

**Tuesday February 3rd**

**Mark 5:21-43**

We have seen Jesus' power unfolding as he ministers and teaches around the Sea of Galilee. He has cured the sick, cast out demons, calmed the winds and the sea and now we see him raising a dead person back to life again. Mark has painted a clear picture of a man of God for whom nothing is impossible. This will be an important part of the background as we see Jesus nailed to the cross. Mark has already set the foundation for being able to say: "Why panic? We know his power and the authority with which he has lived and worked. Surely, that same power will come into play on Golgotha and in the grave". One thread that we find in the sequence of stories is the reaction of Jesus to the purity laws. He confronted the spirits among the tombs in the Decapolis which would have made him unclean. He then cast them out into the pigs which must have been wandering around the area also making him unclean. He touched a woman with a discharge of blood and then touched the corpse of the little girl. None of this seemed to worry Jesus who saw higher priorities that had to be met. What Mark seems to be doing is to set the stage for the confrontation in chapter 7 when he will argue with the Pharisees over the law and the meaning of purity. In the end this will be a clash between religion and faith, between the work of God as human institutions wish to regulate it and the action of God as he wishes to work in the world.

It is hard for us to appreciate the true plight of this poor woman. She had been ill for twelve years with a haemorrhage. That Mark mentions the particular sickness is important, because anything to do with blood brings into focus the very real fears about ritual impurity. This woman would have been an outcast in her family and community, for anyone coming into contact with her would have risked being made unclean. She would not have been free to move around the village, wander to the market and mix with others. To go to town to see Jesus would have demanded a great deal of courage from her. All else had failed. She had been to the doctors, endured the humiliation of examinations and was no better off. Her life must have been full of misery and despair and it was in this mood that she covered up her face and quietly made her way through the crowd. What should give us hope in the story is the response of Jesus. He saw, not an unclean person, but a woman of faith and hope and reached out in love, mercy and with compassion. This he does to us, seeing not sinners but people in need of his grace, mercy and love.

*Prayer*

Loving Father, we come before you as people in need of your mercy and compassion. When we feel overburdened by our lives, remind us of your constant loving presence.

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## **BIBLE STUDIES JANUARY 2009**

**+ Michael Hough  
with Fr Robert Newton**



## LANTERN SERIES

*After the General Synod of 2001 the Bishop of Ballarat invited Anglicans throughout the Diocese to spend time in reflecting on the role the Scriptures play in the life of Anglicans and to take part in Bible studies and Bible reflections for General Synod 2004. This mandate now continues for the Mission of the Diocese.*

The Scriptures are the Word of God and in them we can not only discover God's teaching and his wonderful works of salvation down through the ages in the lives of his people, but we can also hear God speaking to us in our own varied situations. It is a living word that when read with eyes of faith brings us into a deeper relationship with God.

This Lantern Series of studies follows through the Gospel reading from the daily Eucharist as set down in the Australian lectionary. By reading these each day we are in a prayerful manner joining with people around the world as they gather for the daily Mass.

Each study is in three parts. Some background study of the text, opening up details and background that will help the reader to come closer to what the Gospel writer may have had in mind. An analysis of what possible meaning could the writing have to people seeking to live out lives of discipleship in the world today? And each study ends with a short prayer which may help us to ground the reading in our spiritual lives. It is to be hoped that as the people work through the texts they will be led to present their meditations to God in prayers of their own.

What is important is that adequate time is put aside each day to read the Bible texts before we work on the studies. Through familiarity with the language of the Bible and direct contact with the stories we will find ourselves growing in confidence as we study. To do them justice it would also be helpful to include a little extra time for reflection and prayer. The texts themselves are also suitable for discussion groups and over time will help give an introduction into various methods of biblical studies.

The Lantern Series is an initiative of the Diocese of Ballarat. These studies are also available at the start of each month at the diocesan web page at [www.ballaratanglican.org.au](http://www.ballaratanglican.org.au)

### **Monday February 2nd**    *The Presentation of*    **Luke 2:21-40** *Christ in the Temple*    *Fr Robert Newton*

The writer of Luke's Gospel can hardly have had a deep personal interest in the details of Jewish ceremonial coming from a Hellenistic background, and therefore it is remarkable that he should mention no less than five times in this passage that the observances were carried out according to the Law. Jesus we are to understand was brought up in the strictest traditions of Jewish devotion. But at once we are introduced to two people of like devotion, whose loyalty to the Law, so far as making them satisfied with its provisions, had kindled in them a flame of expectancy. Simeon was looking for the consolation of Israel; Anna and others like her were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem. The piety of the Old Testament properly understood produced faithful men and women eager for the coming of the Gospel. The Mosaic Law provided three ceremonies to follow on the birth of a male child. (Lev 12; Exod 13:12; Num 18:16). The first was circumcision, which took place on the eighth day from the birth and was usually the occasion for the giving of the child's name. Then in the case of the first born, there was the rite of redemption by the paying of a five shekel offering; this could be done any time after the first month. Finally after forty days, there was the purification of the mother, who up to then was regarded as unclean. The purification involved the sacrifice of a lamb and a turtledove, or young pigeon, but the poor were allowed to substitute a second dove or pigeon for the lamb; and Joseph and Mary made a poor person's offering. Luke seems to have confused the second and third ceremonies.

What stands out in this story is how much Simeon, Anna, Jesus, Mary and Joseph built their lives around the expectations of God. They could have easily found excuses for not carrying out all the demands of the Mosaic Law but chose instead to be faithful. That is something that is so easily overlooked in our modern world. As a faithful Christian we cannot determine our commitment according to our own likes and dislikes. The expectations of the faith have been established by Jesus in his preaching and teaching and these demands are every bit as binding as were the precepts of the old Mosaic Law. God expects us Christians to be living in a particular Gospel manner, not just mouthing words or "talking the talk", but "walking the walk".

#### *Prayer*

Heavenly Father, we thank you for the many blessings of life and that we show you our hearty thanks by the way we live out our faith in our daily lives through your Son Jesus Christ.

## **Sunday February 1st**

### **Mark 1:21-28**

*Fr Robert Newton*

The first full picture of Christ at the beginning of Mark's Gospel is Jesus preaching and teaching, which makes a clear statement of how aware the writer of Mark was about the centrality of teaching to Christ's ministry on earth. If so why then does the writer of Mark devote so little of the rest of his Gospel to the contents of Christ's teaching? No doubt he could assume that his original readers were already familiar with it, but that hardly serves to account for the great disparity in this respect between him and the writers of Luke and Matthew. We must remember however, that the different Evangelists were inspired to write to different audiences, and it was not a paramount aim with Mark, as it was with Luke and Matthew, to preserve the teachings of Jesus in a systematic and memorable form. It is typical then of the writer of Mark in verses 22 and 23 not to attempt to tell us *what* Jesus taught, but *what effect* the teaching had on its hearers. That this teaching of Jesus had an authority which astonished the hearers and differentiated it sharply from the teachings of the scribes to which they were accustomed. Christ's authority credentials are further explained not only through his teaching but by his actions in verses 24 to 26. Here is a typical example of Jesus simply uttering a word of command and such is its authority that the unclean spirit must obey, however unwillingly. But now a new element is added, for the powers of evil not only recognise the fact of Jesus' authority; with their supernatural insight they penetrate to the true explanation of it — they recognise that Jesus is the true Messiah.

When we read this Gospel we are reminded of the authority and power of Jesus and the authority and power he has left his Church to bear witness to the world. However this is an authority and power based upon the model of Christ's Messiahship, not as conqueror in an aggressive sense but as a servant King who suffered upon the cross for our redemption. Therefore the authority and power of the Church must also follow Christ's way, not the way of the world. The true authority and power of the Church has been seen through the ages in service and sacrifice, not in temporal power or domination. Through the many examples of lives of faith of countless men and women throughout the ages we can see the effect of Christ's authority to overcome tribulation and reveal the true power of service and sacrifice.

### ***Prayer***

Heavenly Father, give us the strength to serve you and our neighbours through service and sacrifice as you have shown us in word and deed.

## **Thursday January 1st**

### *The Naming and*

### **Luke 2:15-21**

*Circumcision of Our Lord Jesus Christ*

In this section Luke records three reactions to the angel's message of the birth of the Saviour: that of the shepherds, the community that received the message from them and that of Mary. The shepherds responded by going to see what was happening. What they saw was the baby in the manger with Mary and Joseph around him, a picture which paints a stunning theological statement. These shepherds are important for Luke, not because they are eyewitnesses to the birth of Jesus, but because of the spontaneity of their response to the angel's message. This is something that Luke will highlight throughout the rest of his Gospel. These shepherds leave the scene giving praise and glory to God, a similar kind of response that their news elicits from their friends and neighbours. Mary's response in verse 19 is different to that of the shepherds. She locks "all these things" away in her heart and ponders on them in keeping with the image as a handmaid of the Lord. Luke presented Mary in 1:45 as the first Christian believer. She is shown as believing her child to be the long awaited Messiah and Son of God, but Luke pulls up short of portraying her as fully understanding all things. It is an understanding that grows with the ministry of her Son (see 8:21 and Acts 1:14).

