

Reflection

Sometimes it is good to simply stop and enjoy the longevity and the immediateness of God's care for everything; the simpleness of wonder at the deepest truth. We are fleeting feathers in the flowing breeze of love which has been going on for eons before us and will go on for eons after us. Without digging into whether mountains really crumble, what does it mean for a tree to bow, if God really does wreak destruction, challenging these pre-scientific words of creation responding as human to God's words, without all of that interrogation which I am most definitely prone to doing, sometimes it is good to stop for a while for wonder. No matter what we believe to be true of God, we don't actually know what is true about God. We can, and some have, argued to the death about what they believe to be true about God. Sometimes I can be very short tempered about my version of God compared to another's version of God. The reality is that we're all not fully sure - and that's a good thing. God is mystery whether we like it or not.

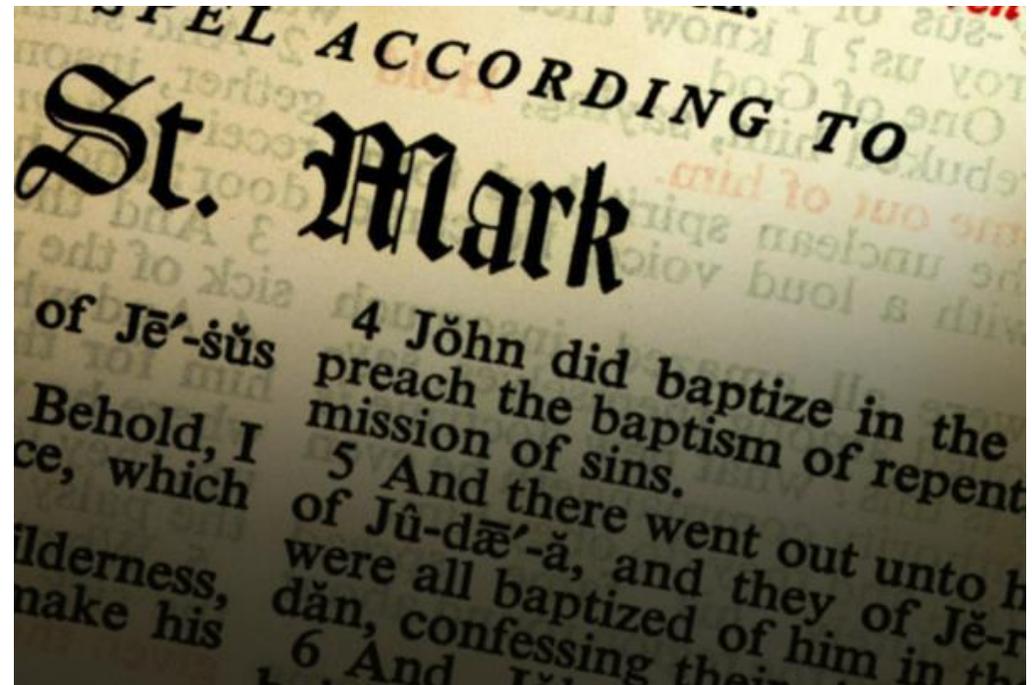
God is beyond and around and inside and it is wonderful to dip into these ancient words and realise that being awestruck by the who and how of God is a good thing. There is something very real in this poem of glory and God can stir us in our deepest selves as we rest in its words. I urge us all to sit and dwell in this poem and to let ourselves be moved by God's mystery and presence. With so much about which we have been wrestling, we need the space that dwelling with these lines will bring.

Prayer

God of all time and this time, let us give ourselves permission to stop and rest with you. Give us grace to pause our arguments and uncomfortable searching and sense your presence. When we are revived, give us courage to bring that new peace to the justice work you call us to do. Amen.

Daily Devotions
from the United Reformed Church

St Mark's Gospel 2
Chapters 3:31 – 6:44



Sunday 17th – Sunday 31st January

Introduction

Between now and Easter we will be reading through the fast paced St Mark's Gospel.

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Sunday 17th January Psalm 27

The Rev'd Dr Susan Durber, Minister, Taunton United Reformed Church

The Lord is my light

The Community of Taize 1991 Ateliers et Presses de Taize

The Lord is my light, my light and salvation:in Him I trust.

The Lord is my light,

my light and salvation:

in Him I trust, in Him I trust.

You can hear this sung here

God takes the little we have and can turn it into more than we ever imagined, as we offer it in thanksgiving and in hope.

Prayer

Lord God help us to feed on your words. Give us faith to offer you the little we have, so that together with you, we can feed your sheep Through Your overflowing generosity and abundant love. Amen

Sunday January 31 Psalm 29

The Rev'd Elizabeth Gray-King, URC Education & Learning Programme Officer, member St Columba's URC Oxford

All on earth and all in heaven,
raise to God a song on high;
strength unmeasured,
love unbounded,
God alone we glorify.
At God's voice the clouds assemble,
thunder roars and torrents fall;
earth shall quake before God's presence,
mountains tremble at God's call.

