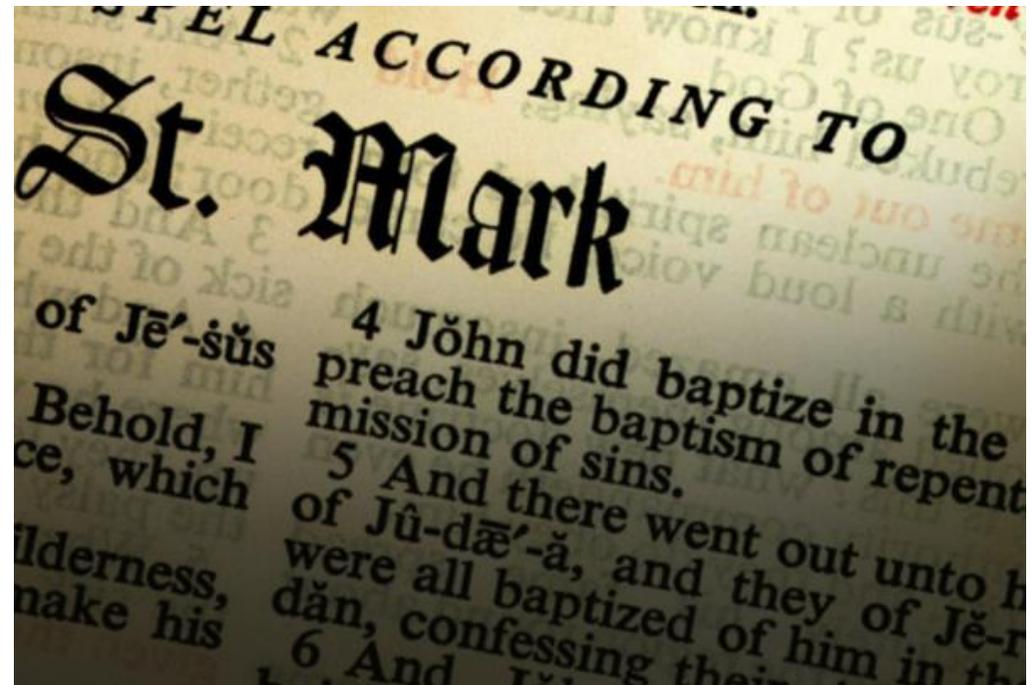


Daily Devotions
from the United Reformed Church

St Mark's Gospel 4
Chapters 11:15 – 13:27



Monday 1st – Saturday 13th March

[Introduction](#)

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

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Monday 1st March St Mark 11: 15 - 19

The Rev'd Terry Hinks, Minister of Trinity, High Wycombe and Cores End URC

Then they came to Jerusalem. And he entered the temple and began to drive out those who were selling and those who were buying in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money-changers and the seats of those who sold doves; and he would not allow anyone to carry anything through the temple. He was teaching and saying, 'Is it not written,

“My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations”?

But you have made it a den of robbers.'

And when the chief priests and the scribes heard it, they kept looking for

a way to kill him; for they were afraid of him, because the whole crowd was spellbound by his teaching. And when evening came, Jesus and his disciples went out of the city.

Reflection

It seems amazing sometimes how differently people can react to what is going on around them. They read and hear and see things in opposite ways. Of course, it all depends on where you are standing and what your life experiences have been like. Do you see life from a place of comfort and privilege or one of vulnerability and pain? Last year's Black Lives Matter protests challenged us all to look again at where we are coming from and the attitudes and assumptions ingrained within us. Jesus's dramatic protest action in the temple raises just such a variety of reactions among those involved. For the sellers and money changers his actions must have caused outrage. For those exploited by the Temple systems, it must have raised a cheer. For the religious leaders it caused fear – and fear is perhaps one of the most potentially destructive emotions around. Fear can lead people to do inhuman things – to remove what they fear, rather than to ask themselves why they are afraid. The leaders felt threatened and their response was to plot to destroy the troublemaker.

