

DEVOTIONS FOR LENT 2012



THROUGH SLEEPY EYES

A SERIES OF PERSONAL DEVOTIONS FOR LENT

BASED ON THE GOSPEL OF MARK

through sleepy eyes

mark 14:41-42

jesus came back a third time and he said to them,
are you still sleeping and resting?

enough! the hour has come!

look, the son of man is now being handed over to the power of
sinners.

get up, let us go.

look, here is the man who is betraying me!

(gnb)

in commemoration of 150 years with jesus the christ
this booklet was written and prepared in 2012 by the
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INTRODUCTION

Welcome to this year of Mark.

For some time, within the history of the Christian Church, Mark's gospel account wasn't regarded very highly. St Augustine even suggested that it was little more than an abbreviation of Matthew's gospel story. In more recent times that view has changed. It is now accepted that Mark's was the first gospel account to be written and that Matthew and Luke sourced it for their own accounts.

Jesus' crucifixion is central to Mark's gospel. Throughout the book Jesus predicts his suffering and death, and his last days in Jerusalem take up more than a third of the gospel. This strong focus could be for a number of reasons. Maybe the account of Jesus' suffering and death was offered as an encouragement to the early, persecuted followers of Jesus to persevere. Or maybe it was to reinforce that Jesus' suffering and death, as absurd as it seemed, was part of God's intended plan. It seems that Mark's purpose for writing this gospel was so that we might offer our own faithful confession about the mystery of Jesus Christ. He starts the gospel with the words:

The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. (Mark 1:1 NRSV)

and concludes it with:

Now when the centurion, who stood facing [Jesus], saw that in this way he breathed his last, he said, "Truly this man was God's Son!"
(Mark 15:39 NRSV)

In writing the gospel account Mark allows us to meet Jesus so that we might also confess him as the Christ, God's Son.

I pray that this series of devotions will help you in your own journey toward making that confession.

Thanks to Colin and Yvonne for leading this community project, and for everyone who contributed written pieces.

God bless you in your Lenten journey.

Pastor James

ASH WEDNESDAY

Wednesday, 22 February 2012

Mark chapter 1:1-20

AM I READY?

This reading is about the beginning of the gospel about Jesus Christ. At the beginning, was Jesus ready? Was everything ready for Jesus?

John prepared the way for the Lord. He baptised Jesus in the Jordan River. Then Jesus was sent into the desert, and he was there forty days, to be tempted by Satan. Jesus did not do what Satan wanted. So I think Jesus was quite ready, and everything (also Satan) was ready for him. So he started doing his job.

I'm wondering when he said "The time has come, the kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!" were the other people ready? Were they ready to follow Jesus?

Simon and Andrew left their nets. James and John left their father in the boat with the hired men. They left all they had behind, and followed Jesus. So they were ready as well.

Am I ready?

Jesus is calling me, he is inviting me. Can I go with him without delay? Can I leave everything behind to follow him? Can I give up anything important to me to worship him?

If the answer is "Yes", I think I'm ready.

Prayer

Lord Jesus, open the eyes of our hearts that we may see you clearly, and follow you without hesitation. Amen.

2ND DAY IN LENT

Thursday, 23 February 2012

Mark chapter 1:21-34

ORDINARY MIRACLES

God works through all of us to bring his love to the people we share our lives with. In this story, God works through Jesus to bring healing to the sick, then seen as miracles. Those miracles today are achieved by doctors and other health professionals. I don't think we see them as miracles. There doesn't seem to be anything miraculous about taking paracetamol and your fever going or using antidepressants to treat depression. However these are God's miracles. Our healing of health comes from God working through the health professionals that we see. God enables them to do his work and they sometimes are seen to 'play God'. But they are not playing God; they are using their knowledge to facilitate healing and life so astounding that only God can be behind such marvels. God has blessed us with all the medical advances that have been made, and we should not forget that even though it is totally normal now to not die from a wound infection, that God is still working his miracles behind the screen of modern medicine.

Prayer

Thank you Lord for enabling people to carry out your work and miracles. We are truly blessed to receive these ordinary miracles every day. Amen.

3RD DAY IN LENT

Friday, 24 February 2012

Mark chapter 1:35-45

JESUS PREACHES AND CLEANSSES A LEPER

Luke reports how Jesus first priority in waking before day break is to pray in quiet; so leading us on how to start our day.

Though Jesus has much more to do among the people of Capernaum, He makes time for private devotion and then insists on moving on to visit other towns and villages. His unswerving adherence to the right priorities stands in sharp contrast with our own tendency to lose focus, allow others to set our agenda, and put lesser things above what is most important. Given our weaknesses it is reassuring that Jesus keeps things straight. His highest goal is to fulfil the father's command that he save the lost.

Jesus sent the man, who previously had leprosy, to the priest so that he might officially be pronounced clean. Jesus touch resulted in two restorations: first, the man was restored to physical wholeness; second, he was able to resume his rightful place in society.

When a leper seeks Jesus' help, the Lord not only heals him, but also makes sure the man is restored to the way of God's will. Though we may no longer ostracize people for contracting leprosy, there are a host of ways that people experience alienation from family, church and the larger community. But Jesus healing will remedy such alienation. His grace makes peace with God, restores our broken relationships, and thus puts us right with one another.

PRAYER

Lord, preserve us from misplaced priorities. Keep us focused on Your Gospel. Lord thank you for your healing power. Hear our cries for help, heal us according to your wisdom and then move us to tell others what you have done.

4TH DAY IN LENT

Saturday, 25 February 2012

Mark chapter 2:1-12

THE HEALING OF THE PARALYSED MAN

What impresses me most about this story is the determination of the paralysed man's friends to bring him to Jesus for healing. They were so determined that when they could not enter through the door they somehow got on to the roof of the house and lowered the man on his bed to Jesus' feet.

They displayed much faith and trust in Jesus' power to heal. Can you imagine the joy in the hearts of the man and his friends when Jesus told him his sins were forgiven and to "take up your bed and go to your house"?

There were also at this house some Scribes and Pharisees from Jerusalem who were very critical and hostile to Jesus' teachings and they asked, "Who can forgive sins but God alone". The Lord declared himself as the Son of Man who has power on earth to forgive sin and he healed the paralytic.

We, too, can bring our family and friends to Christ in prayer and hope, and give them loving support in Jesus' name.

Prayer

Gracious Father, I thank you for your steadfast love to me in your Son. Help me to love and help those in need. Amen.

FIRST SUNDAY IN LENT

Sunday, 26 February 2012

Mark chapter 2:13-17

WHEN JESUS CALLED LEVI

We can all identify with one of the people mentioned here – Jesus, tax collector, sinner, disciple, teacher or Pharisee, healthy, doctor, sick, righteous. Maybe we see ourselves in several categories, but which one do we really want to be in?

When did you last ask someone to “follow” you to church, and not a friendly neighbour but rather the one with the loud accelerating car who screeches around your corner?

Did you make an excuse not to attend a Christmas celebration because you knew there’d be loudmouthed, overindulging “sinners” present?

Have you passed criticism or judgement on why people don’t do things your way?

Have you been friendly to all those around you, eaten with them?

Have you seen a need and become a “doctor”?

Are you afraid of the “Pharisees” who may criticise you?

Jesus could see a need and didn’t hesitate to go with, and even eat with the tax collector. Others followed him, eager to be there, hear what he said, and Mark passed it on to us.

Don’t be afraid to follow your inner feelings to help others. They are unlikely to be tax collectors, but rather victims of emotional stress, physical abuse, alcoholics, homosexuals, physically challenged, or just lonely or sad. A greeting, a smile, a helping hand, a silent prayer is a good way to start.

Prayer

Dear Jesus, God and man, give us the faith, strength and wisdom to follow your example and do what you would do. Amen.