The shepherds were the first to worship the Saviour of the world and it presents us with a valuable insight. When we think about shepherds we can see that they were not spiritually important. While their work was vital to the community, the nature of their work would have made it difficult for them to remain ritually clean. They mixed with the animals, ate with the animals and very often slept in the same place as the animals. Their animals were taken to the markets for sale and so they were exposed to pagan shoppers and out in the isolated grazing areas, where would they find water for washing. There are also writings from the time that suggest that around the big cities this particular occupation held more than its fair share of rogues and crooks. Yet, these are the very ones to whom it was revealed that the Saviour of the world was born. Where were the leaders of the Jewish people? Where were the priests and the Pharisees? It was left to the young virgin, the baffled carpenter and the rogue shepherds. At the beginning of the Gospel of Salvation that is Good News for all of us who are less than perfect.

### ***Prayer***

Glory to God in the highest, and peace to his people on earth. Father, we pray that as we continue on with our celebrations of the birth of your Son, we may share that peace with others.

## **Friday January 2nd**

## **John 1:19-28**

In all the Gospels the story of John the Baptist serves as an introduction to the ministry of Jesus. The Jewish authorities sent a delegation to find out just who and what John was claiming to be. He does not answer them but rather testifies to another who is greater than he is. That one is:

[a] The Lamb of God.

[b] The one who is filled with the Spirit and who will baptize in the Spirit.

[c] The Son of God.

In the early Church there were people who had only been baptized by John (Acts 18:25), and in some parts there had grown up an excessive veneration of the Baptist. It was therefore important for all the Gospels to set down clearly the relationship between John and Jesus. In his Gospel, John presents the Baptist as representing the Old Testament and all its hopes and expectations. He shows him to be only the voice crying out in the wilderness and presents his ministry of baptism as having no independent significance. His baptism merely points forward to something it cannot achieve on its own. It is only the Lamb of God who will take away the sins of the world. More importantly, while John appears in his ministry in and around Galilee before Jesus, it is really Jesus who existed "before" him (v 30) because he is the Son of God. These points all make it clear that John only has significance in terms of his relationship to Jesus.

What is significant in John's story of the Baptist is that he is presented as a "voice crying out in the wilderness". In this way he presents us with a picture of discipleship. Christ is the one sent by God to proclaim the Good News of the coming of the Kingdom of God with its gift of salvation. It is in the ministry of Jesus that all other ministry finds its roots and its power. As disciples, the way we live is meant to be a proclamation (a crying out) to the world of the presence of Christ in its midst. As a community of believers we should be attractive to people who are searching for light and hope. As people wandered off into the desert to see John the Baptist and to listen to what he was saying, so our worshipping communities should be beacons of hope and life to the world around us. There is the challenge of the story of Christmas. It is a call for a more faithful life of discipleship. Let's ask ourselves, what efforts have we made since the beginning of Advent to live out our faith in a more dynamic manner? Or are we the same as we were before Advent started. That call to repent and believe was one that was given to all of us.

### ***Prayer***

3

Father in heaven, guide us with your Holy Spirit that we may reflect on our lives and seek to faithfully live in your Kingdom.

## **Saturday January 31st**

## **Mark 4:35-41**

This story, along with 6:45-52, highlights the clearly supernatural aspect of the ministry of Jesus as control over the elements is even more extraordinary and inexplicable than the curing of human illness. When Mark notes that this event took place "on that same day" he is using a literary device to tie together the events and teachings of the whole of chapter 4 and helps to provide an answer to the question on how the Kingdom of God might grow from such small beginnings — through the power of God. The picture Mark paints is of Jesus asleep in the boat, calm and unworried, while all around him the disciples are filled with panic and despair. These Galilean fishing boats were generally low sided to facilitate the casting out of the nets and the retrieval of the fish and as such were prone to sinking in the often violent storms that came down out of the Golan heights onto the waters of the lake. The comparison with Jonah would have been made by Mark's audience though "there is someone greater than Jonah here" (Matt 12:41), for while Jonah prayed to God, Jesus himself calmed the storm. Jesus responds to the panic of the disciples with commands to the sea that he has used before in his exorcisms: "Be quiet! Shut up". He also calms the seas with a command and all is well. The disciples are awed and ask the question that is not going to be answered until 8:29 — "Who can this be?". Mark's readers, however, already know the answer to the question, having had it set out for them in 1:1-13. The question is, however, one that Mark encourages the reader to make throughout the Gospel: Who is this man?

In some ways, the disciples in the boat are made to be examples of the difficulties of the Kingdom. They are like the garden into which the seed of the Kingdom is planted. There are parts of the mission of Jesus which are easy for them to accept and they take to them with enthusiasm. However, there are parts of their lives which are closed off to the ways of the Kingdom. The result is that at times life seems as if it might overpower them. Along comes a "storm" and they find themselves at its mercy. That is a problem for all who seek to be disciples. The temptation is to pick and choose those areas and those problems we shall place under the power of the Kingdom. This is the reason why these storms are so threatening. The answer is simple: turn to Jesus who has never left the boat!

### ***Prayer***

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Loving Father, you saved Noah from the raging flood and Jonah from the depth of the storm. When we are faced with times of fear, remind us always of your saving presence.

## **Friday January 30th**

## **Mark 4:26-34**

The next two parables speak about the Kingdom of God. We know from the parable of the sower (4:3ff) that the seed represents the Word of God which is being sown through the ministry of Jesus. In the first of these parables the Kingdom of God is being compared, not with the seed, but with the man who is sowing the seed. In this improbable picture, the man, after sowing, does little more than sleep! The seed takes root and grows on its own. Between planting and harvesting, it is the seed that does all the work and it is the ground which produces the crop. It may seem, to the observer with little faith, that little is happening when the Word is being proclaimed. As with the parable of the sower, there are all kinds of reactions to the preaching. But those who have faith know that beneath the surface the Kingdom itself is at work leading towards a fruitful harvest. The mustard seed was used in Jewish stories as representative of something very small (there were about 700 to a gram and the tree itself grew to over three metres). If we were to imagine this bush growing in the family vegetable garden, we can see why it would stand out among all the other crops and provide a haven for the birds of the air. It is an image with which we are familiar through our own proverbial saying: "Great oaks from little acorns grow", and follows on with the same theme that we have seen in the chapter so far. Those who witness the somewhat insignificant beginnings of the Kingdom should not despair. Nor should they be impatient for the final harvest. All in God's good time!

One of the reassuring messages of these parables is that the Kingdom of God does not depend on human efforts. Like the crop which grows with little help from the farmer in the parable, the mustard seed grows through unknown powers. Possibly, in the back of the minds of the Jewish readers of the Gospel are images of Ezekiel's cedar tree parable (Ezek 17:23; Ezek 31:16) and Nebuchadnezzar's dream (Dan chapter 4). Both of these trees represent the growth of impressive empires and the birds that nest in them are explicitly interpreted in Ezek 31:6 as "all great nations" who enjoyed the benefits of the Egyptian empire. Thus, the Kingdom may begin small, but will eventually incorporate all the nations of the earth. That is timely today as we are tempted to panic over what may appear to be a decline in the Church. The Kingdom, in God's time, in God's way, will continue to grow and provide shelter and food for all nations.

### ***Prayer***

Father, remind us, through your Word, that it is your Kingdom and depends on you for its growth and not on our own efforts.

## **Saturday January 3rd**

## **John 1:29-34**

The idea of the Lamb of God makes use of a number of images from the Old Testament. Of special importance was the Passover Lamb (Exodus chapter 12, etc), the lamb of Isaiah 53:7 and the goat onto which the sins of the nation were heaped on the Day of Atonement (Leviticus 16:21ff). It is safe to presume that what John has in mind is the Passover Lamb as it has been reinterpreted after the Last Supper in the action of the Eucharist. That Last Supper was a Passover Meal in which the death of Christ for the remission of sins was presented as a fulfilment of all the hopes of the nation. John makes it clear once again that the ministry of John the Baptist only has significance in that it points to Jesus. The Baptist invited people into the Jordan after they had repented only so that an occasion was prepared for the baptism of Jesus himself. It is the baptism of Jesus that is important because that baptism will be carried out not only with water but also with the Holy Spirit. The earlier baptisms direct believers towards the baptism of Jesus which truly takes away the sins of the world and brings down the Spirit. It is this gift of the Spirit which is the important sign of the Kingdom of God, for in Hebrew thought a sign of the last days would be the outpouring of God's Spirit. This is why in the other Gospels there is an account of the baptism of Jesus and images of the Spirit coming down like a dove onto the head of Jesus. John does the same thing by presuming that the baptism has taken place and by the language that he uses in talking of Jesus. The coming down of the Spirit of God is the seal of authenticity on all that is about to unfold.

One of the presumptions behind the ministry of John the Baptist was that the people had sins and they needed to find a way of having them removed and their relationship with God restored once again. This was the hope of Israel and a feast like the Day of Atonement was celebrated in the hope of finding this forgiveness. It does not work so well today as generally speaking we do not have the same understanding of sin. Much of our modern spirituality has created a God who is very tolerant of our sins and our stubbornness. It is now very hard to sin! Instead we may do wrong and fail to meet our objectives, but we do not sin. This makes it difficult for us to welcome Christ as our Saviour. A lively and powerfully transforming faith springs from an understanding of our own needs, of our sinfulness and of the forgiveness that is on offer from God in Christ.