Trees shall bow in awe and wonder,
bend their branches to the ground;
from God's lips one word in anger
wreaks destruction all around.
But the Word which sets in motion
such travails can make them cease;
that same voice which tumult beckons
in a gentler breath speakers peace.

You can hear the tune, Ebenezer, here

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wdkv_QptY3E

and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to his disciples to set before the people; and he divided the two fish among them all. And all ate and were filled; and they took up twelve baskets full of broken pieces and of the fish. Those who had eaten the loaves numbered five thousand men.

Reflection

Jesus and his disciples set off for some time to themselves in the wilderness. It's not to be - crowds have seen where they are going and reach the place before them. The teaching and the feast which Jesus gives this huge crowd spring from his compassion, the compassion at the heart of God who becomes the shepherd to this flock, leading them to green pastures (Mark's detail). The crowd are hungry for Jesus' words – they listen for hours. It is the disciples who realise that the people will be hungry, perhaps because they themselves have not eaten.

Feeding so many, they feel, is beyond their means. We too often face problems which we think are too big for us. This story, though, can fill us with hope.

The hungry disciples give all their food to Jesus. His actions both recall past provision by God and look forward to the kingdom meal at the heart of our faith. Jesus gets the disciples to seat the crowd, as for a feast, in groups. He takes the food and gives thanks to God for it - as at the Passover meal. Then he breaks it; and returns it to the disciples to distribute.

Everyone is filled to overflowing, the sign of the generosity of the kingdom of God. From such small means, given willingly though doubtfully, God has more than satisfied the numerous sheep of His pasture.

Let us remember this miracle when we are tired, discouraged and feel insufficient for the needs we see around us all the time. Remember that

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r64gcGMNhDE>

Reflection

It is a rare experience now, for many of us, to find ourselves in darkness - at least the kind of complete darkness from which you cannot see your hand in front of your face. With street lamps, illuminated clocks and mobile phones usually so close we are rarely without light of some kind. This makes the occasional experience of darkness all the more striking. If we do find ourselves suddenly in the dark (perhaps on a walk when we have miscalculated the time of our return, or in the midst of a power cut), we are returned to an experience we have forgotten. We grope for a source of light, or we hold on to another person, or we feel our way tentatively along the fence.

For the people who first crafted, spoke or sang this Psalm, the experience of deep darkness was much more common and familiar. In such a setting they knew, as we sometimes discover, that light is so precious and so necessary; that it can be the difference between stepping on the path or off the cliff, or that it can transform terror into reassurance.

Sometimes life feels like a walk in the dark. There are perils and dangers, and not only in the night. We are fearful and anxious, sometimes even in broad daylight. At such times, these wonderful and powerful words speak to us. 'The Lord is my light, my light and salvation; in Him I trust.' When we are in any kind of dark we have to trust those who can see ahead. When the path is uncertain we search for a light for our steps. When the darkness deepens, we reach out for a hand to hold. And God is there.

Prayer

God, let it be your light that shines on my path,
illumines my spirit, and sends the darkness packing.
I reach for your hand that we may walk together into the day.

Monday 18th January St Mark 3: 31 - 35

The Rev'd Ruth Watson, Bolton and Salford Missional Partnership
Minister

Then his mother and his brothers came; and standing outside, they sent to him and called him. A crowd was sitting around him; and they said to him, 'Your mother and your brothers and sisters are outside, asking for you.' And he replied, 'Who are my mother and my brothers?' And looking at those who sat around him, he said, 'Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.'

Reflection

I have always told my children that part of my job description as a parent is to embarrass them. And no doubt I have fulfilled that role on more than one occasion. It is a role carried out by parents everywhere for generations. Indeed, my mum came down to school to look for me as I was a little late coming home – being in the 6th form at the time, I did not really appreciate her concern!

Mary clearly had concerns about Jesus and the crowds he was attracting and the attention he was getting so wanted him to come home and be a "normal" obedient son. But Jesus had other plans, as his Father's work took precedent on anything a "normal" son would be expected to do. While family is important, the role of family is changing all the time. No longer are we two parents, and 2.4 children (I was the 0.4!) but our families are a combination of partners and siblings and half siblings and step-families and often we spend more time with our work families than we do with our blood relatives.

We are joined to our families by blood; genetics; marriage; we have something in common in that we often came from the same source.

this remind us that while we might not demand our enemy's head on a platter, that we all need Christ's example to show us how to be better.

Prayer

Holy One, you see the best of us, you see the worst of us.

Teach us how to be better, show us how to let go of grudges and those obsessions that diminish us.