6TH DAY IN LENT

Monday, 27 February 2012

Mark chapter 2:18-28

A QUESTION ABOUT FASTING

These passages in the gospel of Mark relate to the Pharisees questioning Jesus about following Jewish law and therefore God's law. To me the Pharisees are the equivalent of today's political commentators or media reporters. They frequently criticise and judge others without evidence or very flimsy "here say" but do not apply the same standard to themselves. The Pharisees portrayed themselves as the upholders of God's law and imposed this on others however they would regularly find loop holes so the laws did not apply to them. Jesus would turn these taunts around and show his people and the Pharisees the real meaning of the law and God's word.

Mark 2:18-22 A Question About Fasting

In the first passages of this reading Jesus is questioned about why He and his disciples are not fasting. Here Jesus draws on the Old Testament where God is referred to as the bridegroom and Jesus is God on earth and is therefore the bridegroom. When in the presence of the bridegroom it is not a requirement to fast, therefore He and his disciples did not fast. Jesus also refers to when he will be gone (reference to his crucifixion) and states that then his disciples will fast, referring to them no longer being in the bridegroom's presence. It is interesting to note that many Pharisees avoided fasting by attending weddings so they were in the presence of a bridegroom. This is another example of humans taking God's work literally rather than understanding its meaning.

Mark 2:23-28 Jesus Is Lord of the Sabbath

In the next section of these passages again the Pharisees taunt Jesus regarding the keeping of the Sabbath law. It is forbidden to work on the Sabbath yet his disciples were accused of grinding grain as they had plucked heads of grain, ground them in their hands and eaten the seed. Jesus again refers to the Old Testament where David ate from the holy bread in the temple to feed his men as they escaped King Saul. Here the need was greater than the Law. Jesus showed the Pharisees that God made the Sabbath for man to make life better for everyone and to celebrate and worship God. This showed that the Pharisees were forcing their interpretation of God's law on to others. To me this is an example of humans wanting to control other humans by using or twisting God's laws and teachings. This is the basic process of the fundamentalists in all religions and I feel this is not God's intention.

Prayer

Lord Jesus, help us to look at ourselves first, with You in our hearts, not judging or imposing man-made religious traditions on others but to follow you as the one and only Saviour that forgives all. Amen.

Imagine life minus one fully-functioning hand. Many folk manage to live this way, but most of us take for granted the fact that we have two hands with eight fingers and two thumbs. These enable us to pick-up, grasp and carry, to express ourselves, to click and clap, and in my case and that of many, to play a musical instrument. If I walked into Jesus' presence with a malformed and non-functioning hand, I know I would wish for healing.

This was my first impression upon studying this passage. And of course, I knew that Jesus would choose to heal.

However, the most striking message in this passage is the fact that Jesus was moved to anger. He was greeted with antagonism and 'hard hearts'. His observers were more concerned with 'catching him out' than relieving the distress of the person with the withered hand, and caused him to feel deeply distressed, and angry. How often do we read of Jesus' anger? Perhaps Bible scholars know the answer to that question, but I suspect it is rare.

How easy it is for us to harden our hearts, to feel concern only for ourselves, to be certain that we are right and that the other person is wrong. We even take this stand in matters relating to our Lord, and our church community. We lose sight of the position of others, and we feel no concern for their suffering. Our hardness of heart and pride narrows our vision, and prevents us from feeling compassion for others.

How this grieves our Lord Jesus. It even moves him to anger!

Prayer

Dear Lord Jesus, I am sorry for making you sad and angry. Please give me the strength to live unselfishly, showing more concern for others than ourselves, and any perceived 'rightness' on my part. Amen.

What causes people to jump onto the band-wagon or the latest trend? In this reading a large crowd of people saw it to be advantageous to them to follow this 'exciting new prophet'. Why did they do this? In many ways they saw distinct opportunities for themselves. There was the possibility of the curing of some illness or ailment that was afflicting them or maybe for the chance to get in close with a new future leader who would rescue them from the tyranny and pressures of the Roman domination or maybe even the promised Messiah.

The enthusiasm by this crowd of people was so great that Jesus even felt some concern for his own well-being. People pushed in hard just to be in contact with him and touch him to cure their diseases. Did this require a significant measure of faith or was there not much to lose and you may as well take a chance? Jesus did heal many of the people and cast out demons but he was not yet ready to fully reveal himself to the crowd. He ordered the demons not to tell anyone who he really was.

Are we too often like this crowd who is there for what we can get out of it? Do we grab hold of some security blanket when there is a particular need in our lives? True faith in Christ requires us to recognise the need for Christ in our lives when things are also going well. Help us to be the Christians who desire Christ in their lives at all times.

Prayer

We know that you are always with us and beside us. Help us to readily talk to you and be near you at all times and not just when we need someone to lean on. Amen.

I feel that these passages relate to unity (wholeness) and the strength that this imparts.

When the Pharisees attribute Jesus' healing to Satan's power, Jesus points out that inner division is destructive, that Satan could not stand if he cast himself out. Jesus is not united with Satan, but he is part of the Triune God – this is his power.

In verse 29 Jesus says whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit can never have forgiveness. In William Barclay's study guides he explains the Jewish conception of the Holy Spirit (not the full Christian sense of the term) was that it had two functions.

- Firstly, the Holy Spirit brought God's truth to men and
- Secondly, the Holy Spirit enabled men to recognize and to understand that truth when they saw it.

The Pharisees, in saying that Jesus had an unclean spirit, had already cut themselves off from the Holy Spirit's revelation to them. They no longer listened to God's guidance and they had lost the ability to discern good from evil.

In the last verses Jesus elevates whoever does the will of God, up to the level of his family. We are part of something much bigger than ourselves.

Prayer

Thank you God for your gift of Jesus and of the Holy Spirit to the world, so that we may be complete and be a member of your family in this life and the next. Amen.

10TH DAY IN LENT

Friday, 2 March 2012

Mark chapter 4:1-12 THOSE WHO HEAR THE WORD AND ACCEPT IT,
BEAR MUCH FRUIT

Jesus' parable of the sower.

This parable is aimed at all the hearers of God's Word.

We are told that the seed that fell on the footpath remained outside the soil until the birds devoured it. Some seed fell on rocky ground and immediately sprang up, but with minimum root growth became scorched and withered. The seed that fell among thorns was choked and yielded no grain but the seed that fell onto good soil brought forth much grain.

There are different ways of hearing and accepting God's Word.

The hearers who do not accept God's Word, they don't want to hear it. The shallow hearers who fail to think about the teachings of the Word and lack depth of understanding. Those who are too preoccupied with many interests to study and meditate on God's Word and do not comprehend what is truly important. Then there are those whose minds are open and always willing to listen and to learn, never too proud or too busy to learn. They listen in order to understand. They bear much fruit.

God gives grace to those who hunger for His Word that they may understand His will and have the strength to live according to it.

Do you hunger for God's Word?

Prayer

Thy presence, gracious Lord, afford,
Prepare us to receive Thy Word. Amen

11TH DAY IN LENT

Saturday, 3 March 2012

Mark chapter 4:13-29

JESUS WANT US TO UNDERSTAND

What I am first struck with in this passage is that Jesus wants us to understand his teachings and so he explains for us the preceding parable of the sower.

Sometimes I feel overwhelmed at the world – Jesus and his saving grace is right there for every person to receive and believe in, and yet, as Jesus explains in his teachings, not all who hear also believe. God is aware of this: he knows the temptations, desires and deceits that we face in this world, and that can lure us away from Him. He acknowledges that there are those who will choose this path rather than Himself.

Are we to be discouraged, as Jesus followers, and keep the good news of salvation in Christ to ourselves? No. In verses 21 to 29 we are called by Jesus to reveal his Word to the world, for even the smallest of lights shine light on the darkest of places. We do not know what effect we have on others through our actions, but whether we are awake or sleeping we are living for Christ.

We need not fear in this challenge: verse 20 gives us the encouragement that we will also produce a crop, simply because we accept the word.

Prayer

We pray that our thoughts words and deeds, no matter how large or small, sow grain that sprouts in the hearts of others.