The ordinary people – the whole crowd – were 'spellbound.' It's perhaps not the most literal of translations (with its overtones of magic) but suitable all the same (with its sense of childlike wonder). What holds you spellbound? Is it even possible in our tired and cynical times? – In his history of the world, the great novelist and atheist H J Wells described Jesus as 'like some terrible moral huntsman digging humankind out of the snug burrows in which they had lived' and humanity as dazzled by 'the white blaze of the kingdom' Jesus proclaimed. Are we spellbound, dazzled, brought to our knees by this Jesus who speaks even now, pointing to a better way?

Prayer

Lord Jesus we are dazzled by your light,
exposing the wrong in our world and our hearts,
stirring up hope and renewing vision,
a vision of justice and inclusion for all.
Help us to stand with you
in your love-filled struggle
for the Kingdom on earth as it is in heaven.

We pray that as time passes, we cling on to the positives and that the
legacy of the pandemic is how it made us ultimately better, happier,
calmer and also deepened our belief in you.

In all things we give thanks
Amen

[Tuesday 2nd March St Mark 11: 20 - 25](#)

The Rev'd Dr Confidence Bansah, Minister of St. George's Hemel
Hempstead and Christ Church Hatfield

In the morning as they passed by, they saw the fig tree withered away to
its roots. Then Peter remembered and said to him, 'Rabbi, look! The fig
tree that you cursed has withered.' Jesus answered them, 'Have faith in
God. Truly I tell you, if you say to this mountain, "Be taken up and thrown
into the sea", and if you do not doubt in your heart, but believe that
what you say will come to pass, it will be done for you. So I tell you,
whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it
will be yours. 'Whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything
against anyone; so that your Father in heaven may also forgive you your
trespasses.'

Reflection

The story of the fig tree took place when Jesus and his disciples were
traveling from Bethany to Jerusalem as he entered the Passion Week.
Approaching Jerusalem they saw a fig tree with signs of fruit-bearing. But
getting closer, they realised that the tree bore no fruit and there was no
sign of figs growing. Disappointed by this deceitful appearance, Jesus
cursed it. The next morning as they went out, they saw that the fig tree
had withered. Peter drew Jesus' attention to it. Jesus responded by
teaching a lesson about how with faith and prayer we can do
extraordinary things. He further emphasised the necessity of forgiveness.

treatment;

Those who were shielding for many months and could not go out;
Those whose family are far away or abroad, meaning they couldn't travel to be with them at Christmas;
Those who suffer from mental health issues.

There has been much suffering in our world in the last year.

There are some who feel that the 'man upstairs' has little power and, therefore, heaven has been 'shaken' as referred to in the verse. I have heard that some are questioning their faith.

However, there are many whose faith has deepened as a result of events, and I will ensure I am one of them. So I endeavour to focus on how Covid is enabling our Father to 'Make his face shine upon' us (Numbers 6:25). Let's live in the positive and share with believers and non-believers alike that, for us Covid, has deepened our faith and enabled Jesus' Power and Glory to be shown. We ie I, can do this by:

Expressing a joyful attitude regardless of the latest news headline;
Encouraging our younger ones to focus on what's great about this time;
Taking the opportunity to pray for the 'angels' that the Father has sent us eg nurses and doctors and letting them know what we think of them;
Confidently sharing the belief that better days are ahead, and that 'Joy will come in the morning' Psalm 30:5.

This is the best opportunity we have, as believers, to show the difference our faith continues to play in our lives regardless of changing times, so let's use it wisely.

Prayer

Father in Heaven, this is a special time; a much needed time where we need to pay attention in our lives.
Through these times let us remember the joy of love and life.

Proverbs 24:29 admonishes us not to revenge. And this was emphasised in the Lord's Prayer in Matthew 6:12 – "forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us". Forgiveness is pardoning the offense of others so as to reconcile and restore a good relationship with them. To be able to do this, we need the empowerment of the Holy Spirit and the grace of God. In this time of COVID-19, my prayer is that you may forgive those who sin against you in the bond of love, peace, and unity!
Amen!