### ***Prayer***

Merciful Father, we thank you for reconciling us to yourself in Jesus your Son. Through your Spirit, transform our lives that we may know a deep and lasting Peace and contentment.

## Sunday January 4th

## John 1:1-18

These opening verses of John's Gospel (called the Prologue) present a clear theological picture of Jesus. In seven statements we have John's statement of faith that will be expanded throughout his Gospel. He begins by stating that Jesus is the Divine and eternal Word. While he is an historical person, he has existed from before the beginning of time. He uses the Greek notion of "Word" for Jesus, meaning that he is the very nature of God made real in the world. All things come through him, making Jesus the reality by which all things in the world must be interpreted. This is why he is the Light of the world. By viewing the world through his teaching and ministry, everything takes on a new meaning and in him has a new and more powerful life. The Word is not the same as the world, even though he became man in the world and the world was made through him. He stands apart from the world and the world did not know him. The Word was also rejected by "his own", though accepted by the Samaritans and sought out by the Greeks (12:20). Most important of all was how John understood that the Word became a man, taking on human personality and the fullness of what it means to be a human being in the world. With images of Exodus the text says that he "pitched his tent among us", meaning he dwelt among us. But it is only a temporary dwelling. The role of the Word as he dwells among us is to reveal to the world the Father's love and divine will. The world has been separated from God by sin and it is the Word of God made man who will overcome the separation of the darkness of sin. This is important in John's theology for the Word did not live a life of separation from the sinners but was among them bringing light to their darkness.

The Incarnation, God becoming man in Jesus, is the gift in which we all find new hope and meaning to life. It is not simply an historical fact, something that took place two thousand years ago. In becoming man Jesus forever transformed what it means to be human. Now all human activities, all human qualities and ways of thinking and acting are to be understood in the light of Jesus. It is because Jesus has gone through all that we have to go through (with the one exception of sin) that we have hope. He knows and understands our struggles and our pains. He is also aware of our weaknesses as he has been there before us. That is why we can approach him without fear, knowing that as we stand before him tainted by our silly ways, he will deal with us with patience.

### *Prayer*

We worship you, Lord Jesus Christ, here in our lives and in all your Churches throughout the world, and we bless you, because by your holy cross you have redeemed the world.

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## Thursday January 29th

## Mark 4:21-25

The four sayings in our reading today are found, with varying meanings, in other parts of the Gospels (Matt 5:15; Lk 8:16; Lk 11:33; Matt 10:26; Lk 8:17; Lk 12:2; Matt 7:2; Lk 6:38; Matt 13:12; Matt 25:29; Lk 8:18; Lk 19:26). This suggests that these sayings existed in various forms throughout the early Christian communities and thus found their way into the Gospel. The sayings have a kind of proverbial explanation attached, which is introduced by the word "for". The point of the first parable is that lamps are supposed to give as much light as is possible. So it is to be with the content of the teachings of Jesus on the Kingdom. There were, at the time, a number of groups (Gnostics) which thought that they held the secret truths of the universe and these truths were not open to those who were outside the group. Here we see that the Truths of the Kingdom of God were to be available to everybody. If Truth is hidden in the parables, it is hidden so that it may be sought out and found. The Truth is only to be found by those who hear in the proper manner (vs 24, 25). The saying in verse 24 seems to come from traditional Jewish thinking which understood it to speak about the appropriateness of divine judgement, where the punishment given out fits the crime committed. Here Mark is applying it more specifically in the parables of Jesus. He is reminding the believers that they will only gain from these teachings according to the amount of time and effort they put into properly hearing what it is that Jesus is trying to say to them. Those who hear them carefully and who respond appropriately will be richly rewarded.

These teachings are all a part of the preparation Mark is putting into place for the rest of the Gospel. Jesus (and after him the teachings of the Disciples) is a light who must be brought to bear on the lives and activities of those who seek to follow the Gospel. Jesus is a light and his teachings and ministry are also lights. When they are used to evaluate what is happening and to plan out a person's course of actions, then they will lighten up the way to follow. But it is not a matter of simply looking up proof texts in the Bible and applying them to particular situations. What Mark has in mind here is what happens to a person's life when they are people who read the Scriptures daily, meditate on it and seek out its deeper meanings for their own daily living. They will be shaped by the Truth that is found there and led in the way of God.

### *Prayer*

Lord and Father of all, at the beginning of time you created light to rule over the darkness and to allow life to begin. Enliven us through the Light your Holy Word alone can bring.

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## Wednesday January 28th

## Mark 4:1-20

Up until this point, the focus of Mark has been on the activities of Jesus. Now, having made it clear that Jesus acts with power and with the full authority of God, we are going to explore some of his teachings. This block of teaching relates back to the earlier accounts of the ministry of Jesus. There we saw a range of confused responses to Jesus. The demons were proclaiming him to be the Son of God while the religious leaders of the nation were trying to destroy his mission. If the demons were correct, how could it be that the Scribes and the Pharisees were so wrong? How is it that people respond so differently to the same message and witness? His disciples left their nets and immediately followed after him, the crowds were amazed and followed him for their own reasons. His family came after him because they were worried about him and the leaders sought to kill him. Jesus teaches in parables about the Kingdom of God and in them he shows that there will be, inevitably, a clash between human and divine values as people go about their lives in the world. To fully understand the ways of the Kingdom they will need something more than human insight. The parables are narratives whose meanings do not lie on the surface level of the story, but demand enquiry and insight. They mean more than they seem to say and will mean different things to different people. And their meaning, when discovered, will include a call to response at the level of attitude, will and action. To understand a parable is usually to be changed (or at least challenged to change) and not just enlightened. A key word in chapter 4 is the word "hear", for hearing is what is demanded of the disciple. This is not just a matter of physically hearing, but demands both listening and responding.

The parable makes it clear that rejection of the word of God is one of the options that are available to those hearing the Gospel proclaimed. What might make great sense to some will seem like an absurdity to others. Some will also begin with great enthusiasm but when the demands seem to be too great they will abandon life in the Kingdom. The Kingdom is also about "removing rocks". There is much in the life of the believer which acts as a barrier to the growth of the Gospel. Some things are simply not compatible with discipleship and must be removed. This is not an easy thing to achieve and will take a lifetime, but go they must. The real battle is to decide just what the rocks are!

### *Prayer*

Father, guide us with your Holy Spirit so that we are able to bring the Gospel alive in all that we do and say and to remove from our lives all that stops the Kingdom growing.

## Monday January 5th

## John 1:43-51

The invitation of Jesus to "follow me" picks up a theme that is common throughout most of the Gospels. Philip's comments that they have found the Messiah suggest that he and the others belonged to a circle of men well schooled in the Scriptures who had been awaiting the Messiah. This is important for John who seeks to place Jesus within the whole unfolding of Salvation History. The problem they had with the Messiah coming from Nazareth is that it is a town that has never been mentioned before in any of the traditions, writings or politics of the nation. It is a "nothing" place and you would expect the Messiah to come from more important backgrounds. This sets the scene for John who wishes to call forth an act of faith from Nathaniel, who came to see in Jesus the promised Messiah. This was the result of faith and not by any logical deduction. When Nathaniel is brought to Jesus he is recognized through what must have been a supernatural knowledge. The image of sitting under a tree is a popular rabbinical one that generally has the idea of sitting under a tree to study the Scriptures. At that time in Judaism, it was also thought that the fig tree was the tree of knowledge from the Garden of Eden, a possible hint at the ministry of Jesus representing a new creation. What is unfolding is the next step in God's saving works.

This is an important part of the theology of John's Gospel. Being able to recognise the action of God in our lives is a matter of faith. There was no link between the Scriptures, Nazareth and Jesus, yet Nathaniel was able to make an act of faith in the coming of the Messiah. Logic went against it. The rest of the community could not make the link, yet through faith Nathaniel could. This is the way it will be throughout the rest of John's Gospel and throughout our lives of discipleship. There will be times when it seems that God is absent (the clearest example being the Cross) but what appears to be an absence of God is in fact an opportunity of faith. We are asked to see the resurrection from the perspective of that Friday afternoon. There will also be times when we are searching for God in what for us are the normal places (as Nathaniel was) only to find that Jesus has walked into our lives from a totally unexpected direction. The problem is not with God, but with our ability to see and to believe. Our challenge for this new year is to make sure that we create in our lives opportunities to find God working away, even in those dark places.

### *Prayer*

Father almighty, you sent your Son to be our Messiah, to set us free from those fears and anxieties that imprison us and from our sins and weaknesses. Help us to see him at work in our lives.