SECOND SUNDAY IN LENT

Sunday, 4 March 2012

Mark chapter 4:30-41

OUR QUIET REBELLION

Sometimes life can simply be overwhelming. We work, we take care of our families, we have bills that seem to continue to rise, sickness happens, death happens, trials and tribulations come. We may ask ourselves: Where is God in all of this? And God may ask *us*: Where have *you* been in all of this?

If we are to be totally honest with ourselves, and with God, we need to face the fact that there are times that we are too focused and obsessed on so many things in life; many being trivial and unimportant.

It is easy to enter a quiet rebellion against God without even realising it. We may not call upon God *until* something bad happens. And the first question we ask? *Where are you God?*

It is not that God has left us. It is not that he is hiding from us when we seem to be going through so much in our lives. For God is always present. He is always there. But there are times when he is silent; waiting for us to open our mouths, not in want, but in praise and adoration, and in faith.

Prayer

God, please help us to be closer to you; trust, and be faithful to you. Amen.

13TH DAY OF LENT

Monday, 5 March 2012

Mark chapter 5:1-20

JESUS, OR MY PIGS

There are many strange aspects to this story: the problem of demon-possession itself, the demon's multiple personalities ('we are many'), the demon's reluctance to leave a particular location and the subsequent possession and drowning of the pigs. What seems equally strange (but less so on reflection) is peoples' reaction to Jesus' healing; not wonder, or praise, or gratitude, but terror. Elsewhere, they swamp Jesus with their supplications; here, they implore him to leave. They are probably not as perverse as the Pharisees' – who attributed Jesus' healing to demons – they must, rather, fear the further consequences of Jesus' work. A man is healed, but 2000 pigs are lost. What else might they lose if Jesus stays?

If God's kingdom were present on earth today, how many of our 'unclean animals' would die, and at what cost? If we lost our addictions to gluttony, lust, substances licit and illicit, gambling, war and power, our economies would likewise suffer. On a personal level, I wonder how often I shun Jesus because of fear of loss. If I truly welcomed Jesus into my life, what would this mean for my 'pigs' – my ambition, my pride, my love of human praise, my wealth, my will to control and dominate, my self-satisfaction. Sometimes Jesus feels more absent than present in my life; perhaps, fearing the consequences of his true presence, I have sent him away.

Prayer

Dear Jesus, help me to welcome you into my heart, whatever the cost. Teach me to value your kingdom above my own. Amen.

14TH DAY OF LENT

Tuesday, 6 March 2012

Mark chapter 5:21-43

DIVINE DELAYS

Interruptions are always frustrating. I am in the middle of making dinner and my children need me to come and help them with their homework. I am out in the garden working with my hands covered in mud and I'm wanted on the phone. Interruptions are a part of life. We often don't think about God being interrupted but this is what happens in this passage. Jesus was on His way to heal a young girl who was dying, when He was interrupted by a woman who was also in desperate need of help.

As a mother I can understand how Jairus would have felt. He was seeking Jesus' help for his critically ill child, and would have been very frustrated by anything that slowed Jesus down. I can only imagine how he would have felt when the news arrived that his daughter had died!

This passage is a lesson in the importance of divine delays....or what we might call 'unanswered prayers'. So many times I pray for something that is so important to me and God just doesn't seem to be there or doesn't seem to care. This passage reminds me that God may just be delaying his answer to my prayer.

And, as in this passage, when Jesus was delayed, the miracle he performed was all the greater. He did not heal a sick child – he bought her back to life!! When Jesus is delayed we think He is not listening ... but His delays may be designed to result in greater glory for Him, and greater faith for us and others around us.

Prayer

Dear Lord. Please help us to be patient and to remember that you never delay your responses to our prayers without good reason. In Jesus Name.
Amen

15TH DAY OF LENT

Wednesday, 7 March 2012

Mark chapter 6:1-13

SPREADING THE WORD WITH HUMILITY

Let Jesus' love shine through, to all around us, whether they are believers or unbelievers. We daily have conflicts, disappointments and hardships, but steadfastly, lovingly, with patient hope and assurance from Jesus, in all our actions, thoughts and prayerful words, we will find many of Jesus' miracles happening around us often.

A loving heart and a concern for other people's needs, requires us to reach out and assist in ways that we are able.

Do not expect rewards, but having worked in executive roles in volunteering for 'The Friends of the Botanic Gardens of Adelaide for 17 years, the greatest rewards in life is to 'give and not receive'.

The highest mountains in the world of doubt and despair of Jesus' love for humanity and suffering, can be conquered by steadfast and continuous compassion, love and prayer, in Jesus name.

Give it a try!

Prayer

Dear Jesus, our Saviour, give us the confidence and skills to bring others to your saving grace. Amen.

16TH DAY OF LENT

Thursday, 8 March 2012

Mark chapter 6:14-29

MAN'S BANQUET OF HORROR
GOD'S BANQUET OF LOVE

This story gave me nightmares as a child, especially after I had come across the graphic depiction of the head of John the Baptist by the painter Caravaggio. As an adult the story is no less disturbing. In these few verses we see the worst excesses of human thought and behaviour, misuse of power, abuse of justice, incest, scheming to take the life of another, beheading and displaying the head at a banquet so that all can gloat. Worse than any horror movie!

The story of the death of John the Baptist is told here in retrospect, as if Herod is reliving one of his nightmares, the memory sparked by the appearance of Jesus and his disciples, as they begin their ministry. Herod is terrified that Jesus is John the Baptist come back to life and is forced to remember the events which led to the death of an innocent man, who had spoken out against a corrupt regime. Herod's reflection ensures that the blame is well and truly shared by others in the story, Herodias and her daughter.

I sometimes have my own Herod experience when hearing of the radical nature of God's love for us through the ministry of Jesus. In the light of Jesus' compassion and love, I am confronted by the nightmare of the hurt and destruction that I have been party to, both as an individual and as a member of the human race. I have certainly wanted to have someone's 'head on a platter' as revenge for wrongs done to me, and I love to share the blame or even shift to blame with others. It is easy to become caught up in this evil banquet of guilt, shame and blame and forget that what Jesus came to bring was life, forgiveness and freedom from oppression, especially the oppression of our own guilt.

The story which follows this one in Mark is the feeding of the 5000, a totally different banquet than the one Herod presided over. Jesus gave nourishment to all who came, just as he does to all of us when we gather together as the St Stephen's community around the font and the communion table, but also every moment of every day through those we meet and the gifts we receive. Let's move from the nightmare of Herod's banquet to the reality of Jesus' life-giving banquet which readies us for love, compassion and justice.

Prayer

Loving God: Release us from our nightmares of guilt shame and blame. Remind us that we are your children and feed us so that we can continue to carry out your ministry of love and compassion. Amen.

17TH DAY OF LENT

Friday, 9 March 2012

Mark chapter 6:30-56

THE FEEDING OF THE FIVE THOUSAND

This well known miracle of Jesus, the feeding of the five thousand, is the only miracle mentioned in all four gospels.

Many people were coming and going, there wasn't even enough time to have a meal. Jesus saw the disciples were weary from their travels and said let's go to a quiet spot to get some rest and relaxation. Before their boat landed people came running from all directions to see Jesus. That ended their plans for a quiet day. Yes, that's often the way with plans. So often the course of our life is shaped by factors beyond our own plans – another reason to pray often.

Jesus was healing and teaching and evening was fast approaching. (Jesus must have been a very engaging speaker for the crowd to listen for such a long time). We know Jesus made the impossible request to the disciples to feed the five thousand people. But he used the two small fish and five small loaves to teach us that anything can be possible with the power of the Holy Spirit. He shows us that we have a compassionate and realistic Father in Heaven, who is concerned about our whole life, even the little things. Our hunger and need for food, our weariness and our need for rest and relaxation.

Prayer

Lord thank you that you know us through and through, and for your continuous compassion. Amen.

18TH DAY OF LENT

Saturday, 10 March 2012

Mark chapter 7:1-13

BE CAREFUL OF MAN-MADE RULES

People love setting rules for others to follow.

Jesus' response to the Pharisees and scribes, religious experts and zealots of their day and culture, identifies that they had departed from following God's commandments and had replaced them with man-made rules.