Prayer

God, you call us into your presence; to be present with you and with one another. We pray that you grant us hope, peace, and comfort so that our faith in you may remain so firm and strong. We pray all this in the name of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ! Amen!

[Wednesday 3rd March St Mark 11: 27 - 33](#)

Dorothy Courtis, Lay Preacher, Thurso URC

Again they came to Jerusalem. As he was walking in the temple, the chief priests, the scribes, and the elders came to him and said, 'By what authority are you doing these things? Who gave you this authority to do them?' Jesus said to them, 'I will ask you one question; answer me, and I will tell you by what authority I do these things. Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin? Answer me.' They argued with one another, 'If we say, "From heaven", he will say, "Why then did you not believe him?" But shall we say, "Of human origin"?' —they were afraid of the crowd, for all regarded John as truly a prophet. So they answered Jesus, 'We do not know.' And Jesus said to them, 'Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things.'

Reflection

We've all encountered those people who ask questions, not because they're interested in our answers but because they want to pick a fight, shout the loudest, get their point across. It's often hard to know the best way to respond. Sometimes we simply need to hear them, let them know they have been listened to - 'Allow them their thoughts' as I read recently, and then go our way in as much peace as we can manage.

I am impressed that Jesus kept on engaging with people who were simply trying to trip him up, entangle him, get rid of him. And I am grateful. The endlessness of his patience reassures me.

These past months, we've all been challenged by authority telling us to stay home, stay away from friends and family. We've been overloaded with conspiracy theories, some significantly loopier than others but still believed in by some. Truth and authority matter. We have seen what happens when people do not accept authority, the results of democratic elections, scientifically based guidance. We've had to choose who we will believe and what, as a result, our responses will be. And then live - or die - with those results.

Jesus offered the Sanhedrin a step in the right direction - towards recognising God at work in John the Baptist and in Himself. That they had to ask the question revealed their blindness to the God they claimed to serve. Bound up with jockeying for power, position, all the administration of Temple worship - so much busy busyness - had they simply lost sight of a God who preferred kindness and mercy, truth and justice to any amount of barbecued meat?

Prayer

Open our eyes to see where You are at work. Challenge us when our traditions, politics, vested interests stand in the way of what You are doing. Give us courage to accept Your authority for our lives and wisdom to test all other claims against Yours. Amen.

Your kingdom will come, despite the best efforts of those who may oppose it. Opposition causes pain and suffering for those caught up in the moment.

We pray for those who suffer;
may you strengthen them and provide for them.
Guide us to offer support to today's prophets.
Grant us wisdom and strength to stand for the Kingdom.
Amen.

[Saturday 13th March](#) [St Mark 13: 24 - 27](#)

Alexandra Priddy, Elder and Children's Church Leader, Trinity Church URC Mill Hill

'But in those days, after that suffering,

the sun will be darkened,
and the moon will not give its light,
and the stars will be falling from heaven,
and the powers in the heavens will be shaken.

Then they will see "the Son of Man coming in clouds" with great power and glory. Then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven.

Reflection

The passage calls to mind, that there has been, and to some extent continues to be a period of 'suffering'. I am referring to the consequences of the Pandemic.

Suffering has taken many forms and the ones that have particularly touched me are:

Those who due to the lockdown have not had access to vital medical

There he is!”—do not believe it. False messiahs and false prophets will appear and produce signs and omens, to lead astray, if possible, the elect. But be alert; I have already told you everything.

Reflection

I am sure you recall dreadful scenes of frightened people running in sheer panic as the Twin Towers collapsed on 11th September 2001 in New York. The events were so dreadful that, I would wager, you can probably recall where you were when the news reached you.

Today’s apocalyptic words of Jesus foretold a “9/11” event of the classical world - the fall of the Temple in AD70. Jesus had specifically condemned the religious system of his day for its opposition of the purposes of God. It would fall, and its demise would send people running for their lives. Its downfall was so dramatic that it fundamentally affected the direction of Judaism and the embryonic Church for centuries to come.

Apocalyptic language alone captures the gravitas of this moment in time. But what about us today? Are these words now redundant - except for the purposes of history - or is there something that we can take away from the rubble of the Temple’s collapse?