**Tuesday January 6th**

*The Epiphany*

**Matthew 2:1-12**

Herod the King was a powerful ruler who had been made King of the Jews by the Romans in 40BC and had ruled over Jerusalem since 37BC. He died in 4BC and his kingdom was divided between his two sons. Herod, also called the Great, was an astute ruler who increased his power by playing off the Romans against the Jewish leaders. He was a ruthless and cruel leader. The origins of the Magi are uncertain. The name "Magi" is Persian and refers to a caste of priests. They were astrologers which suggests a Babylonian origin and the gifts they bring were common in Arabia and the Syrian desert! When they said they were looking for the "King of the Jews" it would have sent off alarm bells in Herod's mind, for that was the title given by some to his arch rival for power (it was also the title nailed over the head of Jesus on the cross). They came to "do homage" which was an act of submission performed before a king, thus further alienating Herod. It was believed that the births and deaths of great people was accompanied by heavenly movements and it therefore made sense that the Magi were following the star (see Numbers 24:17). The star led them to 'Bethlehem of Judea' which is seen as the birthplace of Jesus (John 7:42) thus fulfilling the prophecy of Micah 5:1-2 and completing what was spelled out in 2 Samuel 5:2. The Magi brought him gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh which is probably an allusion to Isaiah 60:6. What is taking place is the unfolding of a drama of divine origin.

One of the undercurrents in the Matthew story is the homage that is given to Jesus by the Magi. They are Gentile pagans who have come from a distant land and they believe. They fall down and worship the Christ child. The one who takes the title of "king of the Jews", far from giving homage, seeks to kill the true King. This would have been important for Matthew's community, which would have been made up of Gentiles and Jews. We can follow this same theme throughout the Christmas story. God's Good News of Salvation, coming to us in Jesus, is an offer that is not limited by human conditions. It is there for anyone who dares to believe. We have seen a carpenter, a virgin from Nazareth, shepherds and now foreign priests all coming to Jesus. There is nothing we can do that would stop God from seeking out our salvation. He wants us to know his Son. He wants us to be free from sin. All that we need to do is to seek him out. That is why the Christmas story offers us so much hope.

***Prayer***

Almighty God, we acknowledge you as King over our lives. We ask that in this season of Christmas we may so renew our lives that all we do becomes an offering of praise to you.

**Tuesday January 27th**

**Mark 3:31-35**

This section brings to an end Mark's presentation of the various responses to Jesus. In 3:21 his relatives set out to do something about Jesus and here we find them arriving. We can see clearly here that Jesus has now surrounded himself with a circle of disciples who gather around him inside the house while his family wait outside. They sought to "take hold of him" but in the end were forced to leave empty-handed. The family represent the more benign end of the opposition to him. The Scribes and the leaders from Jerusalem are clearly his mortal enemies while members of his family are in a sense left to one side because they are unable to appreciate the origins of his ministry and the purpose behind all that he does. This dismissal of his family is watered down somewhat by a new definition of what his family means to him. It is now those who "do the will of God". They are "my brother and sister and mother". The biological family of Jesus now disappear from the scene and are replaced by his spiritual family. Throughout the Gospel we will now have these three groups woven through the stories. There will be the opposition who want to put him to death, those who struggle to understand what is going on but who do not wish him any real harm and those who gather around him to listen to his words and to obey his commands.

This story can seem a little harsh and shocking at first reading with Jesus treating his mother and family in such a manner. But the point is not so much about families as about the cost of discipleship. It must have been clear in Mark's community that there will be times when choosing to follow Jesus meant being cut off from family and friends. The Kingdom demands that its priorities come first, even before the obligations of family life. Most of us in our western culture will never have to face such decisions, though they are not uncommon in other cultures. However, we all have to pay some price. Walking the way of the Gospel will mean at times that we are going against the trends in our own communities, that we are holding on to things that are deemed to be old-fashioned, out of date, irrelevant and so on. That is the price we have to be prepared to pay. The Gospel demands that we be prepared to put aside our own self-centred ways and follow a path of a disciplined love, that we choose the ways of Christ before the ways of the world. That is the price of discipleship.

***Prayer***

Father, it is not easy being a disciple when the world seems to march to a different tune. In the face of embarrassment and uncertainty, keep us ever faithful to the way of your Son Jesus.

## Monday January 26th

## Mark 3:22-30

The family of Jesus were worried about his behaviour but the Scribes have taken the concerns a whole lot further, accusing Jesus of being in league with the Devil. The Scribes clearly hope that by painting him as a man who has come from Satan and who uses demonic powers to perform the signs and wonders, he will become an object of hate in the eyes of the people who are now following him. Up until now the opposition to his ministry has come from a local leadership. The northern province of Galilee had welcomed him enthusiastically, but the population of the city of Jerusalem and the leadership of the City of David have been less than enthusiastic. Mark will gradually draw this opposition out into the open until it becomes obvious that, for Jesus, Jerusalem is going to be the place of repudiation and death. Exorcisms are important in the Galilean ministry of Jesus and much of his reputation as a man of God comes from his victories over the evil spirits. They are used by Mark to make clear the collapse of the Kingdom of Satan (vs 24-26) and the victorious arrival of the Kingdom of God. It is therefore a decisive turning point in the battle between good and evil and the theological point at issue here is the debate over the meaning of the power used by Jesus. Jesus is presented as being the one in and through whom the power of God is at work (1:8; 1:10; 1:12-13). By questioning the origin of his power, the Scribes are questioning his divinity and whether or not he is the Messiah and if they could prove that he was not the Messiah they could easily remove him.

This is a key section of the Gospel for the spiritual lives of believers. The strong man has to be tied up before anyone can break in and steal from him, but once he is in chains the robber can take what he likes and the strong man is powerless. Sin has long been able to take hold in the lives of people because of our weaknesses and limitations. We might make all kinds of resolutions and commitments but inevitably we fail. The strong man (substitute here our own particular sins, weaknesses, failings, etc) is just too strong for us. Into this picture comes Jesus as the Messiah. He is the one who takes us where we are unable to go on our own. He is the one who will bear the burden of the struggle and it is his grace, his life and his power that will overcome the power of the "strong man" in us. But this only happens when we allow him to do so, when we live out our lives in his care, under the direction of his grace and light. That is the goal of our spiritual lives, to allow Jesus to live in us and through us.

### *Prayer*

27

Father, fill us with your grace that we may live out our lives under the direction and power of your Son Jesus Christ.

## Wednesday January 7th

## Mark 6:45-52

In Job 9:8 God is said to have stamped down the waves of the stormy sea and in Job 38:16 to have walked to the deepest parts of the waters that had covered the earth at the time of creation. In Ecclesiasticus 24:5ff Wisdom is said to have walked on the waves and on the bottom of the sea. It is quite probable that these images form part of the background to this story and present a clear picture of the divinity of Jesus. Upon analysis the story itself is a little confusing and it is likely that a number of traditions have been joined together. We can see that Jesus' original intention was to walk right past the boat. He does not seem to be interested in calming the storm or in helping them to complete their journey. The stilling of the storm appears to be a later addition. When we break it down into its major points we note that Jesus stayed behind in prayer, his walking past them during the night, the fear of the disciples, Jesus climbing into the boat (with the subsequent calming of the storm) and the inability of the disciples to believe, even after seeing the great miracle. In this way it is a part of Mark's focus on the theme of faith. Here we see God's compassion for the disciples, even when they are unable to grasp the meaning of Jesus' ministry. In a most spectacular way they are blind but still remain recipients of salvation. Mark makes sure throughout his Gospel that the disciples witness to the struggle that is a part of faith.

On a particularly bad night it would only take about six hours to sail across the lake and here we see the disciples battling from sunset till dawn and making little headway. How true that seems at times! How easy it is to roll over and allow the wind to drag us back to the shore from which we had originally departed. Like the disciples, we have our destinations on "the far side of the lake" and we have been warned that it is not going to be an easy trip. It will take a lifetime of struggle. The real guarantee we have of succeeding is not to be found in our navigational skills or how well we have mastered the art of sailing. What makes the storm manageable is the presence of Christ within the storm. With Jesus in the boat with them they "make the crossing". Despite their blindness he brings them to safety. One cannot help but read this story and wonder at the magnificence of God's compassionate love. In that we should all find great hope for our own journeys, knowing that even if he remains "hidden", he is there leading us safely "to the other side".

### *Prayer*

8

All-merciful God, you led your people Israel through the wilderness of Sinai into freedom in the promised land. In your Son Jesus, bring us through the darkest of our storms.

**Thursday January 8th**

**Luke 4:14-22**

Luke varies his account of the opening of the ministry of Jesus in a manner different to that of the other Gospel writers in that he does not write about the imprisonment of John the Baptist. Instead, he begins with a summary, one that is repeated in various forms throughout the Gospel (4:31-32; 4:40-41; 6:17-19; 8:1-3; 19:47-48; 21:37-38). What he does leave out is the proclamation of the arrival of the Kingdom and the call to repentance that the others stress. This summary has three key elements:

- [a] Jesus is armed with the power of the Spirit. This is the Spirit that was promised for the end time when God would establish his Kingdom, thus Jesus becomes the anointed Messiah. This Spirit is the one that will provide Jesus with the power for his ministry. This power is not just for use in performing miracles but will be a dynamic force that enables him to preach and teach as well.
- [b] His ministry is characterized by teaching, an important theme for Luke. He is being shown as "teaching" and in the opening of the Book of Acts, Theophilus is reminded of all that Jesus did and taught, thus providing a link between the two Books.
- [c] Jesus' 'gospel' is a universal one as he is praised by all the people and not just the Jews.