In the 15th Century, Martin Luther challenged the man-made rules and focussed on the Bible. His actions led to the reformation of the Church. Today, we, as Christians and as part of God's Church on earth, need to be conscious of whether we are placing our focus on man-made rules (made by leading Churchmen today, hundreds of years or even over a thousand years ago), instead of on God's Word.

In verses 6-8, it is written:

He said to them, "Isaiah prophesied rightly about you hypocrites, as it is written, 'this people honours me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; In vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines.' You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition." Jesus' teaching is still relevant to us today.

Prayer

Lord, please keep us on your narrow way and not let us be led astray by man-made rules. Amen.

THIRD SUNDAY OF LENT

Sunday, 11 March 2012

Mark chapter 7:14-23

DECENT OBSESSIONS

“Am I a decent person?” So began an ‘Advertiser’ article in the last week of 2011. More questions could have followed. What makes a ‘decent person’? Is it what we wear, the TV shows we watch, the political party we vote for, where we stand on this or that issue? Is it the work I do, the language I use, or the car I drive?

As usual, Jesus has a different take on such questions. ‘Nothing that goes into you from the outside can really make you unclean’, he said. So food – ‘Master Chef’ quality or the local fish and chip shop variety – is not the problem. ‘It’s what comes out of you that makes you unclean’, Jesus says. The unclean ‘thoughts, words & deeds’ he lists are nearly all ones that affect others. They hurt or harm, put them down, destroy reputations and relationships, damage people & property.

Conclusion: it’s love – look after each other, help each other – that makes for clean living. Love, not just a nice feeling for somebody else, but treating others as you’d like to be treated. This is the kind of cleanliness that’s next to godliness!

Prayer

God of love, just as you love each of us, help us to love each other. Amen.

20TH DAY OF LENT

Monday, 12 March 2012

Mark chapter 7:24-37

YOU'LL TAKE ANYBODY!

The daughter of the Syro-Phoenician woman healed

I confess I've had a moment or two when I've wanted to punch the air with a 'Yes!' when I've just read an account of Jesus' clever responses to someone attempting to corner him. He does have a way with words. But, here is a woman. A Syro-Phoenician woman, painted with the brush of Gentile stigma no less, who knew with her whole heart that Jesus' ministry, was hers too. Initially Jesus turned her away. To whom was Jesus ministering? The Jews? The chosen? She could easily have felt hurt by Jesus' words to her. But, with humble persistence, determined respect and likely with full knowledge of his recent miraculous feeding of 5000 nearby, she snapped him out of it; her reply reminded him who he was ministering to. Even Jesus, it seems, had something to learn by welcoming and listening to a Gentile. She wanted to be fed and heard and she knew that there was enough of Jesus' food for all; even a crumb was enough. In that house, Jesus confronted the concept of Jewish priority - the purity code that separated Jews from Gentiles. Jesus' emphasis became one of mercy. For him there are no barriers to full communion with God.

Yes! God will take anyone. Everyone.

Prayer

Heavenly Father, through this Lenten season and beyond, remind us that your grace is not just for some, but for all. Help us to help others to get some bread too. Amen.

21ST DAY OF LENT

Tuesday, 13 March 2012

Mark chapter 8:1-13

COMPASSIONATE.....PATIENT!!!!

There are two things closely entwined in these verses.

The compassion of Jesus.

He saw how the crowd felt - faint, hungry and tired, "they had come a long way" and he remembered the return trip ahead of them was a long way back. Jesus meets us in the details of life - everyday stuff - always considerate and compassionate. His first instinct is to help. Often our first instinct is not to help - we don't want to get mixed up in other people's problems.

The Challenge of Jesus.

His compassion and pity resulted in wanting to feed the crowd. However the disciples tried to find excuses - "How can we feed them in this desolate place!" Jesus immediately says "how many loaves do YOU have?... (to Help). Jesus says if you see someone in trouble help him with what you have got. You never know what you may do. Jesus has no time for the spirit, which waits until all the circumstances are perfect before it thinks of helping. How slowly we sometimes respond in faith but God graciously continues to supply all our needs.

The Blindness which Desires a Sign. Verses 11-13.

A quote from William Barclay, "A poet wrote
'One asked a sign from God; and day by day
The sun arose in pearl; in scarlet set;
Each night the stars appeared in bright array;
Each morn the thirsty grass with dew was wet;
The corn failed not its harvest, nor the vine-
And yet he saw no sign!'

For him who has eyes to see and a heart to understand the daily miracle of night and day, and the daily splendour of all common things is sign enough from God."

Prayer

Jesus, thank you for signs of your presence in quiet and beautiful ways - flowers - the love of a friend. Please energize us by the power of your Holy Spirit to be alert to the needs and cares of others in the ways Jesus would want us to. Amen.

This is one of the lesser known passages in Mark's Gospel. While the surrounding chapters have passages many of us know almost word-for word, this passage seems to be one of the overlooked jewels. However, I found these eight verses reminded us all of some very powerful truths.

On the initial reading of this passage, I almost laughed at the disciples' ineptitude. Yet again they went out without thinking ahead and had not taken enough supplies. To follow this up, Jesus fed 4,000 followers in the previous few verses and 5,000 earlier in chapter 6, yet the disciples are still worried about their lack of provisions. Despite having the greatest teacher as their constant travelling companion they seemed pretty slow on understanding things. Who could possibly not get it?

Then when I look closer at the passage you start to see yourself in the disciples' actions. How many times have I not trusted or been selfish. How many times have I not understood others or not cared for them as I should? How many times have I missed the very obvious signs that the greatest teacher continues to put in my way?

In the final verse Jesus questioned his disciples' ability to understand, but in his love, he never gave up on them.

Prayer

Lord, open my eyes to your love and let me trust in your constant care for me.

23RD DAY OF LENT

Thursday, 15 March 2012

Mark chapter 8:27-38 WHY HAVE SMALL WHEN GOD OFFERS BIG

Peter identifies Jesus as the Messiah (verses 27-30)

Jesus predicts his death (verses 31-33)

Take up the cross (verses 34-38)

Do you deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow Jesus? If we cannot accept the sort of Messiah that Jesus actually is, if we cannot accept what he teaches, then Jesus will be disappointed about the priority we chose. He is offering us an endless age of divine glory; tragically, some are seeking first a short-lived life in a very troubled world. He does not reject us permanently, just as he did not reject Peter, but he will lament that we chose such a small reward.

Prayer

Our loving Heavenly Father, who gives us peace beyond our understanding, we thank you. You carry our burdens daily and bear our sorrows so that we have peace and can rest. Amen.

24TH DAY OF LENT

Friday, 16 March 2012

Mark chapter 9:1-29

TRANSFIGURED AND TRANSFIXED

Mark records a most amazing incident witnessed by Peter, James and John. These three disciples, sharing a very special relationship with Jesus, accompanied him up a high mountain (perhaps Mount Tabor [900 metres], more likely Mount Hermon [over 3,000 metres]). In an instant they were transfixed. Before their very eyes Jesus had turned a dazzling white and then, incredibly, was joined in discussion by the long deceased Elijah and Moses.

I wonder how we would have reacted in such a situation. Peter, the disciple always quick to respond and a man of action, suggested erecting three tents on this transfiguration site, perhaps to become a meeting place where God could communicate directly with his people. Then a further amazing event occurred. A shimmering cloud covered them and God spoke: This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him!”

We have our own “tent” – the house of worship we know as St Stephen’s Lutheran Church. Here God communicates with us regularly through the hearing and preaching of His Word and the administration of the Sacraments of Baptism and the Eucharist. God’s message regarding his son remains true for us today: Listen to him.

As Jesus and the three disciples trekked back down the mountain they discussed amongst themselves what ‘rising from the dead’ meant. For them this must have been a confusing concept. It would have been interesting to listen to this discussion.

Thankfully we in the twenty first century have the advantage of hindsight. From the scriptures we know that Jesus did rise from the dead, bringing the promise that we too at the last day will rise from the dead. What a hope-filled message that is, as we focus our thoughts again in Lent 2012.