We remember John, and all those whose lives have been snuffed out on a whim. Strengthen us to be better. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Saturday 30th January St Mark 6: 30 - 44

The Rev'd Helen Everard, chaplain to the Moderators of General
assembly, Womersley URC

The apostles gathered around Jesus, and told him all that they had done and taught. He said to them, 'Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while.' For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat. And they went away in the boat to a deserted place by themselves. Now many saw them going and recognized them, and they hurried there on foot from all the towns and arrived ahead of them. As he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things. When it grew late, his disciples came to him and said, 'This is a deserted place, and the hour is now very late; send them away so that they may go into the surrounding country and villages and buy something for themselves to eat.' But he answered them, 'You give them something to eat.' They said to him, 'Are we to go and buy two hundred denarii worth of bread, and give it to them to eat?' And he said to them, 'How many loaves have you? Go and see.' When they had found out, they said, 'Five, and two fish.' Then he ordered them to get all the people to sit down in groups on the green grass. So they sat down in groups of hundreds and of fifties. Taking the five loaves

beheaded him in the prison, brought his head on a platter, and gave it to the girl. Then the girl gave it to her mother. When his disciples heard about it, they came and took his body, and laid it in a tomb.

Reflection

Sometimes bad things happen at parties.

Today's story includes a heady mix of autocracy, fear, careless promises, bravado, grudges, revenge, and lap dancing. One wonders why this story is in the Gospels when Jesus is neither present nor speaks. On one hand it concludes the story of John the Baptist. We learn that he came to a terrible end on the whim of an angry woman who manipulated a young girl. This is the stuff of atrocity not that of the Scriptures, surely?

And yet. On the other hand, we continue to live in a world where atrocities occur. Terror groups continue to murder using savage and less savage methods. There are still autocrats who make rash promises to help insulate themselves and heads still end up on platters. There are people, women and men, who abuse and manipulate. It is a good question to pause and consider carefully who the villain even is in this story? Is it Herod, or the wife of Herod/Philip, or the girl, or the soldiers who carried out the order, or who?

This is a story where the central characters are not present. Jesus is not here. The story is about John but he isn't present either. Perhaps that in itself holds up a mirror to the corners of the world where righteousness and truth are silenced. Herod is a man who feared the light, who feared righteousness and truth, who realised maybe that if he stepped into even the reflected light of Christ in John, that he would be found wanting. The best Herod could do was to protect John until he made some rash promises and found he could protect him no longer.

In this story we catch a glimpse of the worst of humanity. We know that stories like this one have recurred throughout human history. Stories like

How much more so are we joined by our faith family in that we all share the love of God and our willingness to serve in whatever way we can. Our family immediately grows and can be found all around the world. So, whether we are only children or one of many, we all have a vast family of love through our faith in God. They are and will always be our extended family and we will always find a welcome among them.

Prayer

Lord help me to love my family in whatever form it takes. No longer is there a "normal" family, just the bonds of love joining members together. May we see all those who share our faith as part of our family that we may grow in that love together. Amen

[Tuesday 19th January St Mark 4: 1- 20](#)

The Rev'd Sue Chapman, Hove and Portslade Pastorate, East Sussex

Again he began to teach beside the lake. Such a very large crowd gathered around him that he got into a boat on the lake and sat there, while the whole crowd was beside the lake on the land. He began to teach them many things in parables, and in his teaching he said to them: 'Listen! A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seed fell on the path, and the birds came and ate it up. Other seed fell on rocky ground, where it did not have much soil, and it sprang up quickly, since it had no depth of soil. And when the sun rose, it was scorched; and since it had no root, it withered away. Other seed fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked it, and it yielded no grain. Other seed fell into good soil and brought forth grain, growing up and increasing and yielding thirty and sixty and a hundredfold.' And he said, 'Let anyone with ears to hear listen!'

When he was alone, those who were around him along with the twelve asked him about the parables. And he said to them, 'To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside, everything comes in parables; in order that

“they may indeed look, but not perceive,
and may indeed listen, but not understand;
so that they may not turn again and be forgiven.”

And he said to them, ‘Do you not understand this parable? Then how will you understand all the parables? The sower sows the word. These are the ones on the path where the word is sown: when they hear, Satan immediately comes and takes away the word that is sown in them. And these are the ones sown on rocky ground: when they hear the word, they immediately receive it with joy. But they have no root, and endure only for a while; then, when trouble or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately they fall away. And others are those sown among the thorns: these are the ones who hear the word, but the cares of the world, and the lure of wealth, and the desire for other things come in and choke the word, and it yields nothing. And these are the ones sown on the good soil: they hear the word and accept it and bear fruit, thirty and sixty and a hundredfold.’

