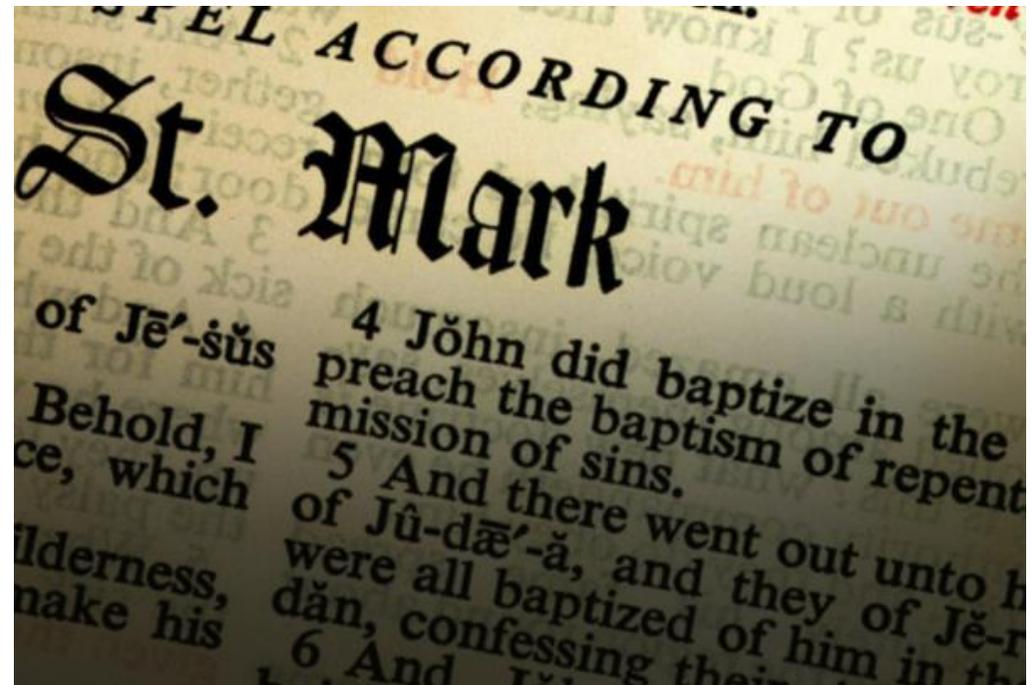


Daily Devotions
from the United Reformed Church

St Mark's Gospel 3
Chapters 6:45 – 11:14



Monday 1st – Sunday 28th February 2021

Introduction

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

Table of Contents

Introduction.....	1
Monday 1st February St Mark 6: 45 - 56	3
Tuesday 2nd February St Mark 7: 1 - 23	5
Wednesday 3rd February St Mark 7: 24 - 30	7
Thursday 4th February St Mark 7: 31 - 37	9
Friday 5th February St Mark 8: 1 - 13	11
Saturday 6th February St Mark 8: 14 - 21.....	13
Sunday 7th February 7 Psalm 30.....	15
Monday 8th February St Mark 8: 22 - 26.....	17
Tuesday 9th February St Mark 8: 27 - 30.....	18
Wednesday 10th February St Mark 8: 31 - 9:1.....	20
Thursday 11th February St Mark 9: 2 - 8	22
Friday 12th February St Mark 9: 9 - 13	24
Saturday 13th February 2021 St Mark 9: 14 - 29	25
Sunday 14th February Psalm 31.....	28
Monday 15th February St Mark 9: 30 - 32.....	31
Tuesday 16th February St Mark 9: 33 - 37	32
Wednesday 17th February Ash Wednesday St Mark 9: 38 - 41.....	34
Thursday 18th February St Mark 9: 42 - 49	35
Friday 19th February St Mark 10: 1 - 12	37
Saturday 20th February St Mark 10: 13 - 16.....	39
Sunday 21st February Psalm 32	41
Monday 22nd February St Mark 10: 17 - 31.....	43
Tuesday 23rd February St Mark 10: 32 - 34.....	45
Wednesday 24th February St Mark 10: 35 - 45.....	47
Thursday 25th February St Mark 10: 46 - 52.....	49
Friday 26th February St Mark 11: 1 - 10	50
Saturday 27th February St Mark 11: 12 - 14.....	52
Sunday 28th February Psalm 33.....	54

are, but I grasp a sense of peace, if not happiness, in being faithful. Stanzas one and two accepted with mystery behind them, I dwell with the third. I believe that these words of profound trust and faith remain alive and speak to us now because they are true in an eternal, purposeful way. We can all name, with a little digging, when we were peaceful and expected otherwise. We can look back to see when we survived and didn't assume we would, we can bear to see that hope shocked us alive when we least anticipated it. That we are alive, reading and praying is in some measure an account of God's watchful eye in our despair, God's encircling grace and tender care. That we pray at all is a sign of hope that our fear may become peace.

In these challenging days when all which seems steady and eternal is rocked to the core, we can take heart from our act of praying, linking ourselves with each other and our eternal God. We will be carried into peace by the very God-ful hope we have.

Prayer

Dear God, I praise you that I am even praying.

You have pulled me through,

made me see, made me cry as we all feel so much for each other.

Let me believe with childlike simplicity that you simply Are. Here with us.

Renew my hope and my commitment to carry that Spirit hope - a torch

into the world in which you place us. Amen.

Sunday 28th February Psalm 33

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

Rejoice, you righteous, in the Lord, in song your voices raise; awake the psaltery and harp, lift up God's name in praise! For by God's word the heavens were hung; God laid the sea and land, and all that fills the firmament were made at God's command.	2: Let every nation, every land unite with one accord, and humbly lay their heart-felt prayers in awe before the Lord. How happy are God's faithful ones, how blest God's chosen heirs, for surely an inheritance of glory shall be theirs!
---	---

3: Behold, God's ever-watchful eye sees through our dark despair;
the arms of grace encircle us with strong, yet tender care;
the hope of all the ages past, that sets at peace our fears,
God's mercy and God's steadfast love shall follow all our years.

Michael Morgan © 19099 Faith Alive Chr. Res.

You can hear this sung to Immortal Invisible here
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mxp2GAtDj20>
It also works well to Ellacombe

Reflection

Sometimes, dear pray-er, I take Scripture words as I read them. As if they were written in the place they are read, in the time in which they are being read, I read as if they are speaking directly into this time. I know they come from other times for other people and the authors probably didn't guess them to last this long. But they are with us still. I read and rejoice in God's name and creation, no matter how much we understand or how it happened. I read on, certainly wishing that every nation could unite in one accord in prayer. I'm not sure how chosen we

Monday 1st February St Mark 6: 45 - 56

The Rev'd Sue Henderson - retired URC minister, member of United Church Bradford on Avon

St Mark 6: 45 - 56

Immediately he made his disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, to Bethsaida, while he dismissed the crowd. After saying farewell to them, he went up on the mountain to pray. When evening came, the boat was out on the lake, and he was alone on the land. When he saw that they were straining at the oars against an adverse wind, he came towards them early in the morning, walking on the lake. He intended to pass them by. But when they saw him walking on the lake, they thought it was a ghost and cried out; for they all saw him and were terrified. But immediately he spoke to them and said, 'Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.' Then he got into the boat with them and the wind ceased. And they were utterly astounded, for they did not understand about the loaves, but their hearts were hardened. When they had crossed over, they came to land at Gennesaret and moored the boat. When they got out of the boat, people at once recognized him, and rushed about that whole region and began to bring the sick on mats to wherever they heard he was. And wherever he went, into villages or cities or farms, they laid the sick in the market-places, and begged him that they might touch even the fringe of his cloak; and all who touched it were healed.

Reflection

What a day! Jesus needed time and space for himself with God, even before he met up with the disciples again. Having dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain to pray. As darkness came, he looked out over the water and saw that the disciples were making heavy weather rowing – experienced fishermen though they were.

They were so tired and the storm was against them. Jesus could see they

were in difficulties and went to them, walking on the water! Far from being comforted, the disciples were petrified, thinking it was a ghost – for no one walks on water, it’s an impossibility – isn’t it?

However we choose to interpret that part of the story, Jesus came to the disciples; he calmed them down by his word of encouragement and by getting into the boat with them so they could see it was really him. Jesus didn’t leave the disciples to struggle on their own, he came to them, he got right alongside them. That gives us the assurance that we are never alone, he is with us when we are struggling, seemingly on our own. Jesus comes with those same words of comfort, “take heart, it is I, do not be afraid.” Like the disciples, we may not understand it, but our heart tells us it is true.