Prayer

Heavenly Father, during this Lenten season may we be transfixed, as we hear again the familiar story of the suffering, death and resurrection of our saviour Jesus the Christ. Amen.

25TH DAY OF LENT

Saturday, 17 March 2012

Mark 9:30-41

HOLDING ON TO EMPTY

In the first part of this reading Jesus tells his disciples of his coming death and resurrection. And it makes no sense to them at all. As they feared the announcement, they pulled back from Jesus and didn't go for the explanation. They simply let the matter slide and opted to hold onto that empty space of not knowing what Jesus wanted them to know.

In the second part, the disciples are working on what they earnestly believe is an important but thorny question. "To which of them belongs the honour and the prestige of being the best disciple?" (I am sure I would have been in the thick of this!)

So, the disciples engross themselves in the game of putting forward their "best disciple" nominations and their best arguments in support of the nominations. Jesus notices something going on and cuts-in asking what they are arguing about. Again their response is to pull back from Jesus and let the matter slide. Again, they opt to hold on to that empty space of not knowing what Jesus wanted to teach them.

This time Jesus did not let it slide. He said the best-disciple issue was also importance to him and to the one who sent him. He asserted the simple (and probably contrary) view that the 'best disciple is the best servant'. And he continues with the even more awkward idea that a high priority of a 'best servant' is to go put their arms around and give a big welcome to the people with the lowest honour and lowest prestige. "Whoever welcomes them welcomes me and also the one who sent me."

In the third part of the reading the disciples ask Jesus for his take on the other 'brands' of disciples who have different beginnings and different practices to them. Are they really good disciples? Jesus says "Don't cut these different people out. Welcome them also. They too are learning about me as they go and their experience of me will also bind them closer to me."

For me, verse 41 is the punch-line. In it Jesus asserts "Whoever gives someone a drink because they belong to me (and the one who sent me) will receive their reward".

Hey! Could this be the "best disciple" award? No. The reward the Father wants to give us is his great big welcome into his great big presence in Heaven.

Prayer

Heavenly Father, forgive us for the empty rubbish we hang on to. Thank you for staying with us as we learn more about you, get closer to you and change our aims and priorities to yours. Amen.

The phone rang. I answered. The voice said, "Mr Prenzler, will you help us to help mistreated children? Do you know that one in four children in Australia are mistreated every day?"

In 1971, I was in a drop-in centre for youth in the USA. I read a copy of a letter, which a youth had written to his father. "Dad, you have always given me presents, but if you had only once told me that you loved me, I would never have left home."

My mother told me of an experience she had in her mid-teens working as a housemaid in a Christian family. The father was an elder and preacher in his congregation. He claimed to bring God's word on a Sunday, but his overbearing behaviour during the week was so powerful that (in mother's words), "I almost lost my faith. But I held on to the thin thread of prayer. God revived and renewed me."

How did Jesus feel about children? Read again Mark 9:36,37.

Now read again today's reading which starts with, 'If anyone should cause one of these little ones to lose his faith.....'

How many baptised children and adults have lost their faith, if not in Christ, then in the church? "Lord, am I partly to blame for their lack of faith? Have I equated welcoming them with welcoming you?"

Our reading today finishes with 9:50b – "Have the salt of friendship among yourselves, and live in peace with one another."

Read Philippians 1:6-13 to be reminded how even a preacher, like Paul, valued the influence of "the salt of friendship".

Prayer

Lord Jesus, thank you that you are direct with us – to direct and even to correct. Forgive where we have caused others to have 'faith' problems. Lord, sanctify our hands, our feet, and our eyes, that we may help others to enter and stay in the Kingdom of God. Amen.

This gospel placement of Jesus' teachings about marriage and divorce and about little children and the kingdom of God, encourages me that it is children who always show us the way to the future. When I married I had joy, openness of heart and mind, inquisitiveness and dreams - no different to that of a young child as I became immersed in the true love of another.

God's purpose in men and women leaving their parents and entering into the relationship of marriage is significant. Often by then we have only travelled a short way towards independence from parental guidance and nurturing and we are still babes in the woods. Our new relationship continues to demand and require a childlike openness, faith and trust in another person as well as in God. We grow to respond to our individual needs, desires, and aspirations in the context of deep consideration of our partner and maybe children. Together we trust that shared dreams, peace and love will prevail.

Nevertheless, for so many and varied reasons, marriages do not last and people become separated despite their commitments. A breach of such special relationships and of trust sees hurt and pain, self-doubts, lack of love and even hatred among those affected by the change in relationship. Doubts and questions about relationship with God emerge.

When I experience with others the pain of marriage and relationship break down, I am reassured to know that God, the mother and father above all others, will embrace their children again. Where our trust and our faith in God and in other people are deeply challenged, God's word encourages us to rediscover the qualities of our childlike belief, hopes and dreams. I am confident that despite the struggles experienced, through the gentle nurturing of loving Parent God, we can be renewed and deep and meaningful relationships can be built afresh.

Prayer

God, just as you prepared me to take the journey of marriage, may I share the childlike love, understanding and compassion that have grown through this relationship with others in my life. Amen.

The march into Jerusalem begins! Jesus leads the way, blessing the little children, (the passages preceding today's reading), challenging the rich young man to become his disciple, and then in the passages after this we read about blind Bartimaeus being healed. This miracle account symbolizes the blindness of the disciples. Jesus is continually preparing his disciples for this fast approaching Passion, though they don't understand or "get it!"

In this reading we see a rich young man asking a question: "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" And the disciples ask: "Who then can be saved?" These are two parts of the reading that stand out for me. We all ask questions! A young child may ask: "Why do we get hiccups?" A teenager: "Why do I have to be home from the party by midnight?" And the person nearing retirement may ask: "Do I have enough superannuation?" We are not always happy or satisfied with the answers that we receive!

This was the case with the rich young man. He was unable to give away his wealth. That wealth was the obstacle that kept him from trusting Jesus. He had a greater love for his possessions than for eternal riches in heaven.

We will receive "treasure in heaven" as a gift from God, if we have no obstacles in the way. Our love for others can unselfishly be shown through our words, actions and through what God has given us. Salvation is a gift of God's grace received through faith.

Prayer

Dear Heavenly Father, thank you for your gift of eternal life. Amen.

29TH DAY OF LENT

Wednesday, 21 March 2012

Mark 10:35-52

JESUS FEELS OUR ALONENESS

Jesus, on His way to Jerusalem and the fulfilment of God's promise, must have had some sad and lonely times knowing that his disciples didn't understand what He was telling them, and that they would desert Him at His worst time, even though He had explained several times His imminent trial and death.

How alone He must have felt. How alone He must have felt on the cross! What a wonderful sacrifice was made for us. God gave His only son to be crucified to save us.

Today there are still so many who do not understand God's word, and Jesus dying for our saving. So they do not have the strength of God's love, patience, compassion and forgiveness.

So long ago the disciples, too, lost their way. Their love of Jesus soon restored their faith and strength. Judas, poor soul, could not find his way. How many of us have lost our way at some time, even for a short time? How many of us have struggled to find ourselves? Regain our Faith?

What a wonderful gift we have been given. Jesus has assured our forgiveness on that first Easter. No matter how weak we are, how fragile we feel, we have that strength to lean on, that love to support us, and His patience to let us find ourselves.

Prayer

Thank you Lord, for Jesus paying our debt for sinning, and for your love forever. Amen.

30TH DAY OF LENT

Thursday, 22 March 2012

Mark chapter 11:1-11

HOSANNA AND HALLELUJAH

Jesus' entry - an event to re-format the hopes of Jerusalem.

Former cries for help change here to shouts of praise. Hosanna meant 'save me' (as Psalm 118:25). Now, at the city walls, Hosanna, sounds of Hallelujah, joy, highest praise! It expresses relief and thanks to a humble King. He moves in without violence – and takes the weight of God's incredible overarching promises to 'our father David'. Hosanna here and now to Messiah, the coming one!