Luke uses the quote from Isaiah 61:1-2 to spell out the five elements that are contained in the saving works of Jesus. His life and ministry is Good News to those who are in need of salvation and who are awaiting a messiah. He has come to bring freedom to those who find themselves enslaved or caught up in the struggle to find peace and joy in the world. He brings sight to the blind, understanding to those who are searching for Truth and meaning in their lives. He has come to set the downtrodden free. These are the people for whom life is a burden, who find that carrying some particular problem, difficulty or hardship is just too much at times. He comes to those who feel exhausted by the struggle, worn out from their works of discipleship, crushed by people around them, hurt, humiliated and put down by others and by life in general. He comes to them as they lie in the dust. And finally, and here is the explanation, he "proclaims the Lord's year of favour". That is another word for salvation. All these are not just activities Jesus carried out for the people of Galilee. They are offers for peoples of all times.

***Prayer***

Heavenly Father, send down upon us the gift of your Holy Spirit so that we are filled with your divine power and are able to take up our calls to discipleship with renewed enthusiasm.

**Sunday January 25th**

*The Conversion of  
St Paul*

**Mark 16:14-18**

Mark once again stresses the stubbornness and unbelief of the Apostles and has Jesus rebuking them for their lack of faith. This verse takes us back to Mark 8:17-21 where Jesus also rebuked the Twelve for their inability to believe, even after seeing the feeding of the four thousand. Faith, for Mark, is not something that people can come to after going through a series of logical steps and through human reasoning. Discipleship is much the same in that it is not something a person can choose. It comes about as a free invitation and gift from God. Mark's Church was struggling with the question of the ongoing existence of evil in the world. If Jesus was victorious on the cross, then why does evil still exist? The answer given here to that problem is that evil is only a difficulty for those who do not believe. For those who believe, Christ is the only reality before which all else will crumble. He will return and bring all peoples to himself. Therefore, the way the Apostles' unbelief is overcome is by their being sent out! God enables them to believe and this belief unfolds in their lives of service of the Gospel. The focus in this closing section of the Gospel is not on the mystery of the crucified Christ, but rather on the mystery of the proclaimed Christ who is revealed through the Church's ministry. Sin, evil, unbelief are now to be overcome through the miracle of a Christ made alive through the ministry of the community of believers. This is an important theological shift and central to a true understanding of the nature of the Church. The reality of the risen Christ is now to be revealed through the work of the Church rather than by personal appearances by Christ himself.

Most scholars today understand that 16:9-20 comes from a different author to that of the rest of the Gospel. It is valuable as it represents for us a part of the traditions from which the Gospels arose and were formed. The Church existed before the Gospels and indeed the Gospels can be called the Church's traditions in written form. Mark's community were clearly struggling with questions relating to their identity and mission and what we have here is a part of the answer. It is by getting out and "doing" Church that the world is transformed. Nothing happens by sitting about worrying about the enormity of the task, the size of the opposition, the difficulties encountered and the lack of resources. Faith is all about "doing", so that the living Christ so proclaimed will sort out the rest.

***Prayer***

Father, come to us in our doubt and moments of unbelief so that we may serve you with confidence knowing that what we begin in faith will bear fruit through your grace and power.

## **Saturday January 24th**

## **Mark 3:20-21**

This is clearly a difficult passage and it needs to be read with an eye on 3:31-35 which will complete the picture we find here. What we have here is no mere difficulty in understanding the mission and message of Jesus. His family had come to seize him and to take him home with them. It is a clear and positive rejection. We find a large crowd gathering again making it impossible for Jesus to have any kind of normal life. They were following him to listen to his teaching and bringing to him their sick to be cured. Of course the problem with this (as we shall see in 3:22-30) is that it upset the rulers of the people. They did not like to see Jesus growing in popularity. The best way of interpreting this text is possibly to see the family of Jesus coming to take him home so that he would not be caught up in the rowdy scenes in Capernaum. This was making him stand out and he was becoming a notable target for attack. For his own sake (and possibly for the sake of the reputation of his own family) they wanted him out of the way. He had gone too far (mad?). But before they have a chance to get hold of him there is an even harsher accusation made from the Scribes, perhaps justifying the concerns of his loved ones. It would be very hard to underestimate the power of the Greek idiom used here. In their opinion, Jesus had gone stark raving mad and needed to be silenced. What is surprising is that it was left in the Gospel account (it is not to be found in any of the other Gospels). Mark has not sanitized his Gospel and shows the disciples as they were, warts and all.

What a great reading for all of us! Here we have the family of Jesus being embarrassed by his ministry and worried about what people would think of them. This stands in stark contrast with the attitude of the crowds who are flocking to be near him and to listen to him. It is also in contrast with the demands of discipleship that Jesus will spell out later in terms of taking up one's cross and following him to Golgotha (8:31-38). To live a life of faithful discipleship will mean at times owning up to our Christianity. It means acting in the case of injustice, speaking out when a wrong is being committed, praying, worshipping, living to the Gospel demands and filtering the ways of the world through the sieve of Jesus' teaching. It will mean being different and sometimes that is embarrassing and too demanding. It is much easier to be like his family. To want to take him home and keep things private and quiet. But that is not the way of discipleship and we, like them, stand to be rebuked if we live like that.

### ***Prayer***

25

Father, be with us as we seek to live out our Christian callings on those difficult occasions when we are embarrassed or afraid.

## **Friday January 9th**

## **Luke 5:12-16**

The miracle of the healing of the leper shows Jesus reaching out to someone who is very much a social outcast in Palestinian society. This was a disease that caused ceremonial defilement and those who were ruled as having it were forbidden to come into contact with others, forcing them to live outside the towns (Lev 13:46; Numb 5:2-3). This is what makes the actions of Jesus so much more powerful, in that he reaches out his hand and touches the sick man. This would make him unclean as well but he is acting according to a different set of demands. It is not the touch which causes the cure, it is the force of his command: "Be cured!". He then tells the man to go and show himself to the priests and to make the appropriate sacrifices of thanksgiving. The Law demanded that once a person had leprosy his cure and therefore his re-admittance into the community depended on the priests pronouncing him clean again. It is important for Luke that he can show to members of his community, which included Jewish as well as Gentile Christians, that the fledgling community of faith is the continuation of the people of God led from Egypt by Moses. It is through the power of the Spirit which was upon him (4:14) that he carries out the cure and so it is with the authority of God himself that he moves around preaching and teaching the Good News of the Kingdom.

We live in a world where there are many "outcasts" and it is so easy, even for the most faithful of believers, to treat some people as "lepers". We see it with the poor, the homeless, the drug addicts, the victims of AIDS, the refugees arriving by boat and those locked away in detention centres, and many more. We can make "lepers" out of those who are different from the way we are, those with whom we disagree, those who annoy us, those who are not driven in the same way we are. At times too, we can see ourselves as being "lepers", unable to be loved by God and by others. The more aware we are of our sins and failings, the more likely we are to make "lepers" of ourselves and to feel cut off from God. None of that is acceptable to Jesus. In rejecting these "lepers" we are rejecting Jesus. But the Gospel demands that we do more than just not reject them. We are called to reach out to them, to seek them out and to make them feel welcome and loved, just as God does to us. The fact that there are still many unloved and abused people in the world stands as a condemnation of all who call themselves disciples of Jesus Christ.

### ***Prayer***

10

Loving Father, we ask your forgiveness for the times when we have given others the impression that they are not lovable and ask your help in reaching out to welcome all those in need.

## **Saturday January 10th**

## **John 3:22-30**

It is probably safe to presume that John's use of this section is to tackle problems created by the disciples of John the Baptist in the Church community he heads. The final testimony given by John the Baptist about Jesus being the Messiah is important in that struggle. The disciples of both these men begin to argue about the merits of their ministries. John's disciples are shown to be narrow-minded and as having missed the whole point of all their master was saying. John the Baptist's reply is that people would not be coming to hear Jesus if the hand of God was not at work in him. Jesus is the Messiah and people are flocking to him. It is in God's plan that the Baptist must decrease and Jesus must increase. He also makes it clear that from the beginning he had taught that he was not the Messiah, only the one sent to announce the arrival of the anointed One of God. He is the herald and not the promised One. John the Baptist is the friend of the bridegroom (Jesus) and in Jewish weddings it was the role of the friend of the bridegroom to lead the bride to the bridegroom and to stand watch outside the bridal chamber to share the joy of the groom with others. For the early community, the bride would have been understood as being the Church.

The existence of the followers of John the Baptist in the early Church is a gentle reminder that the Church has struggled from the very beginning with those who would make of it something that suited their own needs and visions. John had made it clear that he was not the Messiah. He was the herald pointing the way to One who was greater than he was. Yet, there were those who wanted to make him into the Messiah. Why? We are not given the answer to that question but experience tells us that it is a common enough temptation. Having gone to the trouble of repenting and being baptized by John in the Jordan they were not now going to move off again in a new direction. They were happy where they were and were finding all their needs being met. Why change? Why go through all the hassles of moving forward once again? John nudges his followers forward, refusing to allow them to rest contentedly where they were. They had to face the pain of change and having started their journey in faith they had to continue to be open to wherever it was God wanted them to go, even if it was not something they could easily embrace, understand or accept. And we are no different.