When they arrived at the other shore, the crowds met him, bringing all who needed his help. There was nowhere for him to escape. They found him wherever he went. The amazing thing is that he must have been completely shattered – far busier than any normal person’s day – and yet he never turned anyone away. Jesus met them at their point of need, bringing his healing and love and that is true for us today.

Prayer

Lord Jesus, help us to see you when we are afraid.
Help us to hear your voice calling to us when our faith is weak.
Help us to feel you sitting alongside us when we feel alone.
We cannot begin to understand your greatness and your power.
Your purposes are beyond our imagination,
but we know that you are with us.
Jesus, come now and give us your peace.
Amen

Reflection

Jesus was hungry. I’m not sure that’s a state we often associate with Jesus. Yet, if we really believe he was fully human (as well as the Son of God) then it follows he must have gone through the whole set of human experiences, which includes hunger. He wasn’t above or beyond such every day, flesh and blood concerns. Perhaps whoever put him up in Bethany didn’t have enough food to spare to give him a good breakfast, and he knew he had a busy day coming up. This hunger even seems to make him grumpy – he looks for figs on a tree despite knowing it’s not the right time of year, then curses the tree for not having any fruit, a symbolic action that we see the results of a few verses later.

We can all identify with feeling hungry. We’ve all come home after a long day ready for our tea, or looked forward to having a biscuit or two at elevenses to tide us over until lunchtime. A little hunger makes the coming meal all the better. Many of us, though (including me) will have been lucky enough to have never experienced real hunger, and have never had to worry about being able to afford to feed ourselves. That of course is not the case for many people in our world, including many in our own communities, as seen by the growth of food banks. The economic crisis caused by the pandemic has made this even worse. If as a society we hungered more for righteousness than for consumption the food banks, which treat the symptoms rather than the underlying cause of hunger, might no longer be needed. That would truly be a step towards building the Kingdom.

Prayer

Gracious God, we give thanks for the gift of Jesus
and we give thanks for his hunger, both for food and for justice.
We give thanks too for the food we eat,
and pray that we can learn to share
the abundant resources you have given us
to build a world where nobody goes hungry.

was their hope, they were expecting great things, perhaps including freedom from the cruel Roman rulers. We are also looking for freedom, freedom from wondering which tier we will be in next week or how many are allowed into a church service. We all want freedom from this pandemic. The good thing is that just like the people Mark wrote about, we can look to a higher authority. No matter what is happening we can shout Hosanna, as we look to Jesus who we can trust to save us from anything that the world throws at us.

Prayer

Loving God

We ask that You show us your power by taking away our fears and worries.

Forgive us for the times we have doubted you and help us to put our total trust in you.

As we look to a future that might be like the old normal or might be a new normal help us remember that you are our eternal unchanging God.

We put our trust in you

and ask for your help to tell others that you still love us.

In Jesus name we pray Amen

Saturday 27th February St Mark 11: 12 - 14

The Rev'd D. Nick Jones, minister, Heswall URC & St. George's URC,
Thornton Hough

St Mark 11: 12 - 14

On the following day, when they came from Bethany, he was hungry. Seeing in the distance a fig tree in leaf, he went to see whether perhaps he would find anything on it. When he came to it, he found nothing but leaves, for it was not the season for figs. He said to it, 'May no one ever eat fruit from you again.' And his disciples heard it.

Tuesday 2nd February St Mark 7: 1 - 23

Pat Stannard, Elder, Muswell Hill URC

St Mark 7: 1 - 23

Now when the Pharisees and some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem gathered around him, they noticed that some of his disciples were eating with defiled hands, that is, without washing them. (For the Pharisees, and all the Jews, do not eat unless they thoroughly wash their hands, thus observing the tradition of the elders; and they do not eat anything from the market unless they wash it and there are also many other traditions that they observe, the washing of cups, pots, and bronze kettles.) So the Pharisees and the scribes asked him, 'Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?' He said to them, 'Isaiah prophesied rightly about you hypocrites, as it is written,

"This people honour 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.'

Then he said to them, 'You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God in order to keep your tradition! For Moses said, "Honour your father and your mother"; and, "Whoever speaks evil of father or mother must surely die." But you say that if anyone tells father or mother, "Whatever support you might have had from me is Corban" (that is, an offering to God)— then you no longer permit doing anything for a father or mother, thus making void the word of God through your tradition that you have handed on. And you do many things like this.' Then he called the crowd again and said to them, 'Listen to me, all of you, and understand: there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile.' When he had

left the crowd and entered the house, his disciples asked him about the parable. He said to them, 'Then do you also fail to understand? Do you not see that whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile, since it enters, not the heart but the stomach, and goes out into the sewer?' (Thus he declared all foods clean.) And he said, 'It is what comes out of a person that defiles. For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person.'

Reflection

Our grandma would never as much as raise an eyebrow if we came in from her farm covered in muck. If anyone looked shocked, she would retort: "It doesn't matter. They'll eat a peck of dirt in their lives." Only then would she send us off for a scrub. Equally, she drilled into us the importance of washing our hands before meals and taking our turn at cleaning the utensils. In that, she would be in sympathy with the Pharisaic laws.

Where the Pharisees went wrong was in conflating practical rules for everyday life with God's laws to the point where they had become an immutable tenet of their religious practice.

Jesus was having none of it. Compared with the hundreds of rules so important to the Pharisees, he asked his followers to love God with all their being and their neighbours as themselves – and from those two, everything else that matters flows.

Personally, I love the way he explained his differences with his critics in earthy language - what goes into our stomachs must come out again. It is what is in our hearts (souls) that counts, he adds, and if that leads us into bad ways, we are dirty, regardless of outward appearances.

When we say our confessions, surely none of us would express shame for

it, some of the bystanders said to them, 'What are you doing, untying the colt?' They told them what Jesus had said; and they allowed them to take it. Then they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks on it; and he sat on it. Many people spread their cloaks on the road, and others spread leafy branches that they had cut in the fields. Then those who went ahead and those who followed were shouting,

'Hosanna!

Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!

Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David!

Hosanna in the highest heaven!'

Then he entered Jerusalem and went into the temple; and when he had looked around at everything, as it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the twelve.

Reflection

Jesus shows some divine knowledge when He tells His disciples that they will find a colt near the entrance of the village. They had not been to the village, but He knew it was there. While that may be surprising it is the reaction of some of the residents that is even more remarkable. When the disciples said they were taking the colt because the Lord needed it, they let them take it. They demonstrated total trust in the words the disciples spoke. Do we show the same trust today? Do we believe, without question, what we read in the Bible?

The disciples took the colt to Jesus and put cloaks on it to make some sort of saddle. As He rode towards Jerusalem some people threw their cloaks on the road, others threw leaves. What a demonstration of adoration. We all have heard the story of Sir Walter Raleigh demonstrating his admiration for Queen Elizabeth by putting his cloak over a puddle. These people were throwing their cloaks on the road for the Messiah to ride over. As they did this, they shouted out the truth and acknowledged that Jesus was coming in the name of the Lord. He

In this story the crowd began by trying to silence Bartimaeus, but then they change their tack and tell him to get up and go to Jesus. The crowd turns from barring access to Jesus to opening the way to Jesus. This was their turning point—from being a movement that kept the story inside their circle to a community with open boundaries. It was, perhaps, the moment they truly heard the call of the broken world and found a way to bring that brokenness to God.

What was our pandemic turning point? What story will we tell about God's work with us in the past year? Were the last 12 months a time when we were forced to stop, to listen to cries for healing, to bring people to God for healing? Have we changed direction? Is our re-newed calling to to less use of fossil fuels, to being anti-racist, to listening to the cries of those who need love and healing, to being healed ourselves? What is your pandemic turning point story?

Prayer

Healing God, open our ears to listen for your calling. Open our ears to hear the cries of those who need healing. Give us courage to ask for healing. Give us faith to trust your call. Give us the words to tell the story of our healing and our calling to new directions. Amen.

[Friday 26th February St Mark 11: 1 - 10](#)

John Collings, Lay Preacher, Rutherglen URC

St Mark 11: 1 - 10

When they were approaching Jerusalem, at Bethphage and Bethany, near the Mount of Olives, he sent two of his disciples and said to them, 'Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately as you enter it, you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden; untie it and bring it. If anyone says to you, "Why are you doing this?" just say this, "The Lord needs it and will send it back here immediately."' They went away and found a colt tied near a door, outside in the street. As they were untying

eating a sandwich with unwashed hands! What we ask forgiveness for is wrongdoing in our treatment of others or failure to offer help when we could – the sins of commission and omission. We may not be thieves or murderers, but it is easy to wound with harsh words or to let down someone who trusts us. We are human and we stray. Our cleansing will come from owning up to our sins, asking forgiveness and making reparation.