God's coming strains words. But, in Jesus, God put God under pressure. The Word became flesh. Now earthly speech can actually serve divine action and carry it forward. And news of infinite love starts to translate into praise at the very point of God's saving intervention in Christ.

Into our time, calls for help change to acclamations of praise. On such ground grows worship. 'From the depths' Christian liturgy follows this curve up. Begin with our failings and 'Lord, have mercy' cries, by communion time we're with the up-beat sinner-saints of Jerusalem and the angel-hosts of heaven: Holy, holy Lord, Hosanna in the highest, Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. Hosanna in the highest!

Why so utterly exuberant? Double good news: - the meek Christ, who comes right now, is coming again.

Prayer

Help Lord, come quickly, save your people, and bring us peace and gladness in the kingdom of our father David. Hosanna, Hallelujah! Amen.

31ST DAY OF LENT

Friday, 23 March 2012

Mark chapter 11:12-19

JUDGEMENT

This is the image of Jesus loved by filmmakers, the Jesus acting like a real man - driven by rage. He curses the barren fig tree and sweeps through the temple shouting and overturning the moneychangers' tables. (Foreigners could not buy sacrificial animals with non-Jewish money so had to exchange it at usually rip-off rates from agents in the outside Courtyard of the Gentiles). Flocks of doves (two of which served as the cheapest sacrifice available) freed from their smashed cages wheel panic-stricken through the air. Everyone cowers before the vitriol of Jesus.

Dramatic stuff! But why had he left such action to a few days before his death? He had been visiting the temple all his life. And why curse the out-of-season fig tree?

The explanation might be that the fig tree incident was a parable of judgment against Israel, a thought reinforced by its proximity to the account of the clearing of the temple. Israel, like that fig tree, had failed to bear fruit. Was this a prophecy of the fate of the temple authorities who were rejecting their Messiah and refused to accept His way of redemption?

Prayer

Destroy all that would separate me from your Grace, dear Lord. Amen.

32ND DAY OF LENT

Saturday, 24 March 2012

Mark chapter 11:20-33

WITH GOD ALL THINGS ARE POSSIBLE
– Even me accepting His authority.

In yesterday's reading the fig tree was healthy and today it's dead. The dead tree bares silent witness to the control Jesus has over life and death. The dead tree stands as a symbol of Jesus' authority.

In the reading Jesus brings us a challenging and potentially overwhelming message which goes something like this. "My Father not only loves me, he also loves YOU. In fact, He loves YOU so much that He wants YOU to share in His authority too." Then, as capriciously as Jesus caused the fig tree to die to demonstrate his authority, he says "Tell this hill to move from here to over there and it will" . . . testify to YOUR Father-given authority.

Jesus, with a touch of irritation and impatience at our snail-paced learning capacity, explains again the "faith" principle the Father wants us to use - this time to take on His authority. "It's simple, have faith, ask for what you want, believe that it has already happened - and it will happen." Well, it worked on the fig tree for Jesus. So why isn't the mountain moving for me?

In the final part of this reading, the chief priests, teachers and elders (representing me and the rest of the world) gang-up on Jesus in an attempt to undermine his authority by demanding that Jesus give account of his authority to them. If his authority can be undermined it will all come crashing down and the issue will just go away. If his authority is not undermined, then we must be subject to it. The gang-up fails, Jesus refuses to answer to them, Jesus authority stands, and Jesus treats their failed attempt with derision.

Verse 25 gives me the gospel - that fantastic news of the Father's amazing grace! When I pray, the Father says forgive others then I will forgive you – even for your part of this world's actions to not take up and share in my authority. Without the Father's forgiveness I too face the derision Jesus so justly metered out to the other chief priests, teachers and elders.

Prayer

Father, we know that you love us, you want to give us every blessing and with you all things are possible. In Jesus' name, give us the faith to share in your authority as you want us to. Amen.

Whatever were they thinking?

Did the tenants really believe that abusing the property owner's messengers would free them from their obligations? That killing his son could somehow be to their advantage and they might rise from mere tenants to vineyard owners themselves?

Had they completely lost the plot?

Unbelievable as the tenants' actions seem, there's something even more astonishing here. The owner, apparently not sensing the futility, keeps trying.

Remember cartoons, like roadrunner and coyote, where the characters never seem to learn? Trying to achieve their goal, they submit themselves time and again to danger, abuse and near death. Being cartoons, of course they never die, nor do they give up.

But it's astounding that in Jesus' parable of the tenants, it's the owner that lives in hope. In hope the tenants will do the right thing and next time will be different. In hope they come to their senses. In hope that things will be restored and the vintage can be enjoyed by all.

Of course that never happens. Jesus has accurately described how the religious institution has worked and will continue to work. It was not lost on the leaders who eventually have Him arrested and murdered, fulfilling this parable's prophesy.

God does, however, wait and patiently hope. He submits to abuse, not resorting to justice or demanding His rights, but giving us another opportunity. And another, and yet another.

He is the God we've come to know in Jesus. No, it will never make sense. It's grace.

Prayer

Father, give us a measure of your patience, hope that believes all things are possible and deep thanks for you're astonishing grace. Amen.

34TH DAY OF LENT

Monday, 26 March 2012

Mark 12:13-27

MORE PUBLIC HUMILIATION, PLEASE!

Why is it that the Pharisees, teachers, elders and Herod's Party are consistently in a public confrontation with Jesus in their repeated attempts to show him that their view of the world is right. Invariably, they came away from these confrontations with egg not just on their faces. So, why not just go to Jesus and have a quiet chat? But no, its 'More public humiliation....Please!'.

Woops Did I not include myself in that list above? I am included whether I want to be or not. So many times I have headed down a path that I too thought was right. I wanted it, it showed I was a good person, I got support, I could make sense out of it and it added meaning to life..... If only I would have had a quiet chat with Jesus. then, I too would not be still working through old public humiliations and personal disasters.

The disciples were fortunate, they lived with Jesus day by day and had enviable opportunities for quiet chats with Jesus. But, the gospels report that they too failed to take up the available opportunities. Often, they would withdraw from Jesus and let issues slide, rather than talk with Jesus and deal with them.

So, if it is true that the Pharisees, elders, teachers and disciples were not into quiet chats with Jesus at critical times, it can't be surprising that I wasn't either.

There are many instances in the gospels where it is Jesus who chooses not to let the issues slide, and it is Jesus who approaches the disciples for the chat. Jesus was, and still is, the gospel in action. Jesus came to the Pharisees, to the elders, the teachers, disciples and has come to you and to me time and time again. Jesus is just like the father, in the story he told of the prodigal son with all his public humiliations and personal disasters.

Prayer

Father Lord, when we head out for yet more public humiliation and personal disasters, please keep coming to us for a chat. We ask this in Jesus holy name.
Amen

35TH DAY OF LENT

Tuesday, 27 March 2012

Mark 12:28-44

GENUINE AND GIVING

What strikes me most about the widow giving to the temple treasury is that she put in her last two remaining coins. If this is all she had to live on, why not put in only one coin and keep the other to live on? Surely God could not be that cruel to insist that she gives everything she had to the treasury.

But I think this widow knew the heart of God. She knew that God the Father had also given up everything He had by sending His Son into this world to die for her sins, so that she could have the right to be called a child of God. She could do no less than give all she had in thanksgiving of this most precious gift, trusting that God would provide for her in this world, and hold a place for her in the next, because of her faith.

This was a genuine offering to God, not like the flamboyant way in which the rich people gave their offering. She did it without fanfare and without drawing any attention to the fact that she was giving all she had to live on. During this Lenten season, we can imitate the widow by being genuine in our attitude of giving and by being genuine in our relationship with God and others.

Prayer

Dear Jesus, give us a heart like this widow, giving everything we have for Your glory and our eternal salvation. Amen.

The stones the disciples were talking about were as large as 37feet long, 12feet high, and 18feet wide and in 70 A.D. the Romans completely destroyed the temple in Jerusalem that was built of these stones. The disciples would have thought that the destruction of the temple was an event that would signify the end of the age.