### ***Prayer***

Father, it is easy for us to march to the tune of a messiah of our own making when it makes our lives more comfortable. Keep us ever faithful to your Son and always open to his ways.

## **Friday January 23rd**

## **Mark 3:13-19**

Lists of the Twelve vary a bit between the Gospels and each has it in different places within their writings. For Mark it fits into the situation where the reader is made aware of the blindness of the world and the growing opposition to Jesus' ministry. People at first welcomed Jesus but this initial enthusiasm quickly waned. In the calling of the Twelve we find ourselves with a community specifically called together by the Lord and it is from this community that the Church will grow. Mark puts an emphasis on the choice of the Twelve being a part of the sovereign choice of Jesus. He wanted to choose twelve disciples. In verses 13-14 he tells us that "he wanted" and "he chose". From the beginning, Jesus saw this group as a part of his ministry and mission. He was not setting up a new sect like that of the Pharisees that could isolate themselves from the world around them. They were called and "sent out" to "preach with power and to cast out devils". In Mark's mind, Jesus is forming the new Israel, the end time Israel of which the prophets spoke. As with Jesus, the Apostles' authority will be exemplified by their power to cast out demons (cf 1:21ff). The changes to their names indicates the authority that Jesus has to make something new and to inaugurate a new beginning. But these works are never their own but represent the ongoing ministry of Jesus within them.

This is a critical passage in the Gospel, for it sets out the very nature of the Church and its mission and also clearly sets out the difference between the Judaism of Jesus' time and his intention in forming the new Israel. The group that saw themselves as the ones who were keeping the law most perfectly were the members of the community in Qumran, who set themselves up down on the Dead Sea and sought to live perfectly all the demands of the law. This is not the understanding Jesus has for the Church. This new Israel is not to be a community that is complete in itself, which is to spend the bulk of its time in managing its own quest for perfection. This community and each of its members are called to be messengers of the Good News so that others might be attracted to entering into the Kingdom of God. What a timely message! Our parishes may be perfect in the efficiency of their organization, the beauty of their liturgy, the depth of their giving and the magnificence of their plant, but total failures in terms of what it is God wants them to be doing. The Church is defined by its mission, by its going out, by the way it lives for others. A Church primarily concerned with itself is a false Church.

### ***Prayer***

Father, your Son called twelve apostles and sent them out as missionaries. Help us to serve you by serving others in love.

## **Thursday January 22nd**

## **Mark 3:7-12**

This new section in Mark begins with another summary of the current situation with Jesus' ministry and if we follow the movement between boat and mountains in this chapter we can see that we have before us another collection of materials that have been put together by Mark without any real concern for an historical sequence of events. The overall picture is of the crowds gathering around the Saviour as he preaches and teaches on the banks of the Sea of Galilee. Mark begins in Galilee (chapters 1-6) moves onto Tyre, Sidon and the Decapolis (chapter 7) and then spreads out over the Jordan to Jerusalem. Listing the places in this way gives the clear impression of a gradually expanding Kingdom. The gathering of the people is not something that Jesus sought. He withdrew with his disciples but the people, drawn by the power of God that was at work in him, followed him. The people crowded around him, giving the impression that it was by their proximity to Jesus that they were healed. Simply being in his presence was enough to receive a healing miracle.

In the Old Testament there was a clear understanding that God was almighty and that as he moved through creation, things happened. The best example of this is the divine appearance on Mt Sinai during the Exodus. When God came down on the mountain to give Moses the tablets of the Law, there were signs of his presence. There was thunder, lightning, cloud, blasts of trumpets and more. These are called "God noises" (theophanies) and are an important biblical device to show God's presence. Another good example of these theophanies is found in the story of the day of Pentecost in Acts. The idea is that if God is present then things have to happen. He cannot just wander in and everything stays the same. Mark has been painting the same kind of picture of Jesus. There he is by the Sea of Galilee and all people have to do is come to him and touch him and they are cured of whatever ails them. When unclean spirits saw him they fled because they could not survive in his presence. The spirituality behind these theophanies is an important one. If God was truly present in our lives and in the lives of our communities, then there would be signs of this presence. We would be transformed. Our communities would be transformed. It is sobering to reflect on what signs others might see, in our own lives, of God's ruling presence.

### *Prayer*

Father in heaven, we are filled with your graces and gifts through the sacraments of your Church. May we seek ways of allowing your presence to flow through all we do, that others may be drawn to life in your Kingdom.

## **Sunday January 11th**

## **Mark 1:1-11**

Mark begins his Gospel with what appears to be a collection of materials from the communities' traditions. John was not the only one to head off into the desert. The communities near the Dead Sea had done the same thing a century earlier in response to the End Time prophecies of Isaiah. John the Baptist preached a message of repentance and seems to have been widely accepted as Elijah returned to earth. The description of the belt that he wore comes straight from the story of Elijah in 2 Kings 1:8 and his clothing of hair is an allusion to the hairy cloak of the prophets described by Zechariah in 13:4. The two Old Testament quotes (though Mark refers to Isaiah it includes a quotation from Malachi 3:1) serve as a preface to the book and to present all that follows as a fulfilment of all the things that God had been doing for Israel. The Greek word for Good News is one that is used in speaking about a victory in battle and Paul in particular used it to mean both the act of preaching and the content of the preaching, which was the message of the death and resurrection of Jesus. In this Good News God calls all peoples to believe in Jesus and obtain salvation in him. In Mark's story this begins with the preaching of John, comes alive in the work of Jesus and continues on in the mission of the Church. It is not then surprising that around 150AD, Justin uses the term "Good News" or "Gospel" to mean the books in which this story was recorded, a usage we continue today.

In the Bible, the desert holds a special place in the spirituality of believers. Much of this stems from the experiences of the Hebrew peoples in the Exodus. They lived in the desert for forty years and were cared for by God. Most importantly of all, it was in the desert that they were made God's People by a divine covenant. God fed them, watered them, fought their battles with them and led them to a new life in Canaan. In later years, as the nation was torn apart by divisions, politics, false gods, corruption, wealth and the trappings of modern living, they would look back to the glory days of the desert and look forward to once again experiencing the same peace and joy. But the Exodus was only possible because they realized that they needed God. Not just wanted him, but needed him in their lives and that is the story of the Kingdom. It is a Kingdom only for those who allow their Heavenly Father to rule over their lives.

### *Prayer*

Father, save us from the sins of pride where we so easily feel that we have no need of your power and grace in our lives. Help us to build our whole lives on carrying out your will for us.

## **Monday January 12th**

## **Mark 1:14-20**

The Jesus of Mark begins by proclaiming that the Rule of God (the Kingdom) is near. This is an Old Testament concept that refers not only to God's rule over creation but also to his reign at the end of time (Isa 52:7). Believers were thought to be submitting to this Rule of God when they obeyed the commandments. They believed that this reign would mean an end to all the nation's enemies and an end to suffering. There were many different understandings about how it worked. It was something for the future, something that would come from God and all man could do was wait for it and inherit it. Mark's Jesus is different in that he does not speak of God being King and setting up his sovereignty over Israel. Instead, the Kingdom is something into which people are invited. It represents a way of living that is under the influence of God. He speaks of the Kingdom as being near, having already come and as being present among the listeners. The Jesus of Mark makes the Kingdom a reality in the lives of the people through his words and actions. It is possible, through Jesus, to enter into the future Kingdom now, in the present time. This is seen most clearly in the table-fellowship with his disciples and followers.

For Judaism, the world was filled with evil and the only way that this could be overcome was by an act of God that would bring an end to creation. In many of the writings of the time there were visions of great signs in the skies, stars falling, the sun changing colour, earthquakes, floods and so on. Into all that confusion God would appear, judge the earth and restore Israel to its place of prominence in the world. This is not the way of Jesus, though Mark chapter 13 has its own picture of the end. Jesus places his disciples into the midst of the world and sends them out into the world so that the world may know its salvation in him. They are free from the constraints of the world and are not to be caught up in the ways of the world, but there is no judgement in his message. There is no sense of elitism in his message. Disciples are not better than others and there is to be no triumphalism. Nor are there guarantees of special power and glory. The Church is a leaven in the world and disciples are to live in such a way that the world knows the salvation of God. They are not to condemn the world but to transform the world by the way they live. It is a Kingdom where the King and the disciples are humble servants.

### ***Prayer***

Heavenly Father, we acknowledge you as King and Lord over all that we do. Help us each and every day to present our lives to you as acceptable spiritual sacrifices that give you glory.