Prayer

Loving God,
We confess that there are times when we put the appearance of faith before the substance.
We fail to recognise and place the needs of others first.
Pray forgive us and help us to discern
and act upon the teachings of Jesus. Amen

[Wednesday 3rd February St Mark 7: 24 - 30](#)

The Rev'd Branwen Rees, East Wales Regional Minister

St Mark 7: 24 - 30

From there he set out and went away to the region of Tyre. He entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there. Yet he could not escape notice, but a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet. Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. He said to her, 'Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.' But she answered him, 'Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs.' Then he said to her, 'For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter.' So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.

Reflection

This is one of those texts that can be troublesome. It's one where I go, 'did Jesus really say that – did he really compare a woman to a dog, she was only asking him to help her daughter, did I hear that correctly?'

Well the answer is yes that is what Jesus said. I have heard different ways to explain this passage in a way that doesn't upset our sensibilities or make us squirm. Things like, 'Oh, don't worry Jesus didn't mean it, he was just testing her' or 'he was referring to a well-known joke at the time!'. Could it be that Jesus just got it wrong?

However we try to justify it, this is what Jesus said, he compared a Gentile woman to a dog while favouring Jews. I could comment on the faith of the woman, even though the word is not used in this context; we could learn something from her persistence, her expectant trust and possibly even her submission.

But for me, along with the passage that follows about the healing of the deaf man, this is a story about mission – mission to those near and far – to foreigners and those closer to home. There are no limitations on Jesus' mission and there are no limitations on our mission – only those we place on ourselves. God's gracious love is universal – we should not, we must not limit it.

But talking of grace – how often when we lose an argument do we respond as graciously as Jesus? Even when we know the other side, the other person is right, we carry on trying to justify our own position. At a time when we seem to have forgotten how to debate, how to argue well, there is much we can learn from this little story.

Prayer

Teacher,
When we struggle with what you said and did and find the thought of

Thursday 25th February St Mark 10: 46 - 52

The Rev'd Martha McInnes, Minister, Cardiff and Penarth Pastorate

St Mark 10: 46 - 52

They came to Jericho. As he and his disciples and a large crowd were leaving Jericho, Bartimaeus son of Timaeus, a blind beggar, was sitting by the roadside. When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to shout out and say, 'Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!' Many sternly ordered him to be quiet, but he cried out even more loudly, 'Son of David, have mercy on me!' Jesus stood still and said, 'Call him here.' And they called the blind man, saying to him, 'Take heart; get up, he is calling you.' So throwing off his cloak, he sprang up and came to Jesus. Then Jesus said to him, 'What do you want me to do for you?' The blind man said to him, 'My teacher, let me see again.' Jesus said to him, 'Go; your faith has made you well.' Immediately he regained his sight and followed him on the way.

Reflection

This story is a turning point in Mark's narrative. Until this point Jesus' ministry has focused on healing and teaching. At the gates of Jericho, he heals a blind man. He leaves Jericho, setting off towards Jerusalem and the ending of his life.

This story is a turning point for the other characters. Bartimaeus is a blind beggar, waiting at the gate in Jericho with some dim hope of healing. When he hears Jesus is nearby hope grows and he calls out. He isn't going to be quiet—this might be his moment. Jesus does hear him. He calls Bartimaeus to him, and asks what he wants. Bartimaeus asks and is healed. From this point he begins a life of following Jesus. This story is a turning point for Bartimaeus—he moves from being a blind beggar to being a follower of Jesus. Bartimaeus would probably tell and retell this story for the rest of his life—this life-changing moment.

effort and achievement recognised but when we seek power and recognition for their own sake, the healthy “Well done, mate. Good job.” can become an unhealthy obsession. Now, it’s not a bad thing to want recognition for something done well, in however small a way but in its worst excesses, we can become obsessed with status, power, authority. Actually, we don’t have to do that. We do not have to strive for these things, and that’s not because we already have them, nor because we really do deserve them. It’s because we really don’t deserve them. You fear that you are not good enough? You’ve not. Neither am I.

It is because there was once, someone who truly did deserve all approval, all respect, all admiration, all love, because he was good enough. He was already acceptable. And his love is big enough that he will let us all become acceptable. We get to take his ‘good enough’ as our own. Why? Because we deserve it? I don’t think so!

When we realise that we cannot ever make ourselves acceptable we can simply say ‘thank you’ to the only one who can exchange our worthlessness for his worth. Jesus the carpenter – who fixes things. And when we are content that our worth in God’s sight is not earned by good works or approval from those around us, then we can be happy to take the humble position that Jesus did.

That’s good enough for me!

Prayer

My Father,
Please teach me to find my security
in knowing that you love unlovable me
in seeking first your kingdom and righteousness
in striving for the ultimate reward of being your good and faithful servant
through your son, my Lord and example.
Amen

doing your work uncomfortable, even terrifying; help us to place our trust in you. And give us the grace to recognise and acknowledge when we are wrong, and others are right. Amen

Thursday 4th February St Mark 7: 31 - 37

The Rev’d Dr Rosalind Selby, Principal, Northern College

St Mark 7: 31 - 37

Then he returned from the region of Tyre, and went by way of Sidon towards the Sea of Galilee, in the region of the Decapolis. They brought to him a deaf man who had an impediment in his speech; and they begged him to lay his hand on him. He took him aside in private, away from the crowd, and put his fingers into his ears, and he spat and touched his tongue. Then looking up to heaven, he sighed and said to him, ‘Ephphatha’, that is, ‘Be opened.’ And immediately his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly. Then Jesus ordered them to tell no one; but the more he ordered them, the more zealously they proclaimed it. They were astounded beyond measure, saying, ‘He has done everything well; he even makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak.’

Reflection

Jesus is returning from his mission-changing conversation with the Syro-Phoenician woman in which we discover the Gentiles are to be included in Jesus’ mission. Now here’s another healing in Gentile territory, and the feeding of the 4,000 also happens in Gentile territory. Not just the Jews then, but for the Gentiles too there is to be wholeness of mind and body and sufficient-and-to-spare nourishment.

No other Gospel tells this story, probably because Jesus uses his spit during the healing, as well as the use of an incantation which sounded more Greco-Roman than something the unique Son of God might do. But that emphatic “be opened”, shows Jesus’ authority. In these, and in

other miracles, it's clear Jesus is acting in the power of God. The response to Jesus' authority is immediate.

What do we notice about this healing? It's a Gentile healing and a signal that Jesus' ministry is moving ever outwards, receiving more and more of the excluded peoples. Unnamed people play their part in bringing the person in need to Jesus – something we can do in prayer as we bring others' needs before our Lord. It's also fascinating that Jesus takes this man aside and creates a new relationship with him. Perhaps those two things go together; in our lives, others have prayed for us and we have been drawn into a new relationship with Jesus. Now we pray for others, and they in their turn are drawn into that relationship. And Jesus is setting that pattern of prayer as he looks to his heavenly Father for what is needful for this man. These crowds are unnamed – but they become a cloud of witnesses to the change in this man's life.

May we all play our part in this pattern of prayer, and in this pattern of witnessing to all that Jesus has done in our lives and in the lives of those around us.

Prayer

Thank you, God,
for those who, sometimes unbidden,
have prayed for us and made a difference in our lives.
Guide us as we play our part in the prayers of your Church.
We pray, today, for those we know and long to see drawn into new relationships with you.
May ears be opened to hear – and may our mouths be opened to tell of what we have witnessed of your kingdom. Amen

Wednesday 24th February St Mark 10: 35 - 45

Ann Barton - Lay Worship Leader, Whittlesford URC in the Eastern Synod

St Mark 10: 35 - 45

James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came forward to him and said to him, 'Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.' And he said to them, 'What is it you want me to do for you?' And they said to him, 'Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.' But Jesus said to them, 'You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?' They replied, 'We are able.' Then Jesus said to them, 'The cup that I drink you will drink; and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized; but to sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared.'

When the ten heard this, they began to be angry with James and John. So Jesus called them and said to them, 'You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.'

Reflection

I remember when my children were very young; they used to squabble continuously about who got the first choice on anything. Sound familiar? In many ways it is just the same with adults. Some of us are more competitive than others, some more power-hungry (we all know someone who cannot bear to lose at Monopoly), but we each have within us the lurking desire to be better than someone else. It is right to tell people when they have done a good job, and we all like to have our

hands of the authorities based there. It's no wonder that the disciples are afraid both for Jesus and for themselves.

Fear is a recurring theme in the bible. 'Do not be afraid' is possibly the most frequent commandment. More positively folk are often encouraged to believe, have faith, or trust.