Reflection

We know what this parable means, because Jesus explains the meaning. The key, for me, is understanding what God expects from us; to keep alert and ever watchful for all God is doing among us. Jesus is the word and example, to reveal God’s love lavished on humanity. We engage in God’s transformation to reveal the marvellous works of salvation for everyone. No type of ground is a barrier to the work of God’s love. Jesus encourages us; our faith is honed through obedience to God. The seed that God sows has 100% potential, it is only in our limited faith, that the potential diminishes, as we struggle to grasp the importance of God’s mission. Listen to the disappointing tone that Jesus speaks, in verse twelve, almost in exasperation! “When will you listen and understand how God works? I have told you how to grow and bear fruit, by taking God at God’s word. Believe it! Play your part!” God’s love must create the energy of faith, released to reach full potential. Our life in God needs

so that we can focus on your voice, guiding us onward,
so that we run the race with perseverance
and recognise when one phase of our calling ends
and the next begins.
In Christ’s name, Amen.

[Friday 29th January St Mark 6: 14 - 29](#)

The Rev’d Sarah Moore, Transition Champion for the National Synod of Scotland, member of Carver Uniting Church, Windermere

King Herod heard of it, for Jesus’ name had become known. Some were saying, ‘John the baptizer has been raised from the dead; and for this reason these powers are at work in him.’ But others said, ‘It is Elijah.’ And others said, ‘It is a prophet, like one of the prophets of old.’ But when Herod heard of it, he said, ‘John, whom I beheaded, has been raised.’ For Herod himself had sent men who arrested John, bound him, and put him in prison on account of Herodias, his brother Philip’s wife, because Herod had married her. For John had been telling Herod, ‘It is not lawful for you to have your brother’s wife.’ And Herodias had a grudge against him, and wanted to kill him. But she could not, for Herod feared John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man, and he protected him. When he heard him, he was greatly perplexed; and yet he liked to listen to him. But an opportunity came when Herod on his birthday gave a banquet for his courtiers and officers and for the leaders of Galilee. When his daughter Herodias came in and danced, she pleased Herod and his guests; and the king said to the girl, ‘Ask me for whatever you wish, and I will give it.’ And he solemnly swore to her, ‘Whatever you ask me, I will give you, even half of my kingdom.’ She went out and said to her mother, ‘What should I ask for?’ She replied, ‘The head of John the baptizer.’ Immediately she rushed back to the king and requested, ‘I want you to give me at once the head of John the Baptist on a platter.’ The king was deeply grieved; yet out of regard for his oaths and for the guests, he did not want to refuse her. Immediately the king sent a soldier of the guard with orders to bring John’s head. He went and

Reflection

Jesus encourages the twelve not to burden themselves with any excess baggage as they journey around, but rather to take the bare minimum and rely on the kindness of strangers. In her book “Journey to Contentment”, Sally Welch encourages us to rid ourselves of any physical, emotional or spiritual encumbrances that weigh us down and to sit more lightly, both to material possessions and metaphorical baggage. In this manner, we can focus on a discipline of prayer and reflection that will encourage us along the way towards contentedness. This same lack of material burdens would have freed the twelve to concentrate on their part in Jesus’ mission.

The disciples are also encouraged to recognise places where they are not called to minister. During ministerial deployment, we rightly place an emphasis on an individual’s call to serve in a specific context, but how much do we pay attention when that call might have come to an end? Do we place equal emphases on discerning how a call develops over time, how circumstances change and how our gifts and graces may no longer be needed in a particular situation? These considerations are equally applicable to any of us, as members of a congregation or in any vocational context. What we feel called to offer in Christian service changes over time, as challenges evolve. Even as we recognise an opportunity to fulfil a rôle, it is equally important to notice subsequently when it would be better for us to stand aside in favour of another with different gifts. This is akin to “shaking the dust off” in the sense of a judgement, not of condemnation, but that our specific calling in that place is now completed and we are being called to move on and embrace a new aspect of God’s mission.

Prayer (based on Mark 6: 6-13 & Hebrews 12:1)

O God who call us all,
help us to hear your concern that we travel lightly;
let us lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely,

us to create rich environments in obedience to God’s request to be love, so that our potential is at the maximum.

Jesus reminds us to pay attention, even to small seeds, caring about what happens to them, nurturing them, because they hold the potential of God for the world. Listen, be aware of God, and the desire of people for life to have more meaning, in God’s love. That is what Jesus wants us to understand and to work with. Nothing or no-one is too small for God’s love to permeate. God chooses you, because you have love to share. Have renewed faith that you, too, are important to God’s kingdom! Our faith needs nurturing; this releases the kingdom of God’s abundant love.

Prayer

Loving God, fill us with the love seeds of your kingdom.
Encourage us to spread them liberally
and give us the faith we need to nurture them,
so that people find Jesus
Help them to find hope and forgiveness in you.
And be blessed through your words and love. Amen

[Wednesday 20th January St Mark 4: 21 - 25](#)
Val Morrison, The URC in Doncaster

He said to them, ‘Is a lamp brought in to be put under the bushel basket, or under the bed, and not on the lampstand? For there is nothing hidden, except to be disclosed; nor is anything secret, except to come to light. Let anyone with ears to hear listen!’ And he said to them, ‘Pay attention to what you hear; the measure you give will be the measure you get, and still more will be given you. For to those who have, more will be given; and from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away.’