## **Wednesday January 21st**

## **Mark 3:1-6**

This episode takes place in a synagogue on the Sabbath day. The cure of an illness was considered to be the work of a physician and was permitted on the Sabbath day only in cases of life or death. For the Pharisees the question is about whether the law is broken or not broken. For Jesus the issue is about the requirement to do good, regardless of the requirements of the law. He makes it clear that the failure to do good is exactly the same as doing evil. Failing to save a life is the same as destroying it. Once again these are provocative words when addressed to the doctors of the law. They were the protectors of orthodoxy but neglected the weightier demands of love. In this they sinned and it explains why they reacted so strongly to Jesus. They presented themselves as observers of the law and Jesus was accusing them of using the law to absolve themselves from any responsibility for the needy man in their midst. This story rounds off the opening of the Gospel. We have seen Jesus casting out demons, curing those suffering from all kinds of illnesses and diseases and exercising his authority over the law and sin. All this is done with the authority given to him by God and it is an authority not seen before. He has exposed the blindness of the Pharisees and off on the horizon we catch our first glimpse of the looming cross (3:6).

At the time of Jesus the Pharisees led a campaign aimed at strict observance of the Law, a movement that was not all based on hypocrisy. There were the usual debates engaged in by men of learning. Could, for example, a man carry a handkerchief on the Sabbath (as carrying loads was forbidden) or did he have to bind it around his arm (as it would then be a piece of clothing)? But all this was part of a movement for total observance. In 1 Maccabees 2:26-38 we see Jews willing to be massacred rather than break the Sabbath by fighting. Jesus seems to have frequently broken the Sabbath, not, as the Pharisees thought, because he was not obedient, but because as Jesus saw it, he was being more obedient to the requirements of the Law. Mere obedience is not enough. There are deeper considerations (see Matthew chapters 5-7). God's Law provides a direction towards obedience to the will of God. A danger of law is that it can lead to a totting-up of accounts, measuring our relationship with God in terms of what we can do instead of what God does for us and what he gives to us.

### ***Prayer***

Loving Father, open our eyes that we may be ever aware of your presence in all that we do, helping us to rely less on our own talents and actions and more on your merciful goodness.

## Tuesday January 20th

## Mark 2:23-28

This story has some practical difficulties associated with it. Why, for example, were the Pharisees in the wheatfield when the Sabbath laws prevented them from walking more than half a mile? Why don't they question the disciples about walking on the Sabbath instead of tackling them for eating the wheat, which is a much less serious breach of law? Deuteronomy 23:25 allows the plucking of the heads of wheat on the Sabbath while the Pharisees of the time of Jesus considered it to be a part of harvesting and that was a prohibited activity on the Sabbath. At the most basic level then, it is not so much a battle about the Law, but about the Pharisaical interpretation of what they thought the Law meant. The best way of understanding this story is that Mark has joined together a number of different stories into a single account about the ongoing conflict between Jesus and the Pharisees. The point Mark is making is explosive for his Jewish communities and establishes a whole new level of determining right from wrong. The Law is no longer the standard. It has been replaced by the person and message of Jesus. Making the Son of Man the master of the Sabbath was not something that would endear Jesus to the Jewish authorities!

The Pharisees had thirty-nine different categories relating to working on the Sabbath day. Four of these were reaping, winnowing, threshing and preparing a meal, and on this particular day the disciples would have broken all four of them! They were law-breakers and therefore isolated from God and to be cut out of the community. The interesting point in the reply of Jesus was that when it came to human need, the law, even divine law, took second place. The whole point of Sabbath laws was to make life better for man. If it reached the point where it enslaved him and victimized him then it was time for the law to be ignored. People are far more important than rituals and religious systems and those things only exist to help believers better express their faith and carry out their faith commitments. The Sabbath is at its most sacred best when it is used to carry out works of love. It is a sad truth of the Church that at times we can be more concerned with the way we do things, with our procedures and customs, and not as concerned with the demands of the poor and needy around us. The final decision on whether or not we do something or do not take some action must be the demands of love and not the Law.

### *Prayer*

Lord God, your Son Jesus Christ proclaimed a message of love and compassion. As we have received forgiveness and healing at his hands, so may we share it with all those we meet.

## Tuesday January 13th

## Mark 1:21-28

This is a story that had been told over and over in the Church and Mark takes it up, giving in verses 22 and 27 the message he means us to find in the actions of Jesus. The miracle is clear evidence of the authority with which Jesus teaches and preaches. We know that John the Baptist preached and that the Church and the Twelve preached. While Jesus also preached he is the only one who taught. This word is used twenty times in this Gospel and usually in the sense of a continuous action. What makes the teaching of Jesus so significant is that, when he taught, things happened. In this story a sick man is healed, making it clear that God was working through the words of Jesus bringing his grace to those who have ears to hear him speaking. One great commentator wrote that in the words of Jesus "heaven actually breaks in and hell is abolished", which provides us with a neat summary of how Mark understands the ministry of Jesus. The sick man was at the mercy of the spirits within him. At the time, sickness was seen as the result of these evil spirits and therefore something that was not a part of the will of God. There was a general belief that if you knew the name of someone then you could exercise control over them, which is why this demon called out the name of Jesus. The command of Jesus to "Be quiet! Come out of him!" represents his battle cry, but there is no battle, for the spirit leaves the sick man and all is well.

Evangelicals can teach us much about the power of the Word of God. We can see from this story in Mark the power that the people of the time experienced in the preaching of Jesus. His words had power that was able to transform the lives of those who had faith. The strength of this power can be seen in the reaction of the spirits. They were afraid of him because they knew that, for all their power, they were as nothing before him. That is what Mark was trying to tell his people. God's Word is all-powerful. It is like a two-edged sword that can cut through to the bone. But it is useless locked away in a book! What makes the Word of God come alive in all power and might is when it is proclaimed by word and by deed in the lives of men and women of faith. This is why we carry the Book in procession, incense it, read it with candles lit and why we kiss the Book after reading the Gospel. It is the Sacred Word of God in which he is truly present. That is why we read it and seek to obey it.

### *Prayer*

Father in heaven, you reveal yourself to us in many ways but especially in your Son Jesus Christ. As we read the Gospels in faith, open our ears that we may hear you speaking to us.

## Wednesday January 14th

## Mark 1:29-39

Mark continues with his stories illustrating the authority of Jesus. This time he heals Simon's mother-in-law. What is significant in this particular story is her response. She does not respond with amazement or begin to question Jesus about the authority he has to do these things. She was helped to her feet and "began to wait on him" (serve him). We find again that the Greek form of the word used is that she served him and went on serving him. This is the appropriate response of a disciple who in faith hears the word of God. This story is then linked to the next story by the words "that evening". This has the sense of: "Well, you think that was something special! That evening..." It is all a part of the picture of Jesus being painted by Mark the artist. Jesus commands the devils he has cast out not to speak, he often commanded those he cured not to say anything about what had happened to them, a command they were not likely to keep! The saving work of God is not something that will be silenced and as we read Mark's stories we can feel the excitement building up.

There are a number of occasions in Mark when spirits or people who have been cured are told not to say anything about what had happened. This is called Mark's Messianic Secret. For Mark, the time had not yet arrived for the proclamation of Jesus as the Messiah. That time would be at his crucifixion and death and for anyone to understand the full message of Jesus they needed to follow him to the cross. Only by understanding what was happening at Golgotha can the rest of Jesus' ministry be appreciated. It is only by the grace of God, given through the death of the Son, that it is possible for men to follow the road of discipleship. Not only does the cross make it possible for someone to be a disciple, the cross is also a requirement of discipleship. Another thing that leaps out in the story is the attempt by the demon to sidestep Jesus by calling out his name (1:24). Jesus does not just defeat him, he is also making it clear that it is not possible for a person to find salvation simply by using that Holy Name. Salvation depends on an acceptance of Jesus as he is (and not as people want him to be) and on a life of faith. The miracle stories are not really about someone being cured. They are proclamations of God's intervention into human history bringing salvation and life and they are invitations to believe that the same thing is possible today. Those who walk the path of discipleship know the comforting, healing and loving presence of God.

### *Prayer*

Merciful Lord, at those times in our lives when we find ourselves struggling with temptations, trials and sins that seem impossible to defeat, show us your powerful presence.

## Monday January 19th

## Mark 2:18-22

Jesus' justification for not fasting is a clear statement of how he understands the time he is ushering in. He is saying that because of the great joy that is on offer, it is impossible to expect anyone to perform special religious activities. The great joy of the inbreaking of the Kingdom of God so overwhelms the believer that there is no need for them to rely on finding joy through actions they may choose to undertake (fasting). Once a person understands just what God is doing, all else will pale into insignificance (requirements of the Law) for they are no longer required to perform religious acts in the hope of bringing God near to them. The metaphors in verses 21 and 22 are warnings against being half-hearted in their response to the demands of the Kingdom. The new cannot be used for repairing the old and neither can the new be poured into old forms. The coming of Jesus has freed believers from any reliance on works because it alone gives the fullness of joy. Mark is not saying fasting is no longer acceptable (the attitude behind fasting is encouraged in 1 Corinthians 9:25-27 and one Christian writing, the Didache, puts Wednesdays and Fridays aside as days of fasting in the early Church). What he is saying is that its role has radically changed. Fasting becomes a religious tool for helping the disciple unite himself with God.