Two thousand years later we still see societies, systems, institutions, and individuals setting themselves up in opposition to the purposes of God. Again, people of the prophetic tradition will rise and respond in such circumstances. If we ourselves are not caught in such a moment in time, then we should be grateful. But we should remember those who are caught up in such terrible circumstances - through prayer and acts of mercy.

Prayer

Father, we thank you that you are a God of justice and righteousness.

Thursday 4th March St Mark 12: 1 - 11

Mathias Tchatchoua, Lay Leader, Stow Park Church URC/PCW (LEP), Newport, South Wales.

Then he began to speak to them in parables. ‘A man planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a pit for the wine press, and built a watch-tower; then he leased it to tenants and went to another country. When the season came, he sent a slave to the tenants to collect from them his share of the produce of the vineyard. But they seized him, and beat him, and sent him away empty-handed. And again he sent another slave to them; this one they beat over the head and insulted. Then he sent another, and that one they killed. And so it was with many others; some they beat, and others they killed. He had still one other, a beloved son. Finally he sent him to them, saying, “They will respect my son.” But those tenants said to one another, “This is the heir; come, let us kill him, and the inheritance will be ours.” So they seized him, killed him, and threw him out of the vineyard. What then will the owner of the vineyard do? He will come and destroy the tenants and give the vineyard to others. Have you not read this scripture:

“The stone that the builders rejected
has become the cornerstone;
this was the Lord’s doing,
and it is amazing in our eyes”?’

When they realized that he had told this parable against them, they wanted to arrest him, but they feared the crowd. So they left him and went away.

Reflection

I love this parable in which Jesus characterises the sinful state of the nation and warns of terrible consequential judgements. It also speaks to

us today. We need to believe in Jesus Christ for our salvation.

The parable is full of symbolism. The fence, protecting against intrusions from wild animals and thieves, symbolises everything that distinguishes the Jewish nation from the rest of the world. The press symbolises the Tabernacle and later the Temple of Jerusalem, while the wine denotes the divinity of the worshippers flowing from the Temple as they worship God. The tower represents Jerusalem, built on a high place with God watching over and providing protection.

The Jews are the tenants, chosen by God, while the Landowner is God who led and nurtured the nation out of Egypt and into the promised land after 40 years in the desert. On reaching the promised land, however, God watches in dismay as his beloved nation flouts His laws and does not produce the fruit, He so longs to receive from them.

The servants are the prophets, kings and priests sent by God to teach the people to bear fruit. But they were beaten, insulted and even killed. Even the beloved son of the Landowner was killed, representing the nation rejecting Christ and having him crucified.

Jesus uses the vineyard to symbolise the nation. His message to those who rejected him was that God would remove the responsibility that He gave them because of their unbelief and sinful nature. Indeed, Jesus passed this responsibility to the Church gathering around the 12 apostles at Pentecost.

The vineyard landowner, God, cares for all of us. We are His children and his tenants. It is our responsibility to produce fruits for our Christian living in our family, church, workplace and society as a whole.

Prayer

Heavenly Father we thank you for sending your Son, Jesus Christ to teach us how to live our lives in your vineyard, since we are all tenants in your

Yes, there will be a new world. It is up to us, powered by Holy Spirit, to live the eternal love of God, experiencing the positive difference when we are faithful in cruel times. We Jesus-people can't afford to give up hope, giving power to the destruction of community. The historical cycle of Lent asks us to know that every bit of us, every sinew, every facial expression, every heartbeat, every word is blessed by God who mysteriously does this active love. Our role is to accept such blessing (with no argument about deserving it), share such ridiculous faith against the common angst, and fly in the face of daily panic. Let us be the blessing by being the peace our communities need.

Prayer

Oh God, really? Do I have to be strong? Is it down to me to be peace? I'm tired. Yet, as I pause, you let me know that you know. None of us is truly alone. Give us all power to lift our eyes to see our new family for new times, people of justice faith gathered by you, in you, for all.

[Friday 12th March St Mark 13: 14-23](#)

The Rev'd Daniel Harris, Minister with the Rochdale, Bury and North Manchester Missional Partnership

'But when you see the desolating sacrilege set up where it ought not to be (let the reader understand), then those in Judea must flee to the mountains; someone on the housetop must not go down or enter the house to take anything away; someone in the field must not turn back to get a coat. Woe to those who are pregnant and to those who are nursing infants in those days! Pray that it may not be in winter. For in those days there will be suffering, such as has not been from the beginning of the creation that God created until now, no, and never will be. And if the Lord had not cut short those days, no one would be saved; but for the sake of the elect, whom he chose, he has cut short those days. And if anyone says to you at that time, "Look! Here is the Messiah!" or "Look!

asked him privately, 'Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign that all these things are about to be accomplished?' Then Jesus began to say to them, 'Beware that no one leads you astray. Many will come in my name and say, "I am he!" and they will lead many astray. When you hear of wars and rumours of wars, do not be alarmed; this must take place, but the end is still to come. For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be earthquakes in various places; there will be famines. This is but the beginning of the birth pangs. 'As for yourselves, beware; for they will hand you over to councils; and you will be beaten in synagogues; and you will stand before governors and kings because of me, as a testimony to them. And the good news must first be proclaimed to all nations. When they bring you to trial and hand you over, do not worry beforehand about what you are to say; but say whatever is given you at that time, for it is not you who speak, but the Holy Spirit. Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death; and you will be hated by all because of my name. But the one who endures to the end will be saved.

Reflection

What an interesting little prophecy in the middle of the passion narrative of Jesus in Mark. These verses come to us in the second week of Lent which reminds us of the huge blessings only possible from God and that the entirety of our selves are to respond to that blessing. This section is often called the Little Apocalypse. Apocalypse is not a single event, but a revelation; something ongoing. The ongoing prophecy in this set of words could have been written in 2020 and 2021. We have seen world leaders take followers dangerously astray, siblings betraying each other, a virus as enemy, wars, earthquakes, hideous actions against faithful people. The list of anxious and fearful change is exhausting. If almost 2000 years ago, followers were told that all of these pressures were but the beginning of birth pangs, our world is in very slow gestation. Will there be a birth to new, fair and loving times? Is it even possible with what we see repeated in nation after nation?

Kingdom. We pray for wisdom to discern your message that we can only truly enjoy the blessings of the vineyard when we live according to God's commands. Amen!

Friday 5th March St Mark 12: 13 - 17

Fay Rowland, author and graduate student of Wesley House, Cambridge, worshipping with Christ the King, Kettering

Then they sent to him some Pharisees and some Herodians to trap him in what he said. And they came and said to him, 'Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and show deference to no one; for you do not regard people with partiality, but teach the way of God in accordance with truth. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not? Should we pay them, or should we not?' But knowing their hypocrisy, he said to them, 'Why are you putting me to the test? Bring me a denarius and let me see it.' And they brought one. Then he said to them, 'Whose head is this, and whose title?' They answered, 'The emperor's.' Jesus said to them, 'Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's.' And they were utterly amazed at him.

Reflection

"Render unto Caesar", it's one of those phrases which has passed from the Bible in common speech. We use it when we sigh and fill in our tax returns. At least this year we know it's doing good, supporting our wonderful, but woefully overstretched, NHS. And it's good (both for giver and receiver) to give some of our cash to benefit others.

The trouble is, Jesus wasn't talking about giving. That word 'render' is not very helpful. The Greek is apodidomi, meaning to give, pay or (and here's the relevant one) pay back.

In many ancient cultures, and in our own not so very long ago, the monarch owned everything. Really, everything. That's why Queen Elizabeth I could go on a grand tour and stay at any noble's home she chose, eating, drinking and moving on without any thought of payment.

Everything was hers anyway. The nobles were only looking after it on her behalf. Anything they 'gave' her was just giving her back her own stuff. Mind you, I don't suppose it felt like that when they'd been used to spending their groats and sovereigns however they liked and then the actual sovereign comes by and demands a reckoning. (Didn't Jesus tell a parable about that?)