It was Jesus' absolute trust in his father that had made him 'set his face towards Jerusalem'. However, that would not be enough to take away from the terrible consequences of following that path.

Faith can give us the 'sure and certain hope' that we are doing the right thing. It can give us strength to carry on, even in the most difficult of circumstances. It can even help us to have an outwardly calm approach, because we know what we are doing and why.

Nevertheless, we can still be afraid of the consequences. Like Jesus we can sweat drops of blood, and suffer greatly as a result of following our chosen path, even, in extremis, crying, 'My God why have you forsaken me?'

So let's cling to the sure and certain hope and to the leading that God has given us, and let's not be afraid of fear itself. We are human and we know that our faith will not remove the pain and difficulties ahead, nevertheless our faith tells us that with God's help we will be able to deal with them.

Prayer

Living and loving God,
We believe, help our unbelief.
Open our eyes to the paths that you would have us walk.
Hold us in our fear, and strengthen our trust,
that we might set our faces towards your kingdom,
regardless of the difficulties on the road ahead. Thanks be to God Amen.

Friday 5th February St Mark 8: 1 - 13

The Rev'd George Mwaura Minister, Church of Christ the Cornerstone
Milton Keynes

St Mark 8: 1 - 13

In those days when there was again a great crowd without anything to eat, he called his disciples and said to them, 'I have compassion for the crowd, because they have been with me now for three days and have nothing to eat. If I send them away hungry to their homes, they will faint on the way—and some of them have come from a great distance.' His disciples replied, 'How can one feed these people with bread here in the desert?' He asked them, 'How many loaves do you have?' They said, 'Seven.' Then he ordered the crowd to sit down on the ground; and he took the seven loaves, and after giving thanks he broke them and gave them to his disciples to distribute; and they distributed them to the crowd. They had also a few small fish; and after blessing them, he ordered that these too should be distributed. They ate and were filled; and they took up the broken pieces left over, seven baskets full. Now there were about four thousand people. And he sent them away. And immediately he got into the boat with his disciples and went to the district of Dalmanutha. The Pharisees came and began to argue with him, asking him for a sign from heaven, to test him. And he sighed deeply in his spirit and said, 'Why does this generation ask for a sign? Truly I tell you, no sign will be given to this generation.' And he left them, and getting into the boat again, he went across to the other side.

Reflection

Feeding the world through compassion!

This story comes to us right on the heels of the first feeding of 500 men plus women and children. Perhaps the people following Jesus were motivated by the promise of a meal in a time of serious scarcity. Some scholars suggest that this was a symbolic meal taking place, maybe

something like the Holy Communion we often share. Others suggest that this is a lesson in people overcoming their selfishness and sharing the little they had. Perhaps they are both right. I wonder though; would a multitude of people follow Jesus that far from home without packing a lunch? We read that after Jesus blessed the 7 loaves and some fish, they all ate and were satisfied, and the disciples collected 7 baskets of leftovers. On this second occasion, Jesus turned a frugal meal into a feast for thousands.

Today, we are easily paralysed by the enormity of world poverty and suffering but instead of getting caught up in the difficulties and politics of hunger, why not just perform a single act of generosity consistently? You do not need to travel abroad to combat poverty: there is plenty of it in our own backyard. All we need is to see those on the margins through Christ's eyes. Thomas Chisholm puts it this way: Great is thy faithfulness O God our father. There is no shadow of turning in thee. All I have needed thy hand has provided. Our little, combined with God's grace becomes more than enough. 7 baskets were collected after the multitude were fed!

We have enough to eat, share and spare with all sisters and brothers in the world if we are compassionate enough. And we should, after all, we are God's appointed agents- Amen.

Prayer

Generous God, in a world where millions hunger, provoke us by your spirit to willingly share the bread and fish which we have with our sisters and brothers. Open our eyes to the suffering of millions in our world helping us to respond in acts of compassion to the glory of your name we pray-Amen

Prayer

Lord, I strive to put you at the centre of my life,
to rely on you as my bedrock,
my foundation and security.
But, I know I am weak;
I let other worldly treasures
divert me from the path of discipleship.
By the light of the cross,
show me again the way,
so that through your grace
I may arrive safely home. Amen.

[Tuesday 23rd February St Mark 10: 32 - 34](#)

The Rev'd Jacky Embrey, Bolton & Salford Missional Partnership

St Mark 10: 32 - 34

They were on the road, going up to Jerusalem, and Jesus was walking ahead of them; they were amazed, and those who followed were afraid. He took the twelve aside again and began to tell them what was to happen to him, saying, 'See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be handed over to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death; then they will hand him over to the Gentiles; they will mock him, and spit upon him, and flog him, and kill him; and after three days he will rise again.'

Reflection

Mark paints a picture of Jesus walking steadily towards Jerusalem with his disciples trailing behind. We are told that they were both amazed and afraid.

Presumably they were amazed at Jesus' instance on going to Jerusalem, despite warning them for a third time that he would suffer and die at the

Reflection

Discipleship is difficult ... but the good news is that it's not just down to us!

At first it seems that Jesus is dealing here with an ingratiating and perhaps malign sycophant. So Jesus pricks his puffed up bubble and reminds him that religion has a hard practical side. It is not about giving flattering praise but doing God's will.

In the exchange that follows events take a different turn. Jesus senses the man's sincerity – he has tried to keep the Law all his life and has come to realise that this is not enough. Now Jesus warms to him and answers his original question with the seriousness it deserves. He invites the man to follow him. But the path of discipleship is costly and, in the man's case, in order to lay up treasure in heaven he must sell all his possessions. It proves too daunting a sacrifice.

This sends tremors of dismay within the on-looking disciples. The discipleship gauntlet set down is forbidding. It is not about wealth as such but rather “complete inner detachment from worldly things ... to put one's trust in God and rely on him as the sole source of security and well-being” (Nineham).

Gulp! ... with the bar set so high how can anyone be saved?

Then, we hear the great news! “For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible.” This verse heralds what became the core of Paul's teaching. If we are to be saved it is not by our own efforts alone but through the grace and unlimited power of God. So, at the heart of this reading are two truths about discipleship, which are in creative tension with each other. On the one hand, it involves constantly renewed, striving dedication. On the other hand, such efforts will not themselves be sufficient as the kingdom is a gift of grace from God ... for whom all things are possible.

Saturday 6th February St Mark 8: 14 - 21

The Rev'd John Durell, retired minister, member of Waddington Street URC, Durham

St Mark 8: 14 - 21

Now the disciples had forgotten to bring any bread; and they had only one loaf with them in the boat. And he cautioned them, saying, 'Watch out—beware of the yeast of the Pharisees and the yeast of Herod.' They said to one another, 'It is because we have no bread.' And becoming aware of it, Jesus said to them, 'Why are you talking about having no bread? Do you still not perceive or understand? Are your hearts hardened? Do you have eyes, and fail to see? Do you have ears, and fail to hear? And do you not remember? When I broke the five loaves for the five thousand, how many baskets full of broken pieces did you collect?' They said to him, 'Twelve.' 'And the seven for the four thousand, how many baskets full of broken pieces did you collect?' And they said to him, 'Seven.' Then he said to them, 'Do you not yet understand?'

Reflection

It's a favourite ploy of journalists to quiz politicians about the price of a pint of milk or a loaf of bread. We'd like our leaders to be competent, but we also want them to be in touch with ordinary people and everyday life. One of the endearing features of Mark's gospel is the way in which he depicts Jesus's disciples. Time after time they turn out to be ordinary, fallible people just like ourselves – quite a contrast with those strands of the New Testament that link the apostles with prophets of old and with Jesus himself as being part of the Church's one foundation (Ephesians 2.20).

So here we find that the twelve can't even organise a picnic on the seashore. What kind of leadership is the fledgling Church ever to expect? And worse still, the disciples don't just demonstrate their incompetence

over catering (always a significant matter in local church life), but they also reveal a total lack of understanding of what Jesus is saying to them. Earthly power such as Herod's, and false religiosity such as that of the Pharisees, have always been a danger for Jesus's followers – but the disciples only want to argue over the short order of bread.

Having eyes yet failing to see, and ears yet failing to understand, they're behaving like outsiders who have no part in the kingdom (ch 4.11). For all that Jesus has been doing (including those two miracles by the lake) and for all that he is saying to them now, the twelve are simply missing the point. The apparent lack of connection between the two parties in this non-conversation is not a sign of Mark's awkward style: it's simply how things were.

Yet these are the people who somehow took up Jesus's mission. Which I find strangely encouraging.

Prayer

Jesus, may we look more carefully
and recognise the ways you have been at work among us.
May we listen more intently
for the challenge of your living word.
And may we find each day the bread we need
to nourish us for the journey.