Reflection

“For to those who have, more will be given; and from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away.” Reading these words from Mark’s gospel towards the end of 2020, we are reading against a background of a government refusing to release money to feed school children, the Black Lives Matter campaign, and the desperation of asylum seekers and refugees. In the light of this background these are shocking words and we might be forgiven for questioning whether Jesus really meant them, for they seem to deny the picture of justice and mercy which has been our understanding of what Jesus demonstrated as a way to live. So how did these words slip into Mark’s gospel?

The first thing to say is that they didn’t slip in at all. They follow Jesus telling a parable and explaining something of how parables work. In parable fashion these few verses begin with the image of a lamp - a reminder that this is about the teachings of Jesus and an encouragement to understand that within those teachings are hidden depths which are there to be plundered. Everything is available to be disclosed. But nothing is disclosed without careful listening and paying attention to what we hear for the more carefully we give attention to the word of God the more we shall hear.

As with any reading we do, the way we hear the words is informed by the way we have heard them previously, if we actively listen we are able to build on our previous awareness, examine our interpretation and turn our understanding into action. The fact that there are two possible ways to understand these words is demonstration enough of the need to heed Jesus’ command to Listen.

Prayer

God of words and actions,
we give thanks that you offer us
the possibility of understanding more from your word,
that you offer the possibility of openness and light in our relationship
with you.

his hands on a few sick people and cure them makes me laugh. It reminds me of someone who can’t walk past something that’s out of place without tidying it up! Perhaps Mark is suggesting to us that Jesus’ essential qualities can’t be suppressed even when he feels he is having no impact. Maybe that can encourage us when we feel we are talking into a void (though I would be surprised if any readers of the Daily Devotions were able to heal people with the laying on of hands!).

Prayer

Lord, we confess that sometimes we prefer the comfortable message to listen to people who will reassure us, not challenge us.

Help us to put aside our prejudices, and open our hearts and minds.
May we discover our own prophetic voices, and have the confidence to speak, even when we feel like the odd one out.

And may we always listen for your promptings, no matter who is carrying your message. Amen.

[Thursday 28th January St Mark 6: 6 - 13](#)

The Rev’d David Miller, Minister, The URCs of North Staffordshire

Then he went about among the villages teaching. He called the twelve and began to send them out two by two, and gave them authority over the unclean spirits. He ordered them to take nothing for their journey except a staff; no bread, no bag, no money in their belts; but to wear sandals and not to put on two tunics. He said to them, ‘Wherever you enter a house, stay there until you leave the place. If any place will not welcome you and they refuse to hear you, as you leave, shake off the dust that is on your feet as a testimony against them.’ So they went out and proclaimed that all should repent. They cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them.

Wednesday 27th January St Mark 6: 1-5

Gordon Woods, Elder, St Columba's URC, Oxford

He left that place and came to his home town, and his disciples followed him. On the sabbath he began to teach in the synagogue, and many who heard him were astounded. They said, 'Where did this man get all this? What is this wisdom that has been given to him? What deeds of power are being done by his hands! Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?' And they took offence at him. Then Jesus said to them, 'Prophets are not without honour, except in their home town, and among their own kin, and in their own house.' And he could do no deed of power there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them. And he was amazed at their unbelief.

Reflection

Was it the messenger or the message? Either way, Jesus' teaching didn't go down well with the home crowd! I wonder what it was about what he said that was so uncomfortable to hear, and led the congregation to start discounting it because they had known him as a child.

As a white man in his 40s I'm aware that I'm generally a lot less at risk of my contributions being ignored because of my identity than others are. I've been in meetings where a female colleague makes a key point and it passes unnoticed until a man repeats it. And I remember a wise woman noting churches' tendency to assume that BAME people would best contribute to worship through music, rather than preaching, for example.

What are our blind spots as individuals and churches, that tempt us to discount the prophetic authority of those different from us? How do we unlock the talents of everyone in our churches, rather than relying on familiar faces? Are we ready to be made uncomfortable?

Mark is famously brisk, but his passing remark that Jesus could only lay

We pray that

we may hear and act upon
your command given through the words of your Son to
'Listen and pay attention to what we hear'. Amen

Thursday 21st January St Mark 4: 26 - 30

The Rev'd Fiona Thomas, freelance facilitator, member of Christ Church, Bellingham.

He also said, 'The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground, and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how. The earth produces of itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head. But when the grain is ripe, at once he goes in with his sickle, because the harvest has come.'