And so it was with the Roman tax money. It was all Caesar's anyway, said Jesus, it had his picture and inscription, so paying taxes was just giving him back his own stuff.

And what about rendering unto God? When I 'give' to God, do I think of it as giving, or giving back? The time that I have is from God. The money I have is from God. The job I have, the family I have, the house I have, the health I have, the opportunities I have, all are from God. But it's easy to forget. It is all God's anyway and I'm just giving him back his own stuff.

Prayer

Yours, O Lord,
are the greatness, the power,
the glory, the victory,
and the majesty.

For all that is
in the heaven
and on the earth is yours.

All things come from you,
and of your own

have we given you.

Amen.

(from 2 Chronicles 29)

transcends the years. Many a preacher has waxed lyrical about the whole-hearted generosity of the poor widow. It was a paltry sum she gave, and in dramatic contrast to the large amounts of money donated to the Temple by others. But proportionately it was something else. These two tiny coins were all she had left to live on. She had given her last penny whereas the wealthy donors scarcely noticed the difference; they simply gave what they could well spare. Read like this, it is a moral tale to prick the conscience, a perfect lection for a stewardship campaign or a Commitment for Life Sunday. But the context suggests it might also be read through another lens, in the light of the previous verses. Here we have a theme frequently found in the Old Testament, a sweeping condemnation of exaction by the wealthy and powerful and of false piety that serves as a cloak for injustice. In the light of this, the poor widow in the Temple is arguably being taken advantage of; her pious extravagant gesture, a sign of exploitation by Temple authorities. Jesus is in earnest: those who oppress the poor and defenceless, people like this vulnerable widow, are failing to love God and their neighbour.

Prayer

Dear God, Show your loving kindness to all who are in need of your help. Be with the weak to make them strong and the strong to make them gentle. Bless your church in the fulfilment of her calling. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

[Thursday 11th March St Mark 13: 1-13](#)

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

As he came out of the temple, one of his disciples said to him, 'Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!' Then Jesus asked him, 'Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down.' When he was sitting on the Mount of Olives opposite the temple, Peter, James, John, and Andrew

We hope to find the true meaning of our practice and our tradition with fear and trembling hearts.

Prayer

Dear Lord,
We thank you for the beauty of our tradition and the preciousness of our acts of worship.
By the guidance of the Holy Spirit,
Let our hearts, traditions, and worship, be renewed and restored,
Through which, we may find God much closer to us
And that we may bring the true meaning of 'good' news to others.
We love you Lord, with all our hearts, our minds and our strengths.
Amen.

Wednesday 10th March St Mark 12: 41 - 44

The Rev'd Fleur Houston, retired minister, member, Macclesfield and Bollington URC.

He sat down opposite the treasury, and watched the crowd putting money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums. A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which are worth a penny. Then he called his disciples and said to them, 'Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. For all of them have contributed out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on.'

Reflection

There is something profoundly human about this little story which

Saturday 6th March St Mark 12: 18 - 27

The Rev'd Ian Gow, Minister, Eltham United Reformed Church.

Some Sadducees, who say there is no resurrection, came to him and asked him a question, saying, 'Teacher, Moses wrote for us that if a man's brother dies, leaving a wife but no child, the man shall marry the widow and raise up children for his brother. There were seven brothers; the first married and, when he died, left no children; and the second married her and died, leaving no children; and the third likewise; none of the seven left children. Last of all the woman herself died. In the resurrection whose wife will she be? For the seven had married her.' Jesus said to them, 'Is not this the reason you are wrong, that you know neither the scriptures nor the power of God? For when they rise from the dead, they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven. And as for the dead being raised, have you not read in the book of Moses, in the story about the bush, how God said to him, "I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob"? He is God not of the dead, but of the living; you are quite wrong.'

Reflection

On September 13th 1982, Princess Grace of Monaco was killed in a car crash. The accident captured the attention of the world with 100 million people watching the funeral. Grace Kelly had become something so magical, enigmatic, and perfect, that people could not believe that she was anything other than angelic; goddess like. Public perception and reaction was similar to that after the death of Princess Diana in 1997 when a nation mourned for the angelic figure that had ascended to glory. When words fail, music fills the void as illustrated in Elton John's ballad, "Candle in the Wind". When human beings in their millions try to come to terms with the loss of a beloved public icon it is not unnatural for them to imagine that, in some way, they have become angelic. In reality although there is nothing in the Bible to support this view.

The Sadducees were a small but prominent, wealthy Jewish sect, who did

not believe in resurrection, angels or spirits, unlike their Pharisaic counterparts. (Acts.23:8). Their intention was to demonstrate the absurdity of the resurrection, assuming that in resurrection life human relationships will continue unchanged, as they are in this present life; a concept denounced by Jesus in his retort that in resurrection life there will be no marriage; on the contrary, men and women will be like angels. The illogicality of the Sadducean question was that they failed to appreciate that the Old Testament did, in fact, teach the resurrection and that God has the ability to accomplish it. God's original intention in creating humankind, a perfect unity of body and soul, was to ensure that future resurrection allowed the Abrahamic covenant to be fully restored in fellowship and blessing with Him.

Prayer

Loving Father, thank you so much that we can look to the future with peace and confidence. We place ourselves in your hands and trust you for all that is to come. Amen

Sunday 7th March Psalm 34

The Rev'd Dominic Grant, minister, Barnet URC and St Andrew's Chesterfield Road URC

*Taste and see, taste and see
the goodness of the Lord.*

*Oh, taste and see, taste and see
the goodness of the Lord, of the
Lord.*

1 I will bless the Lord at all times.
Praise shall always be on my lips;
my soul shall glory in the Lord;
for God has been so good to me.

2 Glorify the Lord with me.

Together let us all praise God's
name.

I called the Lord, who answered
me;
from all my troubles I was set
free.

3 Worship the Lord, all you
people.

You'll want for nothing if you ask.
Taste and see that the Lord is

12 good;

prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation.'

Reflection

When I was young, I was greatly encouraged by a youth minister in my church and, with his good influence, I was growing up with a dream to be a minister of the Church like him. I often imagined myself wearing a nice long clerical robe and have been overwhelmed by a sense of calling from God and by the great passion to serve the Lord.

Now I do not wear the robe, but a clerical collar which reminds me of my identity in Christ, which is something that I prayed for since I was young. It has reminded me what my attitude should be like for my ministry: it was all about calling, identity, responsibility 'with fear and trembling' (Phil.2:12) before God and before people.

In addition, 'prayer' is supposed to be a significant practice in our personal relationship with God where we bring our concerns into God's hands. Prayer for the world in this sense is special.

However, this passage has quite different meaning: 'the long robes' and 'the long prayer' of the scribes here actually hide what was in their inner hearts – a sense of privilege, pride, hierarchy with self-centred greed without compassion.

We know that the point in this passage is not about the long robe nor the long prayer. It is about our hearts, the true motivation of it, which could be hidden from other people, but not from God.

I think that, however, the real point might be about 'the long robes' and 'the long prayer' whose true meanings have been distorted, but to be renewed and restored. As Mark draws our attention into the destruction of the Temple in the next chapter (13), the point is about restoration, not abandonment, to rebuild the Temple with its true meaning of God's dwelling place that is built not by stones but by the Spirit.

Jesus' words about love can feel mundane and obvious, easy to be overlooked in the need to get on with the important, demanding, and challenging activities that everyday life brings.

Yet these words offer what can feel like the hardest challenge – a challenge that silenced Jesus' listeners. Loving God means building up my relationship with God in prayer and in taking time in the midst of a busy round to listen for God's voice. Loving my neighbour is not just about loving those like me that I get on with, but loving the stranger, the alien, the person with whom I feel I have nothing in common.

Love is not a simple and easy road. It leads to the way of the cross. It takes me to the point of reflecting on who I really am and seeing the barriers I put in place of being filled with God's love.