[Monday 22nd February St Mark 10: 17 - 31](#)

Professor Graham Handscomb is Convenor of the URC Stepwise Task and Finish Group and a member of Christ Church URC, Chelmsford.

St Mark 10: 17 - 31

As he was setting out on a journey, a man ran up and knelt before him, and asked him, 'Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?' Jesus said to him, 'Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. You know the commandments: "You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; You shall not defraud; Honour your father and mother."' He said to him, 'Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth.' Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, 'You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money] to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.' When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.

Then Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, 'How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!' And the disciples were perplexed at these words. But Jesus said to them again, 'Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.' They were greatly astounded and said to one another, 'Then who can be saved?' Jesus looked at them and said, 'For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible.'

Peter began to say to him, 'Look, we have left everything and followed you.' Jesus said, 'Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields, for my sake and for the sake of the good news, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this age—houses, brothers and sisters, mothers and children, and fields, with persecutions—and in the age to come eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first.'

Spring Clean as we engage with it devotionally.

Verse 1 celebrates the blessing of being forgiven. A blessing indeed. God places no blame. We can be who we truly are.

Verse 2 gets personal and specific in applying the general principle of verse 1. 'I' was bent down with guilt and grief. 'I' confessed, speaking out the messy truth to God. 'I' experienced God's liberating forgiveness. Verse 3 speaks of the experience of turning to God in trouble and finding strength and solace. It brings to mind Horatio Spafford's hymn, 'It is well, it is well, with my soul' which came to him in a time of deep distress when his four children were lost at sea. I think, looking also at the NRSV, that this is the meaning of verse 3. Not that we will escape life's tumult but that we are held in the midst of it.

In Verse 4 God speaks of giving direction on the basis of seeing (understanding) a person's actual situation. Our part is to be open to God's guidance, learning to pause and listen to that inner voice.

Verse 5 Jesus said that he came to save sinners. Let's leave 'the wicked' to his compassion, including the wicked within our own psyches, attitudes and actions (back to verse 2). Let's bask in God's mercy and steadfast love (NRSV). And so we end where we began, with blessedness and joy.

Prayer

Lord God, by your Spirit,
bring to mind any buried mess I should confess...
Thank you for taking my burdens and setting me free.
Hold me as I meet the challenges of this day and give me strength...
Help me to be open to your direction.
You are my joy and delight.

Sunday 7th February 7 Psalm 30

The Rev'd Michael Hopkins, Minister of a group of Methodist and United Reformed Churches based around Farnham, Surrey, and Clerk of the URC General Assembly.

All with joyful exultation
let us sing to God our praise;
To the Rock of our salvation
loud hosanna raise.

2: Lord, we sing with joyful voices;
Your great power can lift and save;
By Your healing touch, revive us,
life restore beyond the grave.

3: Praise to You, our sure salvation,
You, the Holy One above.
End the night so dimmed by
anguish,
with Your light of peace and love.

4: Change our sorrow to rejoicing,
cloth with gladness all despair;
Cause unsteady feet that stumble
now to dance beneath Your care.

5: Dry our tears we shed in mourning,
give us steadfast hope always;
Fill our hearts with expectation;
fill our songs with thanks and praise.

Michael Morgan © 1999 Faith Alive Christian Resources
You can hear the lively tune here
<https://hymnary.org/media/fetch/150540>

Reflection

This Psalm echoes the experience of Job, whose prosperity was plunged into lengthy devastation before he was restored to well-being. Walter Brueggemann describes the events of this Psalm as representing states of orientation, disorientation and new orientation. This is the experience which many of us know at times in our lives, and speaks to those back and forth, up and down cycles of confidence and confusion.

Obviously this psalm was written long before the time of Jesus, yet in it

we can see parallels with the story of resurrection, which echoes around the cosmos:

Life. Death. New Life.

Many of us find ourselves either in the midst of a crisis, or just getting over a crisis, or unaware that a crisis is just around the corner. Crisis is part of our normal cycle. Life for most of us has always included death, tragedy, and trauma, and most people experience movement through all these cycles.

As people of faith we have an opportunity to see a bigger picture, a wider meaning that allows us to stand firm with both confidence and humility. We're challenged to give credit to God: thanks when things are going well, hope when things are not going well, and praise when things open up into new possibilities.

This doesn't mean that God moves humans about like chess pieces. Rather, we believe that our Maker holds everything together and is always working for goodness and wholeness, even when the normal human cycles bring crisis and confusion, we can trust that God is constantly offering hope and new possibilities.

Prayer

God, you have not promised skies always blue,
Flower-strewn pathways all our lives through;
God, you have not promised sun without rain,
Joy without sorrow, peace without pain.
But you have promised strength for the day,
Rest for the labour, light for the way,
Grace for the trials, help from above,
Unfailing kindness, undying love;
Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Sunday 21st February Psalm 32

The Rev'd Gwen Collins, retired minister, member of Avenue St Andrew's URC, Southampton

How blest is he whose trespass
hath freely been forgiv'n,
whose sin is wholly covered
before the sight of heav'n.
Blest he to whom Jehovah
will not impute his sin,
who hath a guileless spirit,
whose heart is true within.

2 While I kept guilty silence,
my strength was spent with grief;
thy hand was heavy on me,
my soul found no relief.
But when I owned my trespass,
my sin hid not from thee,
when I confessed transgression,
then thou forgavest me.

3 So let the godly seek thee
in times when thou art near;
no whelming floods shall reach them,
nor cause their hearts to fear.
In thee, O Lord, I hid me,
thou savest me from ill,
and songs of thy salvation
my heart with rapture thrill.

4 I graciously will teach thee
the way that thou shalt go,
and with my eye upon thee
my counsel make thee know.
But be ye not unruly
or slow to understand;
be not perverse, but willing
to heed my wise command.

5 The sorrows of the wicked in number shall abound,
but those that trust Jehovah, his mercy shall surround.
Then in the Lord be joyful, in song lift up your voice;
be glad in God, ye righteous; rejoice, ye saints, rejoice.

Words Psalter 1912 Public Domain

You can hear a congregation sing this Psalm here
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YVo6zc-nTWU>

Reflection

I invite you, reader, to pay attention to this song/Psalm verse by verse. On this first Sunday of Lent it may serve to give structure to a spiritual

touched by the holy man, Jesus seemed pretty relaxed with the whole scene.

More than that, far from taking the opportunity to educate the parents and check out their credentials, Jesus uses the occasion to educate the disciples. “Whoever does not receive the Kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.”

There is plenty of mileage to be had from thinking through just what this essential essence of “childlikeness” IS which enables you to receive the Kingdom of God. I don’t think it is cuteness or innocence, but rather, total helplessness. The infant can make no case for having earned or deserved her place in the kingdom of God, she just accepts it as a gift of grace.

But I’d add one more thought. My experience of infants is that if you give them something they will test it to destruction. They will put it in their mouth, throw it at the dog, push it into the CD player or bang it against a wall... They will play with it and be creative with it, they will be joyful with it and noisy with it. Maybe that’s also how we should be receiving the Kingdom of God?

Prayer

Gracious God, you offer me the Kingdom of God,
I mentally catalogue the good deeds that must have entitled me.
Gracious God, you offer me the Kingdom of God,
I recount the story of my faithfulness that must have gained my entry.
Gracious God, you offer me the Kingdom of God,
Make me infant-like in my acceptance and toddler-like in my living of it.

Monday 8th February St Mark 8: 22 - 26

John Ellis, Synod Area Leader for West Kent and East Sussex and Secretary of Capel United Church

St Mark 8: 22 - 26

They came to Bethsaida. Some people brought a blind man to him and begged him to touch him. He took the blind man by the hand and led him out of the village; and when he had put saliva on his eyes and laid his hands on him, he asked him, ‘Can you see anything?’ And the man looked up and said, ‘I can see people, but they look like trees, walking.’ Then Jesus laid his hands on his eyes again; and he looked intently and his sight was restored, and he saw everything clearly. Then he sent him away to his home, saying, ‘Do not even go into the village.’

Reflection

A healing curiously in two stages. Those with perfect eyesight may find it hard to enter fully into the story. As my mother’s sight deteriorated a deep, heartfelt frustration was only seeing her children like trees walking, unable to make out our faces. In that predicament, you know there is so much more than you can see, but nothing in your power can give you access to it. Some of us know that special moment when a skilled optician finds the right prescription: suddenly the world comes into focus, and the range of possible activities to enrich life multiplies.

There is a hint the blind man was not fully concentrating the first time. Perhaps he was so excited by finding Jesus alongside him that his mind was all over the place. How often are we so full of what we want to tell Jesus that we fail to hear exactly what he wants to say to us? We need to look at him intently.

