginnings of time or by the effects of sinful generations now beyond redemption. According to Jesus, the placement of the 'desolating sacrilege' (v. 14), a phrase taken from Daniel 12:11 where it refers to the altar to Zeus constructed in the Jerusalem Temple by Antiochus Epiphanes in BC 168, is an example of this phenomenon. Whether Jesus had the Temple's destruction in mind or some other act of desecration is unclear.

God's intervention is prompted by the need to save the elect or a surviving remnant (v. 20). Evidently, without divine assistance no one, not even the upright and faithful, would be left alive. One way in which apocalyptic writing highlights both the disordering effects of human sinfulness and the corresponding displeasure of God is by depicting the disruption of the natural order (vv. 24-25; cf. Isaiah 13:10; 34:4; Ezekiel 32:7-8; Joel 2:10; 3:15; Amos 8:9). These happenings provide the backdrop for the coming of the heavenly Son of Man (vv. 26-27). The book of Daniel (7:13-14) once again supplies the imagery for God's deliverer, a cosmic Messiah empowered to implement the divine will, with or without human co-operation. The gathering together of the remnant of faithful Israel also expresses a hope found in the Hebrew Scriptures (cf. Isaiah 11:11; 43:5-6).

Do these verses reflect Jesus' understanding? One school of thought is that Jesus did expect God to intervene in human history and believed his death would act as a trigger for this intervention. Certainly, his mode of entry into Jerusalem, coupled with his conduct in the Temple at a time when Jewish nationalistic and messianic fervour will have been high, suggests a desire to orchestrate a confrontation and so to pre-empt a crisis. As we shall see, Jesus succeeded on this count.

The parables contained in verses 28-31 and 32-37 pick up the flavour of Jesus' apocalyptic discourse even if they weren't originally a part of it. The pattern of nature as exemplified by a fig-tree demonstrates the inevitability of God's judgement and consummation of all things, whilst the parable of the house-owner reinforces one of the principle functions of apocalyptic, namely, to encourage faithfulness, obedience and conscientiousness.

The ambiguity of intimacy

Read Mark 14:1-11

FROM THIS POINT the order of events narrated by Mark possesses a coherence that reflects both regular retelling and a correspondence with what actually happened. In these verses, we find the plot to kill Jesus (vv. 1-2 & 10-11) enveloping his anointing at Bethany (vv. 3-9). Mark has already informed us of the religious leaders' intention to silence Jesus (e.g. 3:6; 11:18; 12:12), presumably because he undermined their own authority, threatened to de-stabilise the fragile peace and, perhaps, was genuinely thought to be a false prophet.

Judas' willingness to hand Jesus over may well have persuaded his opponents to throw caution to the wind (cf. v. 2) and to act during the festival of Passover and Unleavened Bread (originally two separate feasts, but amalgamated later; cf. 2 Chronicles 35:17). Christian tradition has cast Judas in the mould of the malevolent, avaricious disciple who betrays his Lord with a kiss. Yet the word translated 'betray' (v. 10) need carry no prerogative overtones and may simply mean 'hand over'. His motivations for leading the religious authorities to Jesus when in a secluded place are now out of reach. But this seems to be the extent of the crime; the rest is interpretation. And in the light of this, one wonders whether Judas has been made into something of a scapegoat, bearing the guilt of all those who betray Jesus, as he is cast out from the community of faith and destroyed as a form of recompense or atonement (cf. Matthew 27:3-10).

The anointing of Jesus is one of the most powerful and enigmatic stories recorded in the Gospels. The woman's actions can readily be accommodated within the social protocols of the day; however, the opulence of her gesture in using costly ointments was extraordinary and for this reason received a mixed response. For some, no doubt indignant at such waste, it was excessive, financially irresponsible and contrary to Jesus' priorities and commitments. And yet in spite of this, Jesus defends her. We can only assume that, whereas on-lookers reacted to what she did, Jesus discerned her motivations and judged them to be worthy. Perhaps, as with the woman in Luke 7:36-50, he recognised an expression of love and devotion that was truly inspirational and exemplary. Certainly, this anonymous follower is promised the highest acclaim (v. 9).