What a terrifying passage of scripture this is, straight from Jesus mouth. Nation rising against nation, earthquakes, famines, family members turning against each other, Christians punished for their beliefs. These events are happening now, just as Jesus predicted they would. We are to be prepared for the end of the age, the same as the disciples were. We can look at the world around us in despair. The pain and grief people are suffering, injustices, murders, hunger, natural disasters, drug addiction, family breakups, and so it goes on.

A question I ask myself is what can I do? I can become indifferent to it all or I can look at what my Savior has to say to me, "He who stands to the end will be saved." Being a disciple of Jesus means for me to persevere in my faith, not wait until I feel the necessity to seek God's help. Worship, prayer, contemplation of scripture are ways in which I can persevere in my faith and through the Holy Spirit's guidance I will stand in my faith to the end.

This means I can tell others confidently not to be afraid and that Jesus will come again. As Peter, James, John, and Andrew, the first disciples did, sit with Jesus privately and ask Him.....watch and pray, especially during this holy time of lent.

Prayer

Dear Father God, I have difficulty staying awake and watching and praying. Send me Your Holy Spirit to enable me to maintain my perseverance in my faith, in Jesus name I ask this. Amen.

37TH DAY OF LENT

Thursday, 29 March 2012

Mark 13:14-27

THE AWFUL HORROR

What is this 'awful horror' that Jesus is referring to here in these verses? Some other Bible translations say 'the appalling abomination', or 'the abomination that causes desolation'.

Jesus is referring to a prophecy in Daniel 12:1; 'There will be a time of troubles, the worst since nations first came into existence' and again in Daniel 12:11; 'From the time of the awful horror, the daily sacrifices shall be taken away'.

The prophecy was fulfilled. In 70 AD, after a 5-month siege of Jerusalem, the city, including the temple, was invaded and destroyed by the Romans.

How awful for those people.

The world hasn't changed. There are millions of people who have had these experiences in their lives over the centuries. And it happens today in many parts of the world, and indeed it will continue to happen. They live in fear, poverty, war, oppression, floods, earthquakes, droughts.

How awful for those people.

We are so blessed to live here in Australia. We are so protected.

Is it enough to believe that God understands the situation and that he can see the big picture? Is he really in control? Is this part of the last days?

Jesus has promised that he will come. He will come into this weary world. He will come in power and glory, gathering his chosen people to be with him.

Prayer

Dear Lord Jesus, open our hearts to people of different nationalities and different faiths, who have fled from war and oppression, to come here seeking freedom. Amen.

Up to this point in Mark 13 Jesus has been giving a series of predictions concerning the future—answering questions about when the temple would be destroyed and what indications there will be that the age is coming to an end.

This passage then speaks about three main things:

- The fig tree's promise of the coming summer as a metaphor of the events leading to Christ's return.

Just like the fig tree is a sure sign of a change in the season; so we can be sure that there will be an end to time.

- Jesus' word will never pass away.

So far so good. 2000 years later his words haven't passed away—very reassuring.

- How does he want us to live as his people?

Like the man's servants left in charge of the house who were told to be alert, Jesus wants us to be alert.

This is a special message for those who do belong to him. He entrusts his kingdom to us. Yes, just as we are reassured that Jesus' words haven't disappeared, we can be sure he will return. He left us with work to do in the meantime—to love and serve people and share his Word.

Prayer

'Surely I am coming soon', says Jesus.

'Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!' (Rev 22:20)

39TH DAY OF LENT

Saturday, 31 March 2012

Mark chapter 14:1-21

LOVE AND BETRAYAL

When a woman interrupts the meal to anoint Jesus' head at the home of Simon the leper, she causes a scene and provokes some of those present to criticize her action. Her action was motivated by one thing, and one thing only, namely, her love for Jesus. She was oblivious to all around her, except for Jesus. She also did something which only love can do. She took the most precious thing she had and poured out all the contents to anoint Jesus. It was very expensive, almost a year's wages for an ordinary worker. In a spirit of gratitude and with great love, this woman lavishly served the one who showed her the mercy and kindness of God.

I feel that some of the indignant people around this woman, were greedy. A person views things according to what is inside the heart or soul. Jesus remarked that this woman had done a lovely deed. We can never outmatch God in kindness and generosity.

Mark immediately contrasts this lovely deed with the treacherous act of Judas. Why did Judas betray his own Master? Did he simply sell out for money and greed? Was he disappointed or disillusioned with Jesus?

The Passover feast commemorated the deliverance of the people of Israel from their slavery in Egypt. It was at Passover time that Jesus came to Jerusalem knowing he would be betrayed and put to death. As Jesus ate the Passover meal with his twelve apostles he said to them "one of you will betray me". We also must examine ourselves in the light of God's word and ask him to strengthen us in faith, hope, and love that we may not fail him or forsake him when we are tempted. Do you pray with confidence in the words Jesus gave us to pray: Do not lead us into temptation, but deliver us from evil?

Aren't we tempted to use God for our own purposes? It is not God who must change, but it is us who must be changed by him. Jesus knew beforehand what would befall him. We can either be an instrument of good or of evil, and a servant of God or of Satan. The choice is ours. Who has free entrance into the door of your life?

Prayer

Dear God, strengthen us in faith, hope and love that we may not fail you when tempted. Amen.

PALM SUNDAY

Sunday, 1 April 2012

Mark chapter 14:22-42

SELFLESSNESS

Reading through the text I noticed something, which was, for me, quite new.

So often we hear of Jesus' selflessness and is this yet another example?

During the Last Supper, Jesus tells the disciples that they will all leave Him; but later, on the way to the garden Peter argues the point; he's so cock sure of himself. "I'll never leave you; even if they kill me or chuck me into prison. It ain't gonna happen. I'm definitely gonna be there for you."

This tirade, after he's been unequivocally and precisely told by the Messiah [according to his own reckoning], that he will deny Jesus and leave Him to His fate.

But there is no way this is going to happen. Is there?

Before long, Jesus and the disciples are in the Garden of Gethsemane. Jesus is in utter mental anguish. He is literally sweating blood [Luke 22:44]. He's alone, terrified, distraught and saddened "to the point of death".

Peter, James and John are nearby, but tired, so very, very tired. Unable to stay awake, they fall asleep.

Jesus wakes Peter. "Simon, can't you stay awake with me?" Then He says, "Watch and pray, so that you won't fall into temptation."

What? What temptation?

Could it be, that even in this extremity, Jesus loved Peter so much and sincerely cared about how the denial He'd prophesied would affect Peter? That He knew the depth of self-detestation and loathing Peter would suffer. That He was deeply troubled by the bitter tears His friend would cry? That He didn't want His own prophetic words to be fulfilled?

I think so.

Prayer

Thank you Lord, for your selfless love for me. Help me to value, remember and believe it and live, as you want me to. Amen.

For most of this unorthodox trial that was devoid of rights Jesus remained silent.

This court of the Sanhedrin could not impart a death sentence and yet that verdict had already been decided (v55) before the trumped-up, contradictory evidence was staged. There were no witnesses for the defence of Jesus and in his own defence Jesus was silent.

I have vaguely, previously associated his silence with his submission to his Father's will after wrestling in prayer in the Garden.

From a human point of view feelings of complete futility would also be understandable. What would have been the point of even trying to argue? He had already answered his accusers through his teachings and his life, words and works and the fulfilment of Scripture (v49, 50).

But Jesus would not lie. When asked again by the High Priest, "Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed One?" Jesus answered, "I am. And you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven." (v62)

This use of God's name and image of power affirms that 'Jesus is the Sufferer, and yet He is in charge.'* Jesus chose when to speak and when to be silent. He deliberately suffered injustice, contempt, mockery, cruelty and death.

Prayer

Jesus, thank you for your determination to accomplish our salvation. Amen.

**Concordia Self-Study Commentary, W Roehrs and M Franzmann, Concordia, 1971 St Louis, 'Mark' p 53*

TUESDAY OF HOLY WEEK

Tuesday, 3 April 2012

Mark chapter 14:66-72

PETER DISOWNS JESUS

Simon Peter struggled with obedience. Earlier in the garden of Gethsemane in Mark 14 we read that when Jesus returned to his disciples and found them sleeping, he said “Simon, couldn’t you keep watch for one hour? Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak.”

Jesus knows our thoughts and weaknesses.

Would we be any different despite the best of intentions to follow Jesus? Other passages that give light to this event are in Luke 22 where Jesus says: “Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to sift all of you as wheat. But I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers.” But he replied, “Lord, I am ready to go with you to prison and to death.” Jesus answered, “I tell you, Peter, before the rooster crows today, you will deny three times that you know me.”

Yes, we like Peter do fall short of being a powerful witness for Jesus. We need to daily put on the full armor of God to combat the flesh, the world and the devil to have the power to resist and overcome temptation as we read in Ephesians 6:10-20. I find Bible Study Fellowship has been an excellent means of keeping me in God’s Word as there is power in the Word of God.

Prayer

Lord strengthen me through your Word and your Spirit and enable me to stand against the temptations of the flesh, the world and the devil. Amen.

WEDNESDAY OF HOLY WEEK

Wednesday, 4 April 2012

Mark chapter 15:1-20

ACTING OUT OF IGNORANCE?

All of us have had our experiences of being mocked. It is the degree to which we have been mocked, and its severity, that would be different for each one of us. There is at one end of the scale, what most of us would deem as minor incidents, for example, light hearted teasing between family members and close friends. But then at the other end, there is the more severe: bullying, harassment and abuse.

There are children and adults in our society, who for no other reason, except that they have differences from the “norm”, make them a target for mocking throughout their whole lives. The mocking they receive varies, just as it can for us. It can happen on a daily basis or less frequently, but it is a big part of their story! Maybe you have even witnessed a person with a disability being mocked. Or maybe you have even been the mocker?

We try and teach children and others, the dangers of such behaviours and the strategies they may be able to use to counteract them. In my experiences, we never teach the recipients, or the witnesses of mocking to do absolutely nothing! But you and I know it still occurs, in all its various forms, including now a cyber version, with just as dire consequences.

Our Saviour’s treatment at the hands of Pilate, the priests, the crowds, the soldiers is sometimes excused as ignorance. The same excuse today is often used, “We didn’t know she had autism. We didn’t know he was deaf.” etc.

Prayer

“Lord let us never accept ill treatment of others, there is never an excuse. Help us to see everyone through your loving eyes. Amen.”

MAUNDY THURSDAY

Thursday, 5 April 2012

Mark chapter 15:21-32

SERVANT KING

People who were crucified had their crime written on the cross above them. Because Jesus couldn't be found guilty of any crime, the only accusation that could be made against him was the 'crime' of being the King of the Jews, the Messiah.

The Jews thought that the Messiah would liberate them from the oppression of the Romans. Jesus came to liberate us from something far more fearful, the oppression of sin and Satan.

While Jesus was on the cross he was mocked and insulted.

“Come down from the cross and save yourself so that we may believe.”

Why didn't he save himself? Why did he choose to suffer and die this cruel death?

We, who are created in God's image, have disobeyed and sinned against God. We deserve to be on the cross and be separated from God. But because of God's great love for us, Jesus took our place and because of this and his resurrection we can now be with him and are now free to love and serve him as he intended us to do.

Prayer

Lord Jesus, we praise and thank you for being our Servant King. You served us by dying on the cross for our sins. Thank you Lord for the freedom to love and serve others. Amen.

GOOD FRIDAY

Friday, 6 April 2012

Mark chapter 15:33-47

FAITH IN DARKNESS

Mark 15:33-47 describes the death of Jesus and his burial in the tomb. When I read this passage, I know that I am reading of Jesus' suffering and death as he takes on the burden of our sins. His suffering is impossible to imagine, but I also wonder what it would have been like to have been one of Jesus' followers at this time.

The passage mentions Mary Magdalene and other women who saw the crucifixion from a distance. Jesus had foretold his resurrection, but it would have been easy for His followers to give in to despair. These people did not have the benefit of being able to read ahead to Mark 16 to see what happens next – they had only their faith.

Would they have doubted their faith? I don't know – they were human. Even so, this faith would have been with them as they witnessed the three hours of darkness in the middle of the day and the terrible scenes of Jesus' suffering and death, seen the temple curtain torn from top to bottom. It would have been with Joseph of Arimathea as he took Jesus' body, wrapped it in linen and placed it in the tomb. Their faith would have sustained and comforted them.

Prayer

Lord, strengthen our faith, not just in our darkest hours but in the lighter ones as well, and let it sustain and lead us in our lives. Amen.

EASTER SATURDAY

Saturday, 7 April 2012

Mark chapter 16:1-13

DEATH TO RESURRECTION
- A DRAMATIC TURN OF EVENTS

During the past few months I read “Mistaken Identity: Two Families, One Survivor, Unwavering Hope”. The book tells the story of the mistake made in identifying two girls who had been involved in a car accident. One family was told their daughter had died at the accident scene, the other that their daughter was critically injured. Weeks later, as the survivor comes out of a coma, the mistake, is discovered. One family went from relief and joy (that their daughter survived the accident) to grief and loss (that their daughter had in fact died in the accident). The other family went from despair and anguish (having buried the girl they thought was their daughter) to hope and joy. It is not hard to imagine the confusion, turmoil, doubt and uncertainty these families experienced at the dramatic turn of events. It took them time to process and accept the news, but they were able to find peace with their experience.

The women and the disciples experienced a similar dramatic turn of events – their beloved Jesus had been dead and now they are told he is alive. It is not hard to understand their response (fear, confusion, fleeing from the tomb); they too, are likely to have experienced turmoil, doubt and uncertainty at this unexpected change. Given time, they came to rejoice in this dramatic turn of events and understand how God’s plan for a messiah is fulfilled in the dramatic change of Jesus’ resurrection from the dead.

Prayer

May we too rejoice in Jesus’ resurrection and accept the gift offered in this dramatic turn of events. Amen.

EASTER

Sunday, 8 April 2012

Mark chapter 16:14-20

ON A MISSION

These verses from Mark describe to us the final events of the Easter Story. They tell us of the last important task that Jesus needed to do before the final piece of the jigsaw is put into place. In these verses Jesus appears to his chosen eleven -his special helpers. He instructs them to continue his work on earth so that He can finally return to His Father in Heaven.

I love the humanness of the disciples. They were “too stubborn to believe those who have seen him alive”. They had heard from first hand witnesses and had been with Jesus the night before He died. They were still in disbelief that Jesus had risen and they doubted their faith. Then Jesus gives them the most difficult and challenging task of their lives; the task of telling others, of preaching the gospel, and of spreading the good news to all the corners of the world. What an amazing permanent full time job. It would last them the rest of their lives. As we read in the Acts of the Apostles we know the trials and drama that occur as the followers (including Paul) do their ‘job’ to the best of their ability.

These men became the first evangelists and are the foundation of the Christian Church, as we know it today. With the help of the Holy Spirit these men were able to spread the Good News and share the message of salvation to all those they met along the way. It is the story of the Christian movement as it began amongst the Jewish people and went on to become a faith for the whole world.

So what about us? Do we have that passion and perseverance for spreading the Good News? To whom is Jesus sending us? How will we accomplish our task? Will we trust in the Holy Spirit to use us as a witness to people in our everyday lives? Do our actions and words reflect that we believe in a risen Saviour who is our best friend and daily support?

And finally a reassurance that Jesus is in Heaven preparing a place for all of us.

Despite our reluctance to share our faith story, our laziness and missed opportunities, Jesus wants us to be with him. What a wonderful comfort that we can rest in the knowledge of life everlasting, and that we too are going home to be with Jesus in Heaven. This is the Good News for us; let’s share it with those around us.

Prayer

Amazing God, give me courage and strength and the right words to say when opportunities arise. Help me to share your love with all the people I come in contact with. Thank you that I belong to you and that you are preparing a place for me in heaven. Amen.



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Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and forever. Heb 13:8