Reflection

The people of the first country grew rice intensively, working hard to produce three and four crops from the same piece of land each year by organising irrigation systems. The second country was blessed with many rivers so was usually able to generate two crops of rice each year. In the third the people scattered the rice on the land and listened to it grow. This story of the three countries was told and retold by the colonial power of the time – the versions that the people tell may be different. In Mark's gospel the author marshals words carefully, stringing pearls of parables together without much explanation. This has challenged commentators across the centuries to interpret what was meant by the original sayings of Jesus, in the gospel writer's use of them for the early Christian audience, and for the commentator's own time.

We cannot force seeds to grow, although we can sometimes shape conditions to encourage them. So it is with the good news of God's kingdom which develops of its own accord. Is it us who scatter the seed through our words and actions and attend to it with varying levels of

intensity, without knowing how it develops in the lives and hearts of the people around us? Or is it the stories of Jesus' ministry which is the seed, going underground and growing in secret?

What we know is that our mission plans and programmes, systems and strategies sometimes produce fruit. At other times it is our simple acts of neighbourliness over many years which flower in ways we had not anticipated. We are called to sow seeds and be ready to join in with God's harvest, whenever it comes.

Prayer

God of infinite patience,
inspire us to carry on sowing seeds of hospitality and kindness,
reassure us when the ground seems hard and stony,
surprise us with harvests of goodness in unexpected places,
and remind us that we are apprentices to you,
the sower, grower and reaper. Amen

Friday 22nd January St Mark 4: 30 - 34

Marius Mazuru, pastor, Pilgrim URC Church, Plymouth

He also said, 'With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it? It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs, and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade.' With many such parables he spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it; he did not speak to them except in parables, but he explained everything in private to his disciples.

Reflection

Most people have only seen mustard in a jar. My grandmother was a

as rock, and sometimes twice as thick. He changed it to Peter. He also changed my life. Mark and Luke, wrote some of my stories down. One day stands out above the rest – totally frenetic: a madman cured and stampeding pigs on one side of the lake; a bleeding woman and a dying girl on the other. The girl was special; her father Jairus was a big noise in the Synagogue, and the mourners were hysterical. Jesus' calm the mourners out, I remember the words He used: "Talitha koum" – arise little girl" A couple of years later, after His ascension. I was in Joppa, mourning the passing of a lady apostle named Dorcas but in Aramaic it was "abitha. What should I do? I remembered the house of Jairus, and I knew . "Talitha koum", became "Tabitha koum". Dorcas opened her eyes, and sat up, just like the daughter of Jairus. I knew that the healing Christ was present.

I am a different Peter, and I too am an old man, full of the memories to which old men are prone.

I have spent a lifetime wrestling with the Gospel stories.. Some I understand, others still puzzle me. But they all leave me amazed and humbled by their power and promise. I gave up asking "Were those people really dead?" a long time ago. Instead, I remember those words "Talitha koum". "Get up and live". The real miracle is that they have power to move and motivate us even now, in our troubled world and divided society. "Get up" and use the life that God has given you to make His son's dream come true in your own age and circumstance. If it was true for Peter, James, John, Jairus and Dorcas, it has to be true for us.

Prayer

O Lord, who deemed yourself worthy to wash the feet of Your holy apostles with Your scared hands, cleanse my heart by pouring in the radiance of the Holy Spirit, so that I may be able to love You, our Lord Jesus Christ, in all things, and above all else.

George Herbert

And a large crowd followed him and pressed in on him. Now there was a woman who had been suffering from haemorrhages for twelve years. She had endured much under many physicians, and had spent all that she had; and she was no better, but rather grew worse. She had heard about Jesus, and came up behind him in the crowd and touched his cloak, for she said, 'If I but touch his clothes, I will be made well.' Immediately her haemorrhage stopped; and she felt in her body that she was healed of her disease. Immediately aware that power had gone forth from him, Jesus turned about in the crowd and said, 'Who touched my clothes?' And his disciples said to him, 'You see the crowd pressing in on you; how can you say, "Who touched me?"' He looked all round to see who had done it. But the woman, knowing what had happened to her, came in fear and trembling, fell down before him, and told him the whole truth. He said to her, 'Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease.'

While he was still speaking, some people came from the leader's house to say, 'Your daughter is dead. Why trouble the teacher any further?' But overhearing what they said, Jesus said to the leader of the synagogue, 'Do not fear, only believe.' He allowed no one to follow him except Peter, James, and John, the brother of James. When they came to the house of the leader of the synagogue, he saw a commotion, people weeping and wailing loudly. When he had entered, he said to them, 'Why do you make a commotion and weep? The child is not dead but sleeping.' And they laughed at him. Then he put them all outside, and took the child's father and mother and those who were with him, and went in where the child was. He took her by the hand and said to her, 'Talitha cum', which means, 'Little girl, get up!' And immediately the girl got up and began to walk about (she was twelve years of age). At this they were overcome with amazement. He strictly ordered them that no one should know this, and told them to give her something to eat.

Reflection

My name is Peter. It used to be Simon until Jesus told me I was as solid

farmer; she used to grow mustard in her herb patch. I still remember her explaining to me how to care for each different type of plant.

You don't expect a mustard seed to grow into a tree, or even a shrub – it is normally a small herb, a straight stalk one or two feet tall. A bunch of flowers, turning into seed pods, at the top. You plant a tiny seed and you get small results – it's not just farming, this is what life is like.

Jesus is telling us that the Kingdom of God is different – even tiny investments may produce overwhelmingly great returns.

A few kind words, an act of love, a few minutes of listening – and a life may take a completely different path as a result. It doesn't take big, heroic efforts to change our world. It is true, at times heroic acts are called for – but most of the change is made by an unseen and unheard army of people, doing everyday acts of kindness. One word, one act, one thought, one intention, one life touched at a time. You don't need to go looking for opportunities to make a difference, you are surrounded by opportunities every day; at home, at work, in your daily commute or while doing your grocery shopping.

You plant one tiny seed, and before you know it, it grows into a mighty tree. An army of hidden heroes, planting small seeds of love, can grow an entire forest.

Prayer

God of mustard seeds and mighty oaks,
give us faithfulness to keep planting seeds of grace,
give us a love that continually spills over on those we meet and touch,
help us take over the world, one act of kindness at a time. Amen.

Saturday 23rd January St Mark 4: 35 - 41

Reuben Watt, URC Youth Assembly Moderator

On that day, when evening had come, he said to them, 'Let us go across to the other side.' And leaving the crowd behind, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was. Other boats were with him. A great gale arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already being swamped. But he was in the stern, asleep on the cushion; and they woke him up and said to him, 'Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?' He woke up and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, 'Peace! Be still!' Then the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm. He said to them, 'Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?' And they were filled with great awe and said to one another, 'Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?'

Reflection

The disciples and Jesus are in the middle of a storm, wind howling, the rain pouring down and the waves crashing against the side of the boat. The disciples must have been petrified. However here we have Jesus, being woken up from a sleep by the disciples, at a time of need for them.

Many of us will be experiencing different storms in our lives whether they be around our work situations, exam stress or family conflicts. We have all experienced one of the biggest storms we will probably ever experience with Covid-19. It, at times, must be so hard to know where God is when the going gets tough. This reading is so comforting to me, and I am sure it is to you, to know that God is always going to be there for us.

We then hear how after this storm, there was then a dead calm. Even Jesus, the king of kings, the Lord of Lords needed to take time out of his hectic schedule to be alone and away from the crowds. At these times he could listen to his Father in heaven and pray to be able to refuel himself.

The demons name themselves as Legion, "because they are many".

There is no way Mark's audience could hear this in any other way than a reference to the Roman occupying forces.

There were "about two thousand" demons - the size of a regional Roman occupation force.

The pigs "charge" down the hill. The term describes a charge by soldiers in military formation.

Like the pursuing Egyptian army of Exodus, they are "drowned in the sea".

Jesus has come to liberate the world from everything that stops it becoming the Kingdom! From what powers do we need liberating?

Prayer

May your Kingdom come SOON, O Lord!

To the poor, the sick, the despised, the forgotten, the oppressed, the broken, the addicted, the hopeless, the Little People.

Give us souls to yearn for it, eyes to see it, ears to hear it, and hearts to rejoice in its coming and presence! Amen.

Tuesday 26th January St Mark 5: 21 - 43

The Rev'd Peter Moth, retired minister, St Andrew's URC, Kenton Newcastle upon Tyne

When Jesus had crossed again in the boat to the other side, a great crowd gathered round him; and he was by the lake. Then one of the leaders of the synagogue named Jairus came and, when he saw him, fell at his feet and begged him repeatedly, 'My little daughter is at the point of death. Come and lay your hands on her, so that she may be made well, and live.' So he went with him.

people came to see what it was that had happened. They came to Jesus and saw the demoniac sitting there, clothed and in his right mind, the very man who had had the legion; and they were afraid. Those who had seen what had happened to the demoniac and to the swine reported it. Then they began to beg Jesus to leave their neighbourhood. As he was getting into the boat, the man who had been possessed by demons begged him that he might be with him. But Jesus refused, and said to him, 'Go home to your friends, and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and what mercy he has shown you.' And he went away and began to proclaim in the Decapolis how much Jesus had done for him; and everyone was amazed.

Reflection

Mark's story of Jesus is that he has come in God's name to call time on Rome (Empire's rule) and announce its replacement the Kingdom of God - the rule of God over creation. Satan (Beelzebul) and the demons play a key role in this. In Jesus' worldview, Satan is the Strong Man (see 3:19-30) - the "power behind the throne" of Empire. The demons, like the Roman legions, are occupying forces that are too powerful to be resisted. His mission is to liberate Empire's victims from all the ways in which they are enslaved by a system that binds, uses and ultimately destroys them.