Prayer

Loving God, may I grow in my knowledge and experience of your love for me. Take from me the barriers that I put in the way of being filled with your love. As I grow in this love, may it flow out of my life to you and my neighbour. Help me to love you with all of my being. Help me to love my neighbour, whether friend or stranger, as you love me. Amen

Tuesday 9th March St Mark 12: 38 - 40

The Rev'd Barnabas Shin, Minister, Billericay, Brentwood & Ingatestone URCs

As he taught, he said, 'Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and to be greeted with respect in the market-places, and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honour at banquets! They devour widows' houses and for the sake of appearance say long

in God we need put all our trust.

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You can hear this Psalm sung here
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hHv35gKTK9M>

Reflection

To food and beverage companies, a "blind taste test" can be an important tool for research and recipe development. Participants are asked to taste two near-identical products from competing brands, without knowing which is which, and say which one they prefer. It's also - if discerning cola drinkers and 80% of felines are to be believed – a well-used marketing technique!

Today's Psalm is a song of witness: affirming an intention to praise God always, the singer testifies to God's readiness to rescue and provide. And this gives rise to an invitation, which our paraphrase-setting conveys well: "Together let us all praise... In God we need put all our trust... Taste and see!" Indeed the full text of Psalm 34 expands upon the good things in store for those who answer the invitation: freedom from shame (v5), protection from foes (v7, 21), answers to prayer (v15, 17).

In my encounters with this Psalm, I've tended to associate "Taste and see" with that idea of marketing – the confident tone of a TV advertisement voice-over, or even the free trial period offered by online subscription services. Just give it a try, and we're confident that you'll quickly be won over – that sort of thing.

Thinking about it, though, I'm not so sure that's what the Psalm is trying to say. The Hebrew word used here for "taste" is less about evaluating, more about experiencing. We're invited to taste, not in order to choose between competing options, but rather in order to discover the reality of

God's presence.

And Psalm 34 would have us know just how immediate God's presence really is. Testimonies may be heard, signs may be seen, but such things are still external to us, and we perceive them from afar. Yet God does not remain far-off: God reaches right into our experience, not just perceived but tasted!

And in Jesus, God has come among us; flesh and blood become the place of divine encounter.

Prayer

God of sound and sight, God of touch and taste,
God incarnate, hallowing this world:
be magnified in our theories and our thoughts;
be blessed in our praises and our prayers;
be honoured in our choices and achievements.
And above all, and in all,
be present in our today
and all our tomorrows.
Amen.

[Monday 8th March St Mark 12: 28 - 37](#)

The Rev'd Dr Elizabeth Welch, retired minister, active theologically and ecumenically, member of St Andrews URC, Ealing.

One of the scribes came near and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well, he asked him, 'Which commandment is the first of all?' Jesus answered, 'The first is, "Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength." The second is this, "You shall love your neighbour as yourself." There is no other commandment greater than these.' Then the scribe said to him, 'You are right, Teacher; you have

truly said that "he is one, and besides him there is no other"; and "to love him with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the strength", and "to love one's neighbour as oneself",—this is much more important than all whole burnt-offerings and sacrifices.' When Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him, 'You are not far from the kingdom of God.' After that no one dared to ask him any question.

While Jesus was teaching in the temple, he said, 'How can the scribes say that the Messiah is the son of David? David himself, by the Holy Spirit, declared,

"The Lord said to my Lord,
'Sit at my right hand,
until I put your enemies under your feet.'"

David himself calls him Lord; so how can he be his son?' And the large crowd was listening to him with delight.

Reflection

'All you need is love, love, love is all you need' So the Beatles first sang in 1967, as Britain's contribution to Our World, the first live global television link. It's an appropriate song to sing to the whole world, with words that point to the way in which love can hold people together, across boundaries and barriers. It is just as appropriate today, in the midst of the political tensions and fears across the world, and in the increasing polarisations between people of different views and understandings in a whole range of areas.

The words of the song resonate with Jesus' teaching about love, a teaching just as relevant today as two thousand years ago. Love is God's gift, flowing out of God's nature and being, and made visible in the birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus. In response to this gift, we are called to love, both God and one another.