

The Gospel according to

MARK:

a personal view

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Preface

I was stationed in the Catholic parish of Christ the Redeemer, in Lagmore, West Belfast, Northern Ireland, between 2001 and 2007. When the liturgical year 2005-06 began on the first Sunday of Advent, 27 November 2005, with the Gospel of Mark as the Sunday Gospel, I decided to begin a study of it, in order to learn more about it and understand it better, and, hopefully, to be able to preach better on it at Sunday Mass. I also hoped that this study would be of benefit to me in my faith.

It was never on my mind, then or now, that it be published. It is not good enough for that. I have had no formal training in scripture studies, other than what I learned in preparing for the priesthood. Mostly, it has been a matter of what I learned in later years from reflection in daily prayer and personal study, of which I did a good deal.

It took me more than a year to complete the study of Mark, but I found that it carried me along, and I wanted to bring it to completion. I was glad to be able to do that early in 2007.

The finished product I printed and bound principally for my own use, simply to make it

easier to refer to for study or preaching. If it benefits anyone else, that is a welcome bonus.

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Bibles

Except where otherwise noted, the *New Revised Standard Version of the Holy Bible* (Geoffrey Chapman, London, 1993), is the text used in this book.

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Note

(v.) is the abbreviation for verse, vv. for verses.

The Gospel of MARK: a personal view

Introduction

Mark is commonly identified with the John Mark of Acts (12.12, 25; 15.37, 39, and 1 Peter 5.13), who lived in Jerusalem, and accompanied Barnabas, his cousin (Colossians 4.10), and Paul on their first missionary journey. He may have been a prisoner with Paul in Rome. The gospel which bears his name does not state who wrote it, and the ascription to Mark comes from tradition. John is a Jewish forename, while Mark is a Greek surname. Described as a disciple and possible interpreter of Peter's, Mark nonetheless gives Peter no greater prominence than do Matthew or Luke. Mark was probably a Greek-speaking Jew from the Jerusalem area.

Mark wrote in Greek, in a style which was basic, but vivid and detailed; he likes statistics. A skilful writer, he knows how to select material, to edit it for his own purpose, and to place it for greatest effect. He uses a "sandwich" technique in which he brackets a story between two others for special effect. He in-builds mnemonics for ease of memorization. But he is regarded as not having been an eye-witness to the events he describes; his references to Palestinian geography are sometimes inaccurate. Unlike Matthew, he is

not greatly concerned to establish links with the Hebrew bible (the Old Testament), and some of his attempts to do so are unconvincing. He writes neither a biography, nor a history but a gospel, that is, a work of faith addressed to faith. He is not interested in chronological sequence, nor accuracy in reporting events as a reporter might be expected to write them up.

Mark's is the earliest of the four gospels, written after Peter's death, probably between 65 and 70. It was used as a source by Matthew and Luke, so it seems that it must have been regarded as faithful to the original preaching of the apostles about Jesus. Mark drew on existing traditions, both written and oral, from the community of faith before him, perhaps in and around Jerusalem, with Peter perhaps being prominent among his sources. According to Papias, Mark, who was Peter's interpreter and close associate, his "son" (1 Peter 5.13), wrote down Peter's sermons and they became the basis of his Gospel. His audience was probably one of Gentile Christians, unfamiliar with Jewish customs, and living either in Rome or Roman territory; so Mark explains Jewish words and customs. His readers were people of the second generation of Christians who needed a written record, as the original eye-witnesses were dying off. Probably with their interests in mind, Mark writes with a universalist perspective, taking care to include Gentiles in Jesus' mission. He omits

an account of Jesus' birth or early years, but, with characteristic brevity, sees the opening thirteen verses as adequately setting the scene. Jesus is there depicted as both royal Messiah and Suffering Servant.