However, there may be more to this story than appears. For one thing, the anointing anticipates Jesus' death and becomes the preparation of his corpse that the empty tomb prevents (cf. 16:1). For another, anointing with oil was a means of investing power or communicating status and blessing. Israelite kings were anointed (e.g. 1 Kings 1:39; Psalm 89:20) and God's future saviour would be similarly endowed ('Messiah' literally means 'anointed'). Whether these associations were in the minds of Jesus and the woman we shall never know, but they clearly resonate with Mark's convictions. For the woman's faith not only perceives the way of Jesus to be the way of the cross, but also confirms that Jesus' true identity only becomes manifest through his passion.

Pause for thought

FINDING GOD AT THE EXTREMES OF HUMAN EXPERIENCE is the theme running through this week's readings. A faith that trusts God not only for this life, but also for the next. A commitment to love both the God whom we cannot see and our neighbours whose presence is only too obvious. The challenge to stick with Jesus when he courts controversy, disturbs the status quo of religious complacency, and requires his followers to embrace the crisis associated with the realisation of God's sovereign reign on earth.

Living in the 'present' when it is invested with so much significance and full of so many demands has the effect of polarising human response: some are drawn into the vision of an eternal now, of the dawning of salvation, whilst others are incapable or unwilling to embrace this invitation to authentic life. And as we have seen, Jesus precipitates such polarisation because his life communicates a quality of human being and an investment in God that is at the same time inspirational and threatening. In one sense, his faith is too strong for he refuses to compromise or seek a less confrontational approach. Faith must be tested in the crucible of human experience and so, by implication, must the God who is believed in.

That such intensity of faith and human being should meet with outright opposition is only to be expected - for it is easier to destroy what threatens us than to allow it to 'destroy' or transform us. But what is remarkable is the radical freedom that some found in Jesus' presence. And here the irresponsible generosity of the anonymous woman who anoints Jesus is pre-eminent. For this gesture speaks of one who is truly being herself and expressing a quality of love that is constrained neither by the desire for self-preservation nor concern for popular opinion. And in case we are tempted to think this demonstration of devotion rather self-indulgent and inappropriate, it is worth remembering that in the Gospel story it precedes and prepares Jesus for an even more extravagant and public manifestation.

Few of us find it easy to be true to our authentic selves and to live wholeheartedly and unreservedly in the present. But this is the inheritance of faith that Jesus bequeaths to those who choose to follow him in the way of the cross.

Jesus entrusts his ministry to the disciples

Read Mark 14:12-31

THE FOREKNOWLEDGE attributed to Jesus in these verses is extraordinary, including predictions of betrayal and denial by his followers (vv. 18-21; 27-31). Had things been as Mark records here it is difficult to understand why Jesus didn't withdraw from Jerusalem and avoid arrest. Unless, of course, he intended this course of events to come about, in which case Judas should be re-cast in a different light in that his 'handing over' becomes essential to the story of salvation. A more likely explanation is that these predictions reflect a later strata of interpretation which attempts to give a sense of divine

coherence to the course of Jesus' final days. In this way, the impression is given that whatever happened was all part of a pre-ordained divine plan.

The institution of the Lord's Supper is one of the most difficult events in Jesus' life for us now to appreciate. It has precipitated such a rich feast of theological meaning and liturgical expression that it is extremely hard to distinguish between Jesus' intention and later interpretation. We know that meals and table fellowship were an integral component of Jesus' ministry. They were a celebration of God's sustenance and saving presence (e.g. 2:18-20; 6:31-44; 8:1-10; Luke 7:31-35), a tangible demonstration of God's acceptance and reconciliation of those on the margins (e.g. 2:15-17), and a foretaste of the abundant blessings that communion with God would yield in the future (14:25; cf. Isaiah 25:6-10).

Although Mark presents Jesus' final meal as a Passover commemoration (v. 12-13; in contrast to John 13:1), this may reflect a later attempt to interpret Jesus' death in the light of the Passover sacrifice. Certainly, the Passover meal, with the symbolic use of foods to remember and re-enact God's great act of salvation when the Israelites 'passed over' from slavery into freedom provides a rich interpretative matrix for the last supper (cf. Exodus 12:1-14; Deuteronomy 16:1-3). However, it is questionable whether Jesus wished his followers to understand his death as a new Passover.

For one thing, the word 'is', which identifies bread with Jesus' body and wine with his blood (vv. 22-24), has no equivalent in Aramaic; and, in any case, a Jew would find the prospect of drinking blood abhorrent (Leviticus 17:10-16; Deuteronomy 12:15-28). Jesus intends the bread and wine to represent something and not to become what is represented. Again, the word translated 'body' (v. 22) does not relate to a part of Jesus, but constitutes the entire person and may be used here to encapsulate his life and ministry. Further, comparison with 1 Corinthians 11:25, the earliest witness to Jesus' words of institution, suggests that the principal association is between wine and covenant, and only by implication between wine and blood.

Unfortunately, space does not permit a full discussion of these important issues, but we may well be closer to Jesus' meaning when we understand the words and actions associated with the bread as a commissioning of the disciples and an entrusting to them of his God-given vocation. Whilst the words and actions associated with the wine celebrate the new relationship between God and humanity realised through Jesus' ministry and death, and finding fulfilment in God's future (v. 25).

Gethsemane and the humanity of Jesus

Read Mark 14:32-52

ALTHOUGH IT IS DIFFICULT to understand how Jesus' anguish in the garden of Gethsemane was recorded, the story is surprisingly well attested (Matthew 26:36-46; Luke 22:39-46; Hebrews 5:7-8; cf. John 12:27; 14:31; 18:11). It provides us with some of the most intimate insights into Jesus' relationship with God and how he viewed his vocation. We have already hinted that the portrayal of Jesus as one who predicts the course of his passion (e.g. 8:31-32; 9:30-31; 10:32-34), together with

the desertion of his followers (e.g. 14:17-21, 26-31), is a construct of the evangelist, designed to give a sense of divine foreknowledge and purpose to otherwise chaotic and potentially faith-destroying events. And whilst there is evidence of this editorial re-working in the Gethsemane tradition (e.g. vv. 41-42), we encounter a dramatically different Jesus within these verses.

Indeed, the Jesus of Gethsemane exhibits a depth of humanity that is more demanding and profound than his most public demonstrations of power. He confronts death not as a temporary glitch on the way to resurrection glory (cf. '... and after three days rise again', v. 8:31; 9:31; 10:34), but as a stark reality that threatens to destroy everything. His sense of vocation is tested to the limits as he is overwhelmed by anxiety and grief at the prospect of facing the hour of testing and consuming the cup of fate (cf. 10:38-39). 'Abba', the Aramaic equivalent of 'my father' or 'our father', communicates familial intimacy and, presumably, is recorded here in the original language to emphasise that it was characteristic of Jesus' way of addressing God (also Matthew 6:9; cf. Romans 8:15; Galatians 4:6).

Jesus' petition, 'Abba, Father, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me; yet, not what I want, but what you want' (v. 36), concentrates into one sentence what must have been a gradual movement towards acceptance and resolution. The quality of Jesus' faith exhibited here is extraordinary: a child-like trust in the divine omnipotence of God (cf. 9:23; 10:27; 11:22-24) and a radical obedience enabling him to entrust his future to God and to abandon life itself in pursuit of a vocation (cf. 8:34-37; 13:13). Significantly, it is Christ's obedience that Paul stresses when discussing the saving effects of the cross (Romans 5:17-19; Philippians 2:8).

The account of Jesus' betrayal and arrest also possesses a ring of authenticity (vv. 43-52), although it contains more questionable components (e.g. vv. 51-52). The armed mob acts, at least informally, under the auspices of the Sanhedrin. Surprisingly, given Jesus' activities in the Temple, he is not readily identifiable by his captors and has to be pointed out. Although Judas' mode of betrayal seems unnecessarily heartless, a kiss was a recognised way for a pupil to greet a rabbi. As we shall see, the disciples' desertion of Jesus may not have been as final as these verses suggest; here, in accordance with Mark's presentation throughout, their response is pre-determined (vv. 49-50; cf. 14:26-31). Interestingly, we find a more positive assessment of Peter, James and John on the lips of Jesus in verse 38, where their willingness to stand by him is recognised.

Jesus is tried and sentenced

Read Mark 14:53-65 & 15:1-15

THIS LONG SECTION, narrating Jesus' encounters with Jewish and Roman authorities, together with Peter's denial, is full of problems. Mark's record of his trial before the Sanhedrin repeatedly contravenes the rules stipulated in the Mishnah (an authoritative supplement to the Jewish Law), which although not compiled until 200 AD draws on older traditions: trials have to be held in a special hall on the Temple mount and could not be conducted during feasts or at night; defendants

were innocent until proven guilty and only needed to answer accusations which could be substantiated; convictions required at least two corroborative testimonies; a verdict could not be reached before a second meeting of the Sanhedrin on a separate day. And then what was the charge meriting the death penalty? Does it concern Jesus' pronouncements about the destruction and rebuilding of the Temple (v. 58) or his messianic pretensions (vv. 61-62)? If it is the former, why doesn't Mark record Jesus making this claim (13:1-2 is a prediction not an undertaking; cf. John 2:19); if it is the latter, claiming to be the Messiah was neither a capital offence nor blasphemous (the Messiah was not God, but God's human agent). The evangelist's account of Jesus' meeting with Pilate is little more convincing (15:1-15). It portrays the Roman prefect as an indecisive, ponderous and conciliatory man when, according to the Jewish historian Josephus, he was 'inflexible, merciless and obstinate'. Further, there is no evidence of the custom of releasing prisoners at festivals, and the likelihood of Pilate liberating a committed murderer and political agitator is extremely small.

What, then, are we to make of all this? There is good reason to think that Mark has heavily reworked his traditions to serve both his theological interests and apologetic concerns. We notice how as Jesus' death draws closer, so the veil over his identity is withdrawn (vv. 61-62). Equally, the evangelist emphasises the culpability of the Jews, who had become antagonistic towards Christianity (cf. Matthew 27:19-26; Luke 23:4-16; John 18:28-38; 19:4-16), whilst reducing the involvement of the Roman authorities, who continued in power and posed a real threat to the future of the Christian faith.

And, although we cannot now construct what happened to Jesus in any detail, it does seem likely that he was arrested by the Jewish authorities and faced the Sanhedrin informally to establish the nature of his ministry and to assess his threat with respect to their religious authority. We cannot rule out here a genuine motivation to give Jesus a hearing, but we must also recognise their desire to do away with him. The grounds for this remain unclear, although the belief that Jesus undermined their authority and threatened the fragile peace are likely contenders. We can only assume that the Sanhedrin would have executed Jesus had it possessed the powers to do so. However, that Jesus was handed over to Roman authorities suggests this wasn't the case. Pilate's decision to accede to the Sanhedrin's request will have been motivated by political considerations. Clearly, if Jesus had committed treason by claiming to be 'the King of the Jews' (vv. 2, 9, 12), this would pose a very real threat to Roman rule and would need to be dealt with in the customary manner to avoid unrest and possible insurrection. This will have been even more necessary given the strong nationalistic fervour and vastly swollen population of Jerusalem associated with the Passover festival.

Peter's denial and the crucifixion of Jesus

Read Mark 14:66-72 & 15:16-32

THERE IS GOOD REASON TO BELIEVE the incident concerning Peter's denial of Jesus is rooted in historical fact. It is highly unlikely that the early church would have created such a story, especially, as

Peter was one of the principal leaders and the denial portrays him in decidedly unflattering terms. On a positive note, it suggests the disciples' abandonment of Jesus was not as complete as Mark indicates (cf. 14:50). Surely, Peter wouldn't have risked shadowing him into the courtyard of the high priest's residence if this had been the case. Whether the detail concerning the cock is original and why Peter's Galilean accent should have given him away when Jerusalem was full of pilgrims is impossible to say.

There is no question that crucifixion was a gruesome form of execution, reserved by the Romans for perpetrators of particularly serious crimes. Victims were made to carry their own cross-bar, stripped and fixed to the wooden structure either by nails or ropes. The legs were usually bent to make it harder to breathe and the arms were fixed at the wrist (and not through the palms as many religious artists would have us believe). Death was often an extremely prolonged affair and usually resulted from asphyxiation, sometimes after many days. On top of all this, there was the public humiliation and disgrace, together with whatever the executioners and onlookers meted out.

Details of Jesus' crucifixion may well provide further evidence of the disciples' continuing commitment to him - who else would have recorded them! It appears that the charge brought against him of claiming to be 'the King of the Jews' (v. 26) was the source of additional suffering, both before (vv. 17-20) and during (vv. 29-32) his ordeal on the cross. We know next to nothing about Simon of Cyrene (v. 21), and his being pressed into carrying Jesus' cross was highly unusual. Perhaps Jesus was so weakened by his floggings and abuse at the hands of the Roman soldiers that he was in danger of dying before sentence could be carried out. The whereabouts of Golgotha (v. 22) is now not known, although the name, meaning 'the skull', suggests a hill on the outskirts of Jerusalem. The provision of wine mixed with myrrh to ease the pain must have come from one of Jesus' followers (v. 23). And it appears the mockery of the Roman soldiers was augmented by that of passers by, members of the Sanhedrin and even those crucified with him (vv. 29-32).

And yet in spite of all this pain and anguish, it is difficult not to interpret Mark's presentation of Jesus' crucifixion as a sort of victory. For the evangelist, there is genuine pathos here: the one who is taunted to come down from the cross to save his life and convince his audience of his royal and messianic credentials is indeed the saviour of God's people, as the one who prophesied the destruction of the Temple becomes the source of atonement and the new place of divine encounter.

The death and burial of Jesus

Read Mark 15:33-47

ALTHOUGH MARK'S THEOLOGICAL INTERESTS can be discerned in his retelling of Jesus' death and burial, there is good reason to believe that his account is largely factual. In contrast to Luke (23:34, 43, 46) and John (19:26-27, 30), Jesus makes only one utterance from the cross (v. 34) and this echoes the opening verse of Psalm 22. It is impossible to say whether this heart-rending cry of desolation signals the end of Jesus' faith or is yet another profound demonstration of it (as he

remains convinced that there is a God worth appealing to!). The confusion over Elijah (vv. 35-36) could only occur in Hebrew and not in Aramaic as Mark records (cf. Matthew 27:46), whilst the belief that the prophet could be invoked in times of trouble is attested in later Jewish sources and is presumably a ramification of his translation into heaven (2 Kings 2:11-12). The offer of wine (v. 36) may well be historical, even though this detail can be found in what would become one of the great passion psalms of the church (Psalm 69:21).

Strictly speaking, the Sabbath had already begun when Joseph of Arimathea petitions Pilate for Jesus' body (vv. 42-45). The Jewish Law required the burial of malefactors on the day of death (Deuteronomy 21:22-23) and, although the Romans sometimes left their victims to decompose on the cross, it was not unheard of for them to respect Jewish sensibilities and release the corpse; hence, Joseph's courageous initiative. Mark tells us that Joseph was a 'respected member of the council' and one who was 'waiting expectantly for the kingdom of God' (v. 43). Matthew adds that he was a disciple of Jesus (27:57), a secret one according to John (19:38), who Luke stresses did not agree with the council's decision to kill Jesus. It sounds as if Joseph was a member of the Sanhedrin who, if not a follower of Jesus, identified with him to the extent that he was willing to hand over his unused family burial tomb and risk rebuttal by Pilate and being ostracised by his Jewish counterparts.

Two features of Jesus' death are central for Mark's presentation. This first concerns the tearing of the curtain (v. 38), which must refer to the one hanging at the entrance to the Holy of Holies, the locus of God's presence on earth (Exodus 26:31-35). Only the high priest was permitted to enter this place and then only once a year to make atonement for sins (Leviticus 16:29-34). The rending of this curtain from top to bottom, therefore, signifies God taking the initiative to break out of the confines of Temple worship and priestly mediation, and to open up access to himself through the death of Jesus (see notes on Mark 11:12-26; cf. Hebrews 9:12-28; 10:19-20).