In this passage we are confronted with one of the areas of struggle in the early Church and Mark appears to be addressing problems in his own community by appealing back to conflicts Jesus himself had during his ministry in Galilee. The sayings about the wineskins and cloths serve as a general warning against the temptation to compromise the demands of the Kingdom by trying to unite things that simply cannot be united. The inclusion of the Pharisees in the group questioning Jesus would suggest that the danger was trying to combine a legalism with a celebration of the presence of God within the community. There were those in the community who continued to want the law to be obeyed (and this meant not just the ten commandments but also the interpretations of the Pharisees which had come to take on an authority similar to the Law given to Moses on Mt Sinai). One of the greatest threats to the Gospel message is the sin of compromise which seeks to water down the demands made by Jesus for the sake of an easier life. There are things the world allows that are simply not compatible to the Gospel and must be rejected.

### *Prayer*

Father, it is not easy being a disciple. Strengthen us by your Spirit that we may be faithful to all your Gospel demands.

## Sunday January 18th

## John 1:35-42

We now move into a new scene where two of the disciples of John the Baptist leave their master to follow Jesus. They do this after hearing the testimony given by John about Jesus. In the theology of the Gospel what is happening is that the Father has drawn them to Jesus (cf 6:44). We have here the first recorded words of Jesus and the impact is extraordinary. We read in 1:41 that after being with Jesus and listening to him teaching Andrew is prepared to call him the Messiah! He then goes out and brings back his brother Simon to listen to Jesus and he is given a new name: Rock (Cephas). The invitation was for Andrew to "Come and see" and he came and "stayed with" Jesus and he saw. This Gospel is doing something different to the other three with the call of the disciples. For John, the disciples represent the true Israel which answers the call of God and follows after the Messiah and so they form the beginnings of the community God himself gives to the Messiah (3:27; 3:29). (In the other Gospels the focus is on giving up home and possessions to follow after the Lord.) The question addressed to John the Baptist's disciples: "What do you seek?", is a question the remainder of the Gospel will seek to answer and represents a question addressed to the entire Church.

Significantly the opening words of Jesus in the Gospel of John are "What are you looking for?" and "Come and see". Both of these are addressed as much to we who seek to believe today as they were to those disciples. What is it that we seek from Jesus? Just why do we believe and go through all the struggles of living out a life of discipleship? What we need to do is ask ourselves whether or not our expectations are realistic and reflect the Gospel or whether we are seeking justifications for ways of living that we have already come to accept and with which we are comfortable. There is a danger in coming to Jesus with our expectations too sharply defined. What we are sure to do is find what we are looking for. But there is no guarantee that that is the same as what Jesus is offering. The best answer to the question is the one given in the Gospel. We seek whatever is on offer and the only way to find out what is being offered is to come to Jesus and to "stay with him". The only way to hear what God is saying is to put time aside to be with him. It was after doing exactly this that Andrew knew he had met the Messiah.

### *Prayer*

Father in heaven, in your Son we have the Messiah we seek, who will lead us to light and life. Strengthen us that we may leave behind our sinful ways and follow after him.

## Thursday January 15th

## Mark 1:40-45

Mark places the next story, the cure of the leper, here at the beginning of the ministry of Jesus because it is a significant act. Leprosy was a dreaded disease because it meant that the person was excluded from the community and so from the people of God. They had to keep their distance from others and shout out "Unclean! Unclean!" when they saw anyone approaching (Leviticus 13:45). The Rabbis described the lepers as being living corpses and so their cure was in the same realm as raising someone from the dead. The leper ignored all that and placed his faith in the authority Jesus had: "If you want to...". He believed that Jesus had the power to cure him and was prepared to place his trust and confidence in his merciful care. We are not aware of just how much information this man had of Jesus but it is clear that he was prepared to be completely dependent on him. The older texts read that Jesus was "angry" when he saw the man, a translation that we turn into "had pity on the man". In Mark's scheme Jesus had come to confront all those things which were against the plan of God and which incarcerated people in prisons from which they could not escape on their own. His conflicts came not only with the demons, but also those other circumstances that afflict men's lives and alienate them from others and from God. This miracle, being born to new life, would have been seen as a kind of resurrection.

As with the other miracles, this story is not just about a healing. The cure of the disease is no more than the means of proclaiming a much greater message. The Law created two sorts of people. Those who were lepers and those who were not lepers. The unfortunates who were sick were left outside of the community and so, in the eyes of the priests, also outside of the love of God. The great dramatic point of the story is seeing Jesus reach out his hand and touch the sick man, thus contaminating himself. At that moment Jesus breaks through all the barriers that divide people. There are no more clean and unclean, no more people of God and outsiders. This explains his anger. He is angry at what they had allowed the leprosy to do to this man. This is a confrontation between God and man-made boundaries and all men and women of faith are challenged to think through some of their traditional beliefs and customs, lest they make "lepers" of people who are loved by God and for whom Jesus died on the cross. "Leprosy" or sin is no barrier to God's love.

### *Prayer*

Father, your Son reached out his hand and touched the leper and in so doing declared that no one is beyond the reach of your love. Help us as we seek to take that message to others.

## **Friday January 16th**

## **Mark 2:1-12**

Having established the authority of Jesus, we now have another important story making this authority clear and beginning the process that will lead to the cross (cf 3:6). The central problem is the forgiveness of sins around which this miracle story is built. It was no easy task to get the stretcher to Jesus and the determination of the stretcher-bearers was described as "faith" by Mark and forms the basis for the cure. It is not important for him that they do not understand fully the ministry of Jesus or know who he is. What is important is that they respond to the crisis in their lives with an act of faith. The fact that the faith of the sick man does not come into play brings out the point that what is happening is entirely the work of God. The friends want a cure but Jesus initiates the forgiveness of sins according to the will of his Father. This helps to bring out the biblical understanding of human life that is found in the Old Testament, where there is no clear distinction between a person's physical and spiritual well-being. When human beings become alienated from God the whole of their lives are subject to chaos. Those who sin live contrary to the plan God had for creation and so all areas of their lives were bound to suffer.

This story is similar to the preceding one in that what we find being broken down are the artificial and false walls that separate one person from another. We are told nothing about the actual sins committed by this man but it does not matter, for what Jesus sees on the stretcher there before him is a man who needs forgiveness more than he needs healing for his sick legs. It is only at the end of the story, in response to a challenge by the Pharisees, that Jesus even seems interested in curing him. In 2:15-17 the Pharisees and the Scribes objected to Jesus inviting sinners to be guests at his meals but Jesus goes ahead and mixes with them because in him they have forgiveness of their sins. It is not that he enjoys their sin! What he does is to unite them with himself and so unite them with his Father in heaven. There is no clear evidence that in Judaism there was an expectation the messiah would forgive sins but Jesus does exactly that. In so doing he reveals a Kingdom of God which is directed towards the outcasts, opening it up to tax collectors, to sinners (prostitutes) and so to all people down through time who are in need of healing and acceptance. Sin does not stop the love of God being unleashed in a person's life if they come to him in need and in faith.

### ***Prayer***

Merciful God, time and time again you forgave your people Israel when they sinned against you. Through the love of your Son Jesus for us, forgive us our sins and bring us to new life.

## **Saturday January 17th**

## **Mark 2:13-17**

It would appear that there are three separate stories joined together by Mark: verses 13, 14 and 15-17. What is important for Mark is the note about Jesus teaching and the response of the crowd which "came to him". He came to teach and because he taught "with authority" the people responded (in contrast to the Pharisees). With verse 16 we have a new question being raised. It is clear that the role of the Law and its place within the Church was a pressing question for the early communities of believers. It takes the form of a question over whether or not Jesus came for law-abiding Jews or whether he came for Gentiles as well. (Later on the Church would slightly change the question to read: did Jesus come for those who committed sins after they had been baptized?) The answer of Jesus to this concern is a quote from a popular Greek philosophical saying: "Physicians do not usually teach among the healthy, but where the sick are". The last two stories are joined together, which is Mark's way of indicating that Jesus treated the outcasts in exactly the same way as he treated Levi, thereby indicating their place within the community. If Jesus accepted them, then those who seek to be his disciples must also accept them. For Mark, Jesus is the one who reconciles outcasts by his words.

The sad thing about the call of Levi is that he seems to have been left there, sitting at his tax booth, while everyone else wandered down to the lake to listen to Jesus. He would not have been welcome in the crowd because he was a tax collector. These were men who defiled themselves in two ways. The first way was through their mixing with Gentiles and the ritual uncleanness of the Gentiles was transferred to them. The second way was through their collaboration with the Roman occupiers. The contract for collecting taxes was always given to whoever bid the highest quote. This meant that they had to be ruthless in their collecting and had to put their taxes up to cover their high costs. This put them on a par with the Gentiles and we can then understand why he was left outside the group going down to listen to the teacher on the beach. This makes the actions of Jesus even more potent. He reached out to the one who lived on the fringes and defined discipleship as something for all who repented and came to him. In the community of God there can be nothing that isolates individuals or groups. All are called and welcome.

### ***Prayer***

Loving Father, from the beginning you have shown yourself to be a God who seeks out the poor, the needy and those despised by others. Help us in our lives of discipleship to take out your message of love and healing to all your needy people.