Mark recounts the story of the Gerasene demoniac in this light. Look at the following points:

Jesus has just exorcised the storm. The word he uses is "Be muzzled!" - the same exorcist term for silencing the demons.

"The wind and waves obey him" recalls the story of the crossing of the Red Sea, where Moses commands them.

The Gerasene is a Gentile, whose life among the tombs is a living death. The chains and leg-irons which bind him are those used by the Romans to bind captured revolutionaries (terrorists, in their book) and parade them through the streets before publicly crucifying them.

Just like Jesus, over the course of the next 24 hours take time out of your busy day to find somewhere quiet to spend time with God and hear what he wants to tell you.

Prayer

Lord, throughout today give us the time and the space to be able to take time out, give us the knowledge and the wisdom to know what to say to you during these times, although we may be in a storm, comfort us and guide us. Amen

Sunday 24th January Psalm 28

Jo Patel, local leader, Wattisfield URC, Norfolk.

O Lord my Rock, to you I cry aloud to hear my plea;
I shall be lost, if you stay silent now and deaf to me.
I lift my hands to your most holy place;
do not withhold your mercy, love and grace!

2 Do not, I pray, drag me off with the vile, with souls perverse;
smooth is their speech, but hidden in their hearts a silent curse.
For all the Lord has done, they show disdain,
but once torn down, they shall not rise again.

3 Praise to the Lord, who is my strength and shield; he hears my cry!
God is my help; my heart will give him thanks and leap for joy.
Strength of his people, fortress for his king;
our Shepherd, save us! All your praise we sing.

Christopher Idle from Psalm 28

© Christopher Idle/Jubilate Hymns Ltd

This is sung to the tune Lead Kindly Light which you can hear here
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8fNjEgbsNml>

Reflection

This Psalm was probably written when David was in exile because of the rebellion of his son Absalom. But David isn't pleading with God to restore his physical throne, instead he is crying out to God in a personal way, pleading for help from his Heavenly Father. I am writing this at the start of the second national lockdown and I expect many of us over 2020 have pleaded with God for His help. David is asking God to hear his cry and respond, and that is a significant part of our relationship with God. We need to know that we are heard and that God is a god who answers. Right at the start of this Psalm David states how he will be completely lost if God remains silent. In a different translation David says 'I might as well give up and die'. This is a very serious cry for help.

Then later in the Psalm something shifts in David's thinking and his cries turn to praise. David suddenly sees that God has already answered. God IS his strength and his shield, his ever present help in times of trouble and fear. David enters a time of expressive worship, creating a song of jubilant joy and passionate praise. David's heart is nudged and the penny drops. The revelation of his real and unchanging relationship with God, suddenly comes into view and transforms his outlook. He sees clearly how God has always been interacting with him and His hand has been at work already.

So, how is our faith at this time and what has the crisis in our world done to our focus and our view of God?

We should be encouraged as we read this Psalm. We should let the emotions of David and the expression of his despair speak to us, invigorate our faith and encourage our trust in God's unchanging nature and love for us. Let these words re-energise our relationship with a Father who never leaves us and who is fully engaged in every area and detail of our life. There is power in ecstatic joy and unhindered praise and that is a far better place to dwell than a place of despair and despondency. We must remain faithful and focused because despite

everything He is God and our lives are safe in His hands.

Prayer

Lord, our strength and our shield, our defender and our comforter. Go with us today, walk alongside us as we enter another day serving you. Let your name be on our lips, your Spirit be in our hearts and your works be done through our hands. We praise you, bless you and worship you with our lives, lived through your Son, our Saviour, Jesus. Amen

[Monday 25th January St Mark 5: 1 - 20](#)

Lawrence Moore, Mission & Discipleship consultant, Worsley Road URC

They came to the other side of the lake, to the country of the Gerasenes. And when he had stepped out of the boat, immediately a man out of the tombs with an unclean spirit met him. He lived among the tombs; and no one could restrain him any more, even with a chain; for he had often been restrained with shackles and chains, but the chains he wrenched apart, and the shackles he broke in pieces; and no one had the strength to subdue him. Night and day among the tombs and on the mountains he was always howling and bruising himself with stones. When he saw Jesus from a distance, he ran and bowed down before him; and he shouted at the top of his voice, 'What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I adjure you by God, do not torment me.' For he had said to him, 'Come out of the man, you unclean spirit!' Then Jesus asked him, 'What is your name?' He replied, 'My name is Legion; for we are many.' He begged him earnestly not to send them out of the country. Now there on the hillside a great herd of swine was feeding; and the unclean spirits begged him, 'Send us into the swine; let us enter them.' So he gave them permission. And the unclean spirits came out and entered the swine; and the herd, numbering about two thousand, rushed down the steep bank into the lake, and were drowned in the lake.

The swineherds ran off and told it in the city and in the country. Then