The second detail, which in certain respects is the key to Mark's entire Gospel, is the centurion's confession (v. 39). For it is only when the way of the cross has been concluded and the journey of discipleship undertaken to this point that Jesus' true identity and significance for salvation becomes apparent. Here, his convictions about the kingdom and his faith in God are exposed to the most extreme form of public scrutiny. And, in spite of all the ignominy and failure, rather than being found misguided and bankrupt, they disclose a quality of life and human being that can only have been formed and inspired by God. 'Truly this man was God's Son!'

Rumours of resurrection and the invitation to faith

Read Mark 16:1-8

MOST ENGLISH TRANSLATIONS, including the *NRSV*, include what have become known as the 'shorter' and 'longer' endings of Mark. Most scholars believe that neither of these was original and that both were composed at a later stage (probably 2nd century) to supply the ending that either Mark chose not to write or which was subsequently lost. Certainly, in comparison with the other

Gospels, Mark's omission of resurrection narratives and conclusion with the irony that the women disciples' who, having been entrusted with the good news, remain fearful and silent, seems strange. As we shall see, however, there are good reasons to maintain that this was the evangelist's intention.

The clue is to be found in the young man's (an heavenly messenger?) words to the women who, apparently, had come to anoint Jesus' body a considerable time after his death (decomposition would have been well underway given the climate) knowing that their access would be denied because of the large stone rolled against the entrance to the tomb (vv. 6-7). The angel supplies them with rumours of resurrection and an invitation, on behalf of Jesus, to meet with him once more in Galilee (cf. 14:28), which was to be communicated to the disciples and to Peter (mentioned by name because of his denial of Jesus).

But why Galilee? Many suggestions have been made, including that Galilee was the original locus for the resurrection encounters (cf. Matthew 28:16-20; John 21) and the place where Jesus as the Son of Man would return to bring the kingdom of God to fulfilment (cf. 8:38-9:1; 13:24-27). However, reflection upon Mark's presentation of Jesus commends another option. For Galilee was where Jesus' vocation and ministry took shape and where he called people to follow him in the way of the cross. Repeatedly, Mark stresses that the significance of Jesus for faith only becomes apparent as one undertakes the journey of discipleship with him. And at the completion of that journey not only is the glory of Jesus revealed through the passion, but also the faith that informed his life and the vocation that inspired his ministry is entrusted to those who, having accompanied him throughout, must now embody that same faith and vocation. The return to Galilee, therefore, is the invitation to follow in Jesus' footsteps, to live out the good news of God, and so to discover that he continues to be the one who mediates God's presence and enables others to discover it for themselves.

This is Mark's genius. Rather than limiting the resurrection to what a handful of people experienced, he offers the invitation to share Jesus' faith to all who are prepared to follow him in the way of discipleship, a invitation that gains shape and definition through the pages of his Gospel.

Pause for thought

THE CLOSING STAGES OF JESUS' LIFE as narrated by Mark have been both profound and uncomfortable. We have seen what people are capable of when feeling threatened or under pressure. We have discovered how revealing suffering can be and how, for perpetrator and victim alike, it possesses a transparent quality which discloses the inner self. We have also had to face up to the gulf that exists between beliefs and convictions entertained in the cloisters of the mind and those forged in the cauldron of human experience, where they must inform conduct, determine priorities and set the course our lives will take.

But, equally, we have confronted a vital truth about God which is communicated through Jesus' passion and, in particular, his death and the words, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me'. For, in spite of first appearances and what we might want to believe, this whole episode is imbued

with a profound holiness and divine quality. Not with a God who is out there and who is able to intervene to prevent this tragedy (cf. 'He saved others; he cannot save himself', 15:31); but with a God who informs the depth of human being encountered in Jesus. The cross is where we confront the God who is present as the absent one, to borrow a phrase from Dietrich Bonhoeffer. The God who has put his life and vision for humanity and all creation in our hands. Here on the cross, as throughout his life, Jesus radiates divine glory through his faith-filled, vision-inspired, Spirit-empowered example.

And what Jesus incarnated, each of us is invited to share. This is why there can be no final chapter to Mark's Gospel, just the promise that Jesus will be found wherever his faith is shared, his vision embraced and his ministry continued. For this is the substance of the risen life.