Mark’s wider point is that up to this stage in his Gospel people have only seen vaguely what Jesus is about. This story is a bridge to the second half of his Gospel when God will provide the lens through which God’s great

plan can be seen in focus. This sharpening of the vision will be set out in tomorrow's verses in another way.

Meanwhile we might remind ourselves that sometimes Jesus assures us of his presence without answering all of our questions or meeting our urgent desires. Sometimes we have to wait until another stage to find out with clarity what he is about in our lives. And for impatient people like us, that can be as hard as being half blind.

Prayer

Lord Jesus

When you give only part of what I hoped for:

make me a grateful disciple
show me if I am the blockage
give me patience if the time is not yet.

When you give what I had hoped for:

make me a grateful disciple
show me how to use your gift in your service
give me confidence for the future.

Thank you for the Love that is more than I could hope for.

[Tuesday 9th February St Mark 8: 27 - 30](#)

The Rev'd Trevor Jamison, Minister, St Columba's United Reformed Church, North Shields

St Mark 8: 27 - 30

Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and on the way he asked his disciples, 'Who do people say that I am?' And they answered him, 'John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.' He asked them, 'But who do you say that I am?' Peter answered him, 'You are the Messiah.' And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him.

looks like. He showed us that no price is too high – that being part in the process of transforming eternal souls is worth any effort.

Prayer

God of love,
teach us to see the other with your eyes.
Teach us to realise what an opportunity it is
to invest in building each other up,
what a privilege it is to build the image of Christ in the heart of another,
help us to be the heart of Christ loving one another in your name. Amen.

[Saturday 20th February St Mark 10: 13 - 16](#)

The Rev'd Phil Nevard, Minister of Kingsteignton URC, South Devon and Synod Interim Minister.

St Mark 10: 13 – 16

People were bringing little children to him in order that he might touch them; and the disciples spoke sternly to them. But when Jesus saw this, he was indignant and said to them, 'Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.' And he took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them.

Reflection

Most of our churches are familiar with the idea of parents bringing infants to be "blessed", "baptised", "christened" or sometimes just "done" by the Minister. Churches can be as curmudgeonly about this as the disciples seemingly were. We want to question their motives and check whether they really understand what they are doing. It wouldn't do if this were just superstition, would it? We're not in the business of indulging superstition, are we? Yet when parents brought infants to be

Reflection

How often we approach this text by asking the very same question – ‘Teacher, am I allowed to divorce my spouse?’ ‘Teacher, can a divorced person serve in (whatever) capacity in the Church?’

All the while, we miss the deeper message Jesus is giving us. Asking, ‘is it lawful?’ implies our desire to do the wrong thing if we can get away with it.

Jesus instead points us to the purpose of marriage – or of any human relationship. He takes us to the beginning: how did this start? Why are you in this relationship? Is it because of what you can get out of it, is it because of how you can use others to your own advantage, or do you really want to become ‘one flesh’ with the other?

Are you so fascinated by your spouse, your friend, your community, that you want to spend the rest of your life building this relationship? Are you so invested in the relationship, that you will use any opportunity to encourage, to nurture, to grow, to pray for, to comfort, to help, to do whatever it takes to help the other in becoming the best version of themselves they possibly can?

We are not being unfaithful only when we trespass the boundaries of a relationship, or when we break our bonds. We are unfaithful whenever we stop investing in the other person; whenever we take the other for granted; whenever we look to our own interests, and rights, and wishes, instead of the other’s.

Marriage, and every human relationship, is an opportunity to help turn another person into the image of Christ. We get to play a part in the process that builds daughters and sons of God! Are you ready to forget yourself, and give yourself completely for the other?

Jesus didn’t just ask that of us; on the Cross, he showed us what love

Reflection

‘Who do people say that I am?’

It’s ok to want to know what people say about what you say and do. It’s not so healthy to be obsessed about it. On the other hand, you would worry if someone spoke and acted with no regard for how others felt about them. And Jesus wants to know what the others are saying about him.

They are saying that Jesus is a prophet - someone who tells people what God is saying about them. Jesus is so prophetic that he can be mixed up with John the Baptist, or taken for Elijah returned; two prophets so notable for their God-inspired arguments with kings and queens that the powers-that-be sought to kill them.

‘But who do you say that I am?’

When that’s how rulers respond, it’s safer to report what others are saying than to reveal what you believe, but Peter sticks his head above the parapet: ‘You are the Messiah.’ Like some prophets, and like all Israelite kings, you are one anointed by God for a special task. You are the Messiah, the one appointed by God to deliver the people out of their difficulties and into a new reign of freedom, peace and justice.

‘But who do you say that I am?’

Today, as I continue along ‘on the way’ with Jesus, it’s helpful to know what others, including Peter, said about him. It’s good to know what people say about him now. But that question is also directed to me. Who do I say Jesus is? He’s the one from God, he’s the one who obtains my freedom, who offers me peace, and directs me to live justly.

And Jesus says, “who do you say I am?”

Prayer

God of freedom, peace and justice,
Open my ears to hear what people are saying about Jesus.
Open my eyes to see him truly, and so see you.
Open my lips to say, "You are ... " Amen

[Wednesday 10th February St Mark 8: 31 - 9:1](#)

The Rev'd Andy Braunston works with four congregations in and around Glasgow.

St Mark 8: 31 - 9:1

Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, 'Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.'

He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, 'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.' And he said to them, 'Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see that the kingdom of God has come with power.'

Jesus, so they can also hold the adult Jesus as they receive the bread and wine.

Prayer

Dear God,
We are sorry for the times when we get in the way of others seeing and holding you. Remind us of the privilege it is to be part of your story as each time in communion we are able to hold the bread and wine of your son even though we don't deserve it. Amen

[Friday 19th February St Mark 10: 1 - 12](#)

Marius Mazuru, pastor, Pilgrim URC Church, Plymouth

St Mark 10: 1 - 12

He left that place and went to the region of Judea and beyond the Jordan. And crowds again gathered around him; and, as was his custom, he again taught them. Some Pharisees came, and to test him they asked, 'Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?' He answered them, 'What did Moses command you?' They said, 'Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of dismissal and to divorce her.' But Jesus said to them, 'Because of your hardness of heart he wrote this commandment for you. But from the beginning of creation, "God made them male and female." "For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh." So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.' Then in the house the disciples asked him again about this matter. He said to them, 'Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her; and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery.'

foot causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life lame than to have two feet and to be thrown into hell. And if your eye causes you to stumble, tear it out; it is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and to be thrown into hell, where their worm never dies, and the fire is never quenched. 'For everyone will be salted with fire. Salt is good; but if salt has lost its saltiness, how can you season it? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another.'

Reflection

Christmas may seem like a long time ago now. Our celebrations were hampered because of COVID. At my own church our immediate thought was to cancel the nativity. But then we thought about doing it differently. The story was re-told in photographs with some children dressed up in costumes and others recording the different character's voices and narrating the story. We had a complicated schedule ensuring that the rules at the time were observed and they were genuinely excited to be part of the experience. We were also able to include those isolating at home, with the aid of a green screen. As I sorted through the 250 photographs that were taken it felt very emotional as the young people were central to the story. It was particularly moving at the end when individual characters held the baby Jesus and talked about what his coming meant for them.

It made me think about how we can include children and young people to be part of the whole Gospel story and 'place into their arms' the grown up Jesus, so that they can gaze and wonder at him. Few of us would see ourselves as being stumbling-blocks, but do we fully welcome and enable children and young people to be part of the life of our churches? Do we give them a voice, so that we might hear God speaking to us through them? When I was a toddler my grandparents used to take me to church. On Communion Sundays I had to sit at the back with a family friend and simply observe. I am glad that we now welcome all ages to be part of Communion. Just as our young people got to hold the baby

Reflection

Strong words in today's reading; most of the time elders and ministers resist the temptation, no matter how fleeting, to address each other as "Satan"! To understand what is going on we have to move beyond our cosy understandings of the Cross. We see the Cross as part of the story, the means of our salvation, a heroic example of sacrifice (delete according to theological taste) and yet there is a more basic, and dangerous, understanding on which our various theologies rest.

A Jew in first Century Palestine would only have understood the Cross as Roman oppression. Those who were crucified were rebels who resisted the Empire. They wanted to overthrow Roman occupiers and return to being an independent country. They remembered the Maccabees who had driven the Greeks out and longed to do the same with the Romans.

Jesus' call to take up one's cross would have been heard as a call to resist the might of Rome - and to be ready to bear the consequences. No wonder Peter told Jesus off - this was dangerous talk and they'd all end up on crosses if that continued.

Nowadays most of us tend not to see the cost of discipleship to be about resistance to empire (after all many have a sneaking regard for the British empire) or about standing up to oppression (we're not oppressed in Britain are we?) Yet I wonder what taking Jesus' words at face value might do for our understanding of discipleship. Resisting the empire now might mean asserting that Black lives do, indeed, matter as they are endangered by racist people, systems and policies. It might mean looking at the hidden-in-plain-sight imperial systems all around us - from imperial loot in our museums to unjust immigration controls; from unimaginable wealth of our cities and institutions generated by slavery to the debates around Brexit.

Like Satan, the temptation to gloss over imperial evil must be put behind us.

Prayer

O God,
before you all empires must fall,
all tyranny be overthrown,
all injustice put right;
open our eyes to the true cost of following you,
open our minds to the imperial legacy of
our lands,
our institutions,
and our church,
hidden in plain sight around us,
that we may truly take up our cross,
and resist the might of emperor and usurper,
so that your people might be free. Amen

[Thursday 11th February St Mark 9: 2 - 8](#)

The Rev'd Viv Henderson, Minister of Minehead URC and Chaplain at
Wellesley Hospital, Wellington

St Mark 9: 2 - 8

Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain apart, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them. And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus. Then Peter said to Jesus, 'Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.' He did not know what to say, for they were terrified. Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, 'This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!' Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them any more, but only Jesus.

What a thought for a day when we think of our faults and failings as penitents kneeling for ashing. Psychologists say that we tend to remember a single error far more vividly than a multitude of good judgements – and I know that is true of me. So on the day when we purposefully call our sins to mind, how reassuring to be remembered that our forgotten good deeds also have eternal value.

Perhaps we should spend this Lent not giving something up, but rather giving out a (literal or metaphorical) cup of water each day – and not asking for anything in return, because we bear the name of Christ.

Prayer

Loving, forgiving God, on this day of penitence
we acknowledge our sins of omission and commission.
We place our sorrow, guilt, and tortured memories at your feet
and beg you to forgive.
But, in your grace, you not only forgive us,
but acknowledge our seemingly trivial good deeds
of omission and commission
and promise that we will by no means lose our reward.
May that assurance fortify us this Lent
to walk in your way. Amen.

[Thursday 18th February St Mark 9: 42 - 49](#)

The Rev'd George Watt, Minister Reigate Park United Reformed Church,
Reigate

St Mark 9: 42 - 49

'If any of you put a stumbling-block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea. If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life maimed than to have two hands and to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire. And if your

Wednesday 17th February Ash Wednesday St Mark 9: 38 - 41

The Rev'd Gethin Rhys, Policy Officer for Cytun (Churches together in Wales), member of Parkminster URC, Cardiff

St Mark 9: 38 - 41

John said to him, 'Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us.' But Jesus said, 'Do not stop him; for no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterwards to speak evil of me. Whoever is not against us is for us. For truly I tell you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you bear the name of Christ will by no means lose the reward.

Reflection

This passage allows me to acknowledge the influence of two of my ministerial mentors.

The first is the Revd Jeff Williams, a member of my first pastorate and, until he retired, Head of Christian Aid in Wales. Many years ago he was on a radio debate with his opposite number in another Christian charity. That charity worked exclusively through Christian partners overseas, and believed that evangelism went hand in hand with practical help. Jeff explained that Christian Aid worked with those of all faiths and none, and eschewed proselytism. The other charity leader asked "So what is it that makes Christian Aid Christian?" Jeff replied, "Because we support people without asking anything whatsoever in return – not even faith." Or, as Jesus said, "whoever is not against us is for us."

The second is the late Revd Murdoch Mackenzie, who said in a sermon when I was on placement with him in Runcorn that Jesus' words "whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you bear the name of Christ will by no means lose the reward" means that even the smallest act of kindness has eternal significance.

Reflection

Today's passage echoes the words spoken from heaven at Jesus's baptism. However this time the disciples closest to Jesus share a glimpse of the relationship Jesus has with his father. The disciples have previously noticed that Jesus slips away on his own: now they are invited to accompany him.

Like Moses and Elijah before them, this is an overwhelming mountaintop experience - a powerful revelation of the holiness and glory of God. They must have shielded their eyes from the blinding light as they hear the declaration of love from the heavens.

We are living in a world longing for love - the shops are full of red gifts and cards, tokens of love freighted with obligation. Special filters on social media, themed television advertising and talk show sets all amplify the message that we should be marking the season by proclaiming our love in a special way. So if you are not in a loving relationship you may feel oppressed by the colour scheme and the implication that you should be buying stuff to show that you care for the true love in our life.

I am reminded of an old Graham Kendrick ballad which has the line "Does anybody love you for just who you are?" The Christian can answer 'yes', even if they are one of this country's 8 million people who live alone. As followers of Jesus we are drawn into the loving relationship of the Trinity. As children of God, like Jesus, we can know ourselves beloved. And, like the disciples before we should pay attention to what God says next, namely listen to him.

So whatever your circumstances today, hear this, you really are God's beloved. That love is more than a card or gift, that love really is forever. How does that make you feel? Maybe you know someone who needs to hear that message too.

Prayer

Gracious God,

We thank you for drawing us into your circle of love.

We lift to you all who need your loving presence today

those who feel alone, those who feel they don't matter, those who feel unloved, those who are grieving.

Help us to love as you love us and make someone else feel special today.

Amen

Friday 12th February St Mark 9: 9 - 13

The Rev'd Colin Hunt, retired minister, member of Hutton & Shenfield Union Church, Essex

St Mark 9: 9 - 13

As they were coming down the mountain, he ordered them to tell no one about what they had seen, until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead. So they kept the matter to themselves, questioning what this rising from the dead could mean. Then they asked him, 'Why do the scribes say that Elijah must come first?' He said to them, 'Elijah is indeed coming first to restore all things. How then is it written about the Son of Man, that he is to go through many sufferings and be treated with contempt? But I tell you that Elijah has come, and they did to him whatever they pleased, as it is written about him.'

Reflection

The transfiguration of Jesus on Mount Tabor is usually celebrated in both the Eastern and Western churches on the 6th August. The Orthodox Eastern churches know this celebration as the "Taborion". As the disciples descended from the mountain, Jesus instructs them to tell no one about what they had just witnessed at the top of the mountain. Even so, what did Jesus mean when speaking about resurrection?

just demonstrated how not great they are (at healing like Jesus, at understanding what he is talking about). Mind you, Jesus might have started this posturing and competition for status by picking Peter, James and John to go up the mountain with him, leaving the others feeling second rate perhaps. Of course, they all seem to be forgetting all his teaching about the first being last, turning the other cheek, blessed are the meek and so on.

Thank goodness we never behave like that in our churches. Or think like that about ourselves in relation to others. Oh no, we're much better at humility than....hmmm – time for that awkward silence in front of Jesus....

I want to be taken in His arms and welcomed, like a little child. I want to be told it is not about proving myself in any way, winning any points, besting anyone else. I want to believe that deeply enough that my insecurity melts away and never needs to put anyone else down again. Then I would be able to freely welcome others in the name of Jesus, as generously and graciously as I have been welcomed.

In welcoming all we welcome our Creating, Sending, Uniting-in-the-Spirit God. Imagine - welcoming God into our midst being as easy as welcoming a child. I am writing this in Advent while waiting for the Christ-child to arrive to what will prove a mixed welcome. We need the help of this child to become the child-like, welcoming children of God he is calling us to be.

Prayer

Jesus – help me to dwell in your welcome so completely that my arms are wide to welcome others with the open, loving, trusting spirit of the child that I am truly am in you. Amen.

sometimes we need to be brave enough to admit our not knowing and ask for answers; other times we need to accept we cannot know everything and do not need to! We need to be discerning and yet also authentic, and other times risking being the one to ask 'the stupid question' knowing that we will be helping others, too!

Prayer

Loving God, Jesus' followers struggled to always understand.
Help us when we lack understanding.
Give us wisdom to know when to ask and when to keep silent.
Give us courage to ask even when it feels risky.
And give us patience to know that sometimes waiting will reveal the answers we are searching for.
Amen

[Tuesday 16th February](#) [St Mark 9: 33 - 37](#)

Dr Sam Richards, serving as Head of Children's and Youth Work, member of mayBe Community, Oxford.

St Mark 9: 33 - 37

Then they came to Capernaum; and when he was in the house he asked them, 'What were you arguing about on the way?' But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another about who was the greatest. He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, 'Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.' Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, 'Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.'

Reflection

How childish. Bickering about who is the greatest (especially when they are spending time with THE GREATEST). Particularly when they have all

The Jews believed that the coming of the Messiah would be preceded by Elijah who would be a herald announcing the coming of the Messiah (see Malachi 4 v 5,6). The rabbinic tradition was that this would occur some three days before the arrival of the Messiah. On each of the three days Elijah would make an announcement concerning the coming of the Messiah. On the first day, the announcement would be one of peace for the world. On the second day the announcement would be one of good coming to the world, and on the third day he would cry "Jeshuah" (salvation) will come to the world.

No doubt the thought crossed the disciples' minds that if Jesus was really the Messiah then what happened to Elijah? Jesus' answer was that the people of Elijah's day imposed their standards and limitations on Elijah's ministry, and in so doing they ignored God's will. This was their historic approach to the coming of the Messiah, Have our expectations moved away from the saving grace of the cross and resurrection and just focussed on our own self indulgences? Unfortunately, even on Sundays, the media tends to encourage us to focus more on a secular approach to Sunday rather than considering a more reflective life.

Prayer

Gracious God, like generations past we choose to adopt our ways and traditions rather than Your way of peace, hope and love. Forgive us, forgive our selfishness and lead us by Your Spirit to a more open and considerate lifestyle that reflects Your plans for us. Break down the barriers that separate us from You, this we ask in Jesus' name. Amen.

[Saturday 13th February 2021](#) [St Mark 9: 14 - 29](#)

The Rev'd John A Young retired minister of the National Synod of Scotland URC, member of Giffnock URC

St Mark 9: 14 - 29

When they came to the disciples, they saw a great crowd around them,

and some scribes arguing with them. When the whole crowd saw him, they were immediately overcome with awe, and they ran forward to greet him. He asked them, 'What are you arguing about with them?' Someone from the crowd answered him, 'Teacher, I brought you my son; he has a spirit that makes him unable to speak; and whenever it seizes him, it dashes him down; and he foams and grinds his teeth and becomes rigid; and I asked your disciples to cast it out, but they could not do so.' He answered them, 'You faithless generation, how much longer must I be among you? How much longer must I put up with you? Bring him to me.' And they brought the boy to him. When the spirit saw him, immediately it threw the boy into convulsions, and he fell on the ground and rolled about, foaming at the mouth. Jesus asked the father, 'How long has this been happening to him?' And he said, 'From childhood. It has often cast him into the fire and into the water, to destroy him; but if you are able to do anything, have pity on us and help us.' Jesus said to him, 'If you are able!—All things can be done for the one who believes.' Immediately the father of the child cried out, 'I believe; help my unbelief!' When Jesus saw that a crowd came running together, he rebuked the unclean spirit, saying to it, 'You spirit that keep this boy from speaking and hearing, I command you, come out of him, and never enter him again!' After crying out and convulsing him terribly, it came out, and the boy was like a corpse, so that most of them said, 'He is dead.' But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him up, and he was able to stand. When he had entered the house, his disciples asked him privately, 'Why could we not cast it out?' He said to them, 'This kind can come out only through prayer.'

Reflection

Jesus' true character has just been revealed in his mountain top transfiguration. Having descended with four of his awe-struck disciples, he is now confronted with a crisis: swirling, excited crowds; argumentative scribes; a distraught father with a chronically ill boy; and the rest of his disciples unable to cope. Talk about 'highs' and 'lows'? Yes, it has the ring of truth about it, hasn't it? We recognize from our own experience that our elation can be short lived in the face of problems we

[Monday 15th February St Mark 9: 30 - 32](#)

The Revd Jenny Mills, serving as Secretary for Education and Learning.

St Mark 9: 30 - 32

They went on from there and passed through Galilee. He did not want anyone to know it; for he was teaching his disciples, saying to them, 'The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again.' But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him.

Reflection

In this section of the Gospel of Mark there are so many questions, so much that appears to confuse the disciples and trouble them. They ask a lot of questions, but there are some things that they appear too fearful to raise.

I love it when the disciples react as we might! How many times have we heard a comment and not understood it, but we were too afraid of looking silly to ask for clarification? How many of us have heard a joke and everyone around us laughs and we don't get it really, but join in because we do not want to look daft? How many times have we been in a meeting or gathering and someone has said something we do not understand but we have not been brave enough to admit our ignorance? Yet when someone has dared to ask 'the stupid question' we are often told: 'there is no such thing as a stupid question'.

Embarrassment and shame usually hold us back. So it was for the disciples: things were uncertain, what was going on was confusing, they were Jerusalem bound and yet not really sure what was going on. The words we hear Jesus saying were written after the events predicted, after the outcome was known. We know that eventually the disciples understood too, but it was only after Jesus' death and resurrection. Sometimes we need to sit with questions and wait for answers;

ignore? The day we affirm the God-given worth of every individual, of every heritage and background? The day we actively seek God's face mirrored in individuals and communities whom the world – and we ourselves - have scorned and broken and deemed useless?

Today is Valentine's Day. It is Racial Justice Sunday. Let us (re)commit ourselves to an active love – rejecting racism, sexism, homophobia and all the many points at which injustice intersects. Let us raise up, honour, value and love – without barriers, without limits.

Prayer

Time to Love

God of love,
You love without limits.
You reach across barriers,
Overcome every obstacle,
So that nothing can separate us
From your love.

In our most desperate moments,
In the midst of our anguish,
In the throes of our helplessness,
There you are, with your love.

You lift us up,
Honour and affirm,
Provide strength and refuge
As a sign of your love.

Intensely personal,
Yet all-embracing;
Move us to love
Just as you love. Amen

haven't anticipated, and can't easily solve.

Demon possession and physical illness are often two separate conditions in the Gospels – but here both afflict the boy whose condition appears incurable. While we might use the terms 'mental illness' and 'epilepsy' to describe demon possession and grand mal seizures, we do well to remember how closely linked our mental and physical faculties are. Jesus' concern is for the welfare of the boy, rather than any analysis of the causes. His pastoral approach to relieving suffering, done as privately as the situation permitted, remains a model for the church to follow.

The distraught father who brought his son for healing to Jesus' overwhelmed disciples, also found healing. In a dialogue with Jesus which echoes down through the centuries, 'I believe, help my unbelief' is the cry which opens a path to healing (or salvation) for all who place their ultimate trust in God. It is a prayer whose honesty breaks down the barriers we erect between ourselves and a loving God.

What does Jesus teach us through this Gospel story? Having been comforted, do we dis-associate ourselves from the 'faithless generation' which Jesus found so frustrating before he healed? Where are our prayers and our faith going to take us today?

Prayer

Gracious God
the times we live through can oppress and dismay us,
as though we had no part in their making.
Teach us to be honest in our judgements, loving in our actions.
Encourage us in our faith's journey
to believe that we always have a part
to play in your kingdom's coming
till that day when you welcome us home Amen

Empty, broken, lifeless

I give my spirit, Lord.

In you, O Lord, I take refuge.

Let me never be put to shame

In your Justice rescue me.

Redeem me, O faithful God.

I am the scorn of all my enemies,

a horror to all my friends.

Like the dead, I am forgotten;

like a broken and useless vessel.

My fate lies solely in your hands.

My Father, deliver me!

O Lord, I say, "You are my God."

I place all my trust in you.

Let your face shine on your servant

and save me, O Lord of love

All who wait for the Lord:

Have courage, be strong, find hope!

Shannon Cerneka and Orin Johnson

© 2008, GIA Publications, Inc.

You can hear the Psalm sung here

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ymtOGIFh0uw>

Reflection:

Today is Valentine's Day...

For many, it's a day of flowers, chocolates, special gestures of love. But why all the effort?

How does it feel to be on the receiving end? How does it feel to be the giver?

Even whilst I affirm and coddle a special someone over here, do I deliberately, thoughtlessly, or inadvertently contribute to hurting some removed 'other' – making them feel unloved, unvalued, unappreciated?

Instead of - or alongside – our one-off gestures for a 'loved one', what if we made an ongoing commitment to all?

Today is Racial Justice Sunday - and Valentine's Day seems a perfect opportunity to consider the significance. Who is included/excluded? Who is loved/not loved? Accepted/not accepted? Honoured/not honoured? Respected/not respected? Who counts enough for us to consciously take time and effort to consider them and raise them up?

There are many in our communities and world who are waiting - seeking justice; a better fate.

Many who find themselves scorned, overlooked, rejected – simply for being who they are.

People whose talents are undervalued. Denied. Abused.

Voices crying ceaselessly – 'In you, God, is my refuge. In your Word. In your promises. In you alone I find my strength.'

Many people have long been awaiting their earthly salvation. Could now be their time?

Could today be the day we consciously listen for the voices we too easily