Although Mark begins his gospel, saying, 'the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God' (1.1), he clearly shows Jesus as a man. He is not afraid of the humanity of Jesus, as if it should be down-played in order to highlight his divinity. The matter is not an either-or, but both. For Mark, Jesus, the carpenter from Nazareth, is the human face and presence of God. He presents a picture of Jesus, who, after an initially enthusiastic response, loses support when people came to see, and be disappointed, that his mission was not that of a political liberator who would drive out the Romans and restore the kingdom of Israel. Mark focuses on why Jesus, although neither understood nor accepted, was nonetheless truly God's messenger who carried out his mission. For Mark, Jesus is the crucified Messiah. He contrasts the recognition and acceptance of Jesus by God, devils, angels, and many ordinary people, with his being misunderstood by his relatives and disciples, and opposed by the religious authorities. While the resurrection of Jesus is God's ultimate answer to Jesus' opponents, their opposition is itself used by God to fulfil the scriptures. The way of Jesus, that of humility and

suffering, is in contrast to the prevailing Jewish hopes of a triumphant warrior-king.

Mark's gospel is organized around the idea that, in order to understand the parables, sayings, and teachings of Jesus, one must accept him as the one sent by God, destined to be rejected, to suffer, to die, and to be raised to life again by God. There is a significant turning-point around this theme in 8.27-30. To understand Jesus, and what it means to follow him, his disciples must understand and accept that his way is one of suffering.

Unlike Matthew and Luke, who devote much space to Jesus' teaching, Mark's primary concern in the first part of his gospel, that is, up to 8.26, is with the miracles of Jesus; they point to the coming of God's rule. They are meant to answer the question about Jesus, 'Who then is this?' (4.41) He cites many "works of power" by him, especially exorcisms, in which evil spirits proclaim him as Son of God. He presents Jesus as a prophet, healer, exorcist, teacher, the messiah whom he identifies with the Suffering Servant of God, and, especially, as Son of God who will suffer, die, and rise again.

In Mark, the mission of Jesus is to die and to rise. For him, what matters is that Jesus was the Messiah, the Suffering Servant of God, the Son of God, who proclaimed the kingdom, taught,

worked wonders, suffered, died, and rose. These events were historical and saving. A secondary theme is that of the kingdom of God which Mark sees as a future reality; it has been called Jesus' resistance movement to the prevailing standards of the world.

The "messianic secret" is an important theme in Mark's gospel. During his public ministry, Jesus did not claim to be Messiah, but neither did he deny that he was. The only title he claimed was that of Son of Man, a title which essentially means 'a man'. He concealed his identity as Messiah until late (see 14.61b-62), probably because of the mistaken hopes it would arouse of his being a political messiah who would drive out the Romans and re-establish the kingdom of Israel. He could then safely make the claim, since his situation as a helpless prisoner precluded such misrepresentation of him. Jesus was Messiah, but it was only when he had endured suffering and death, that the title could be given him by God. The secrecy and mystery about the title relates more to Jesus as Son of God than as Messiah; the title of Messiah is misplaced.

Jesus changed people's ideas about God: the means God chooses to achieve his goals are not power and majesty, but humility and suffering. Mark's gospel, a passion narrative with an extended introduction, shows Jesus' suffering, death, and resurrection as inseparable. And, as

for the master, so also for the disciple. While Paul gives a theology about Jesus, Mark puts a human face on him. But Mark is only the messenger; his message is ‘the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.’ (Mark 1.1)

It is said that, about 49 AD, Mark became the founder of the church in Africa, and bishop in Alexandria. Coptic tradition has him dying a martyr’s death in 68 AD.

Introduction to the Gospel: Mark 1.1

V.1. The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

In one phrase, Mark sees Jesus as the Son of God. (See also 15.39) While Paul gives a theology of the Christ, Mark shows the human face of God in Jesus. To the person asking, 'Where can I see God?' Mark answers, 'Look at Jesus; he is the image of God'. It is through Jesus that we learn what God is like.

For a person to say simply, 'I believe in God' is to leave an essential question unanswered, perhaps unasked, namely, 'What kind of God is it that you believe in?' The Aztecs believed in God; in fidelity to that belief, they offered many thousands of people in human sacrifice. The question therefore is not unimportant; in his gospel, Mark gives the answer of the early Christian community.

Mark is the only gospel writer who uses the title of 'good news' for his work. The word *gospel* means good news, or god-spel in Old English. Mark sees it, not so much as an account of events, but a revelation of who Jesus is.

Some manuscripts omit the phrase 'Son of God', so that Jesus is presented as the Christ, that is, the Messiah. But it is a title Mark uses at two key points, namely, the trial of Jesus in 14.61-62: 'The high priest asked him, "Are you the

Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One?" Jesus said, "I am; and you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of the Power, and coming with the clouds of heaven"; and in 15.39, describing Jesus' death on the cross: 'When the centurion, who stood facing him, saw that in this way he cried out and breathed his last, he said, "Truly this man was God's Son!"'

Mark 1.2-8 The preaching of John the Baptist:

2. As it is written in the prophet Isaiah, 'See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way;

3. the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight'.

4. John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

5. And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

6. Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey.

7. He proclaimed, 'The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals.

8. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit’.

Mark has nothing of the childhood or early manhood of Jesus. He starts with John the Baptist, and then goes on to the beginning of Jesus’ public ministry.

V.2: It is surprising for Mark to begin with a quotation from the Hebrew Bible (which he attributes to Isaiah, though in fact it combines Malachi 3.1 and Isaiah 40.3), since he was writing for Gentiles who would not have been familiar with it. Perhaps he wanted to establish Jesus’ credentials with potential Jewish readers also.

Vv.2-7: Malachi sees this messenger as Elijah: ‘I will send you the prophet Elijah before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes’. (4.5) Who then was this returned Elijah – John the Baptist or Jesus? If we take it as John, then that points to Jesus as the Lord, and this reinforces Mark’s purpose. But John rejects this: ‘They asked him, “What then? Are you Elijah?” He said, “I am not.” (John 1.21) He strongly implies that it is Jesus, ‘one who is more powerful than I am is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.’ (Matthew 3.11) Later, John asks of Jesus, ‘Are you the one who is to come, or are

we to wait for another?’ (Matthew 11.3) He seems unsure to whom it refers. But Jesus says it is John: ‘if you are willing to accept it, he is Elijah who is to come.’ (Matthew 11.14) These early Christian attempts at interpreting texts of the Hebrew bible are problematic.

The baptism of Jesus: Mark 1.9-11

9. In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan.

10. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him.

11. And a voice came from heaven, ‘You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased.’

There are parallel passages in Matthew 3.1-12 and Luke 3.3-17.

V.10 is probably an allusion to Isaiah, ‘O that you would tear open the heavens and come down...’ (64.1) The passage uses apocalyptic imagery and language.

V. 11 is a combined quotation from Psalm 2.7, ‘You are my son; today I have begotten you’, and Isaiah, ‘Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights’. (42.1) This latter is used in adapted form in the

transfiguration of Jesus, ‘This is my Beloved Son; listen to him!’ (9.7)

Both these experiences have been called ‘theophanies’ (from the Greek *theos*, God, and *phania*, appearance), meaning a visible appearance or manifestation of God to a person. In both cases, one has the impression of the gospel writer struggling with the inadequacy of human language to convey an image of something that went beyond human experience. In this passage, the experience is confined to Jesus.

The early Christians had difficulties with the story. Jesus, the sinless one, did not need baptism. Yet the fact must have been there, like it or not, and could not be omitted without being unfaithful to the data. So Mark included it.

Why was Jesus baptized? It seems unlikely that it was just “for the sake of giving good example”. That sounds like posturing, something alien to Jesus’ character. Was it to associate himself with a sinful humanity, saying, in effect, ‘I’m one of you’? Is it linked to the thought that, ‘For our sake he [God] made him to be sin who knew no sin [Jesus], so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.’ (2 Corinthians 5.21) Clearly, Jesus was like the rest of humanity in that he experienced failure. The gospel is not a success story, and we falsify it if we try to make

it one. Jesus, who may not even have won over his own family, is someone people can relate to in times of failure.

Perhaps it was because Jesus' baptism marked a turning point, inaugurating in himself something which was a break from Jewish tradition.

Or was it a sign that the carpenter from Capernaum had embarked on a new way of life, and this was perhaps his inaugural declaration of an in-breaking Rule of God?

Another, not incompatible, interpretation is that Jesus, the one like us in all things but sin, made holy the water of the Jordan, thereby gracing all creation, everything material; as a man, he descended into the cleansing water, and, ascending from it, lifted humanity up with him to God.

The focus of the account is on Jesus rather than John. It shows God's seal of approval on him from the beginning. It has also been seen in Christian tradition as having a Trinitarian character, with the presence of the Father (the voice in v.11), the Son (Jesus), and the Holy Spirit (the dove). It points towards Mark's principal theme: Jesus is the Son of God.

The occasion is perhaps remembered in Acts 10.38: 'God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power; ... he went about doing good and healing all that were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him'.

The temptation of Jesus: Mark 1.12-13

12. And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness.

13. He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.

Matthew and Luke say that Jesus was 'led' by the Spirit; Mark's expression is stronger, suggesting that he didn't have much choice in the matter. The word used is the same as that for Jesus' expulsion of demons.

The wilderness was seen as a place of evil spirits; nobody could live there, except wild animals. There may be here an echo of Isaiah: -

6. The wolf shall live with the lamb,
the leopard shall lie down with the kid,
the calf and the lion and the fatling together,
and a little child shall lead them.

7. The cow and the bear shall graze,
their young shall lie down together;
and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.

8. The nursing child shall play at the den of the asp,

and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den.

9. They will not hurt or destroy
on all my holy mountain;
for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the
Lord
as the waters cover the sea'. (11.6-9)

This idyllic scene, a familiar theme in the literature of many cultures, represents the dream of a Golden Age when people and nature would live in harmony. Jews saw this as a sign of the messianic age. Mark may be suggesting that the messianic age has come with Jesus.

The 'forty' days need not be taken literally; forty is used in the Bible as a handy term for a large number. In Genesis 7.4, at the time of the Flood, rain fell on the earth for forty days and forty nights; in Exodus 16.35, the Hebrews were in the desert and ate manna for forty years; in 1 Samuel 4.18, Eli judged Israel for forty years; David was king of Israel for forty years. (2 Samuel 5.4) Perhaps more to the point for Mark's purpose, Moses was on the mountain with God for forty days and forty nights (Exodus 24.18); and equally, Elijah went into the desert where he was fed by angels, and 'he went in the strength of that food forty days and forty nights to Horeb, the mountain of God'. (1 Kings 19.8) There Elijah had an encounter with God and received a mission from him. Mark is surely using the term 'forty' symbolically; he is consciously inserting

Jesus into the spiritual lineage of Moses and Elijah. In Kabbalah literature, the number forty has messianic significance.

Why forty? Was it in some way linked to forty weeks' gestation in the human womb? In some cultures, forty years was regarded as a generation, while in others it was average life expectancy. It was important in the Minoan calendar.

To take the language of symbolism literally is to devalue it. When Jesus said, 'I am the vine, you are the branches' (John 15.5) he was not speaking literally. When William Shakespeare wrote, 'All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players...' he was not doing so either. To take those statements as literal is not an act of fidelity to the text; rather is it a failure of imagination, or even an act of intellectual suicide.

Was the story of the temptation Mark's way of saying that, like Moses and Elijah before him, Jesus went through a period of trial and testing, an encounter with himself and with evil, from which he emerged stronger, ready to undertake the mission God gave him? Perhaps it is a dramatized representation of the struggle between good and evil, using apocalyptic imagery. For temptation to be real, there has to be a genuine choice. Jesus had such a choice; it

may be read as one between following his own path and the path mapped out for him by God.

Maybe it is also a first sign of trouble ahead, a suggestion that, from the beginning, Jesus' mission is going to be a struggle between good and evil, from which, by the power of God, he would emerge victorious.

The beginning of the Galilean ministry: Mark 1.14-15

14. Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God,

15. and saying, 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news'.

If the story of the temptation of Jesus ends with a hint of trouble, this account of the beginning of his Galilean ministry starts with another: 'after John was arrested'. The word used here for arrested is the same as that used later about Jesus: 'arrest him and lead him away under guard'. (14.44) John had been arrested by Herod Antipas, ruler of Galilee, because he objected to John's preaching and specifically to John's condemnation of his taking his living brother, Philip's, wife as his own. The reference to his arrest is probably a reminder of the fate of so many of the prophets, and a hint that a similar one awaits Jesus.

Galilee ‘of the nations’ (Isaiah 8.23 {9.1}) was on a trading route between the surrounding peoples and was an area of mixed population. It was where Jesus spent most of his life and ministry, but was looked down upon by the Jews of Jerusalem and Judea: ‘Can anything good come out of Nazareth?’ (John 1.46), and, ‘no prophet is to arise from Galilee’. (John 7.52) But after the defeat of the Jews in the war against the Romans from 66 to 70 AD, it became a centre of Jewish settlement and learning. Outsiders becoming insiders is a motif that runs through the gospel. Against a provincialist background, the mention of Galilee suggests a universalist vision.

V.15: ‘Believe in the good news’ is a summary of the Christian faith. Jesus proclaims ‘good news’, not good advice. Good news is always welcome; good advice is another matter. Good news we are glad to hear and to share; good advice we often wish the pedantic bore offering it would keep to himself. Good news is to be enjoyed, good advice endured.

Receptiveness to the good news requires repentance. To repent means to think again (Latin *re*, again, *pensare*, to think), to take a second look at things. It is about awareness, opening the eyes, seeing the world and oneself in a new way, and adopting new standards and priorities. It is

not reducible to moral conversion, but that may be a sign that it is authentic.

What is the ‘good news’ that Jesus invites people to believe in? It is that the period of waiting is over, ‘the time is fulfilled’, and God has intervened in the world in a unique way through and in the person of Jesus. The Rule of God has come. God is not impersonal or remote, but has come among humans, and become one of us. Jesus is the way to God. For those seeking God, the good news is that their search is over, because God has come to them; in Jesus, he has visited his people. In the words of Saint Athanasius, ‘God became man that man might become God’. (Saint Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, n.12; Saint Augustine, *Sermon 13 on the Nativity of the Lord*)

John proclaimed ‘a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins’. (1.4) In effect, he said, ‘Repent, and you will be forgiven’. Generations of Jewish preachers before him, and Christian preachers after him, have said the same. They make repentance the pre-condition for forgiveness: no repentance, no forgiveness. But where John preached repentance which leads to salvation, Jesus preached salvation which leads to repentance. He said, ‘repent, and believe in the good news’. (1.15) What is the good news? It is that ‘the time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God has come’. (1.15) The kingdom of God means

that God is present in the world, and that God's presence is a saving one. It means that forgiveness is a present reality; for John, it was something to be hoped for in the future. The former is what Jesus invites people to believe in. Belief in a forgiving God leads to repentance; the knowledge that one is loved unconditionally is what leads a person to turn from what is unloving, to turn from the un-freedom of self-love to the freedom to love the other.

There is a different chain of cause and effect in John's and Jesus' preaching. This may have marked a break between them. It is not difficult to think of John as scandalized by Jesus' tolerant attitude towards sinners. The Pharisees certainly were, as pharisees have been ever since. Is it that they see religion as being about getting "sinners" into line, making them sort themselves out, pulling their socks up, and that they saw Jesus as permissive, courting popularity by lowering standards? After all, he loved all sinners, not just repentant ones. Jesus knew that love, not compliance, is what matters, and love cannot be forced. No amount of moral persuasion, law, or "holy" blackmail can evoke it. For their admission to God's kingdom, he asked, not for repentance, but for acceptance of him; that scandalized the Pharisees.

I recall a discussion on the parable of the prodigal son in Luke 15. 11-32. The question was

asked, ‘At what point in the parable did the father forgive the son?’ Various answers were suggested, usually related to significant turning points along the path of the story. Then an elderly man, the father of thirteen children, spoke, ‘The father never forgave him’. This was greeted with astonishment, and he was asked to explain. He said, ‘The father never forgave him. He knew his son so well, and loved him so much, that he never took offence in the first place’. The elderly man was saying, in his way, that God is always forgiving, that love and forgiveness are inseparable from God’s nature; they are not dependent on any human factor, such as the presence or absence of repentance. The initiative lies with God, not with humans. Where God is present, love and forgiveness are present.

Jesus calls the first disciples: Mark 1.16-20

16. As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the sea - for they were fishermen.

17. And Jesus said to them, ‘Follow me and I will make you into fishers of men’. (*Jerusalem Bible* version; NRSV has ‘I will make you fish for people’.)

18. And immediately they left their nets and followed him.

19. As he went a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John, who were in their boat mending the nets.

20. Immediately he called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men, and followed him.

V.16: the phrase ‘passed along’ sounds casual, as if Jesus just happened to be taking a stroll. But it has significant earlier usage, where God says, ‘I will make all my goodness pass before you’, and ‘while my glory passes by’. (Exodus 33.19, 22) And the phrase is widely used in the gospels where a significant moment is intended, e.g. in Mark 2.14.

These fishermen were not poor; in a country almost devoid of trees, they had boats, probably built of imported wood. They could afford to hire workers.

V.17: There is a touch of humour in Jesus’ saying to Simon and Andrew, the fishermen, ‘I will make you into fishers of men’. Word-plays and puns appeal to biblical writers. A Jewish acquaintance of mine once told me he could tell from the gospel that Jesus was a Jew, just by his sense of humour. Jesus sometimes played with words, and sometimes with people. He spoke of:

- generous givers hiring trumpeters to advertise their charity;
- picking from another person’s eye the speck of sawdust they can see through the plank in their own;

- guests of honour deliberately sitting far from the top table in order to attract attention to themselves when moved up;
- filtering out a gnat, while swallowing a camel;
- putting a lamp under a bed instead of on a table;
- oppressive rulers demanding to be called benefactors.

He asked whether grapes grow on a cactus or figs on a thistle.

He mocked useless teachers, calling them 'blind guides'.

He asked his hearers what they went out into the desert to see - a reed shaking in the wind or a man wearing fine clothes.

Two of his followers, tied to their mother's apron strings, who then got exaggerated notions about themselves, he nicknamed 'sons of thunder'.

He was won over by the lively repartee of the Syrophoenician woman.

He made fun of the scribes' view of scripture.

He laughed in surprise at Nathanael's shock at his statement about seeing him under the fig tree. 'Do you believe because I told you...'

His humour sometimes had an edge to it. Much, of course, depends on the tone with which something is said. Irony, spoken with gentle firmness, can be a wake-up call. Humour can dissolve tension, freeing us from stubbornness and self-importance. It helps us to laugh at ourselves, and to accept a difficult truth. A sign of healthy religion is when we can laugh about it;

a need to be poker-faced betrays a nervous uncertainty. We learn about and appreciate more readily what we can laugh at.

Mark's account of the calling of the first disciples underlines the promptness and the totality of their response. There are two "immediatelies" in the account. It is a "get up and go" response; there are no ifs or buts or maybes, or "I'll think about it". There is an energy, freshness and vitality here, the sense of a brave beginning. The response was made with actions, not words. Twice it says, 'they left...', underlying the need for renunciation in the following of Jesus. (By contrast, John's account suggests a less speedy, more reflective response in which Andrew takes the initiative: 1.35-42.)

Yet there must have been more to it than that. How likely is it that men, probably married and with families, working in a reasonably prosperous family business, would, or even could or should, drop everything and immediately follow a stranger at his invitation? What provision did they make for their wives and families? What about Zebedee, the father of James and John? Where did this leave him? Jesus had an attractive and engaging personality, but Mark gives no hint that the four men he called already knew him, so would they really have upped and left just like that? It seems unlikely, but, as with other gospel writers, Mark probably

felt free to adapt his account significantly to his religious purpose: to show that the apostles followed Jesus unconditionally, that they were with him from the beginning of his mission, and that they accepted that being a disciple of Jesus involved renunciation.

For Mark, the heart of discipleship is the following of Jesus, not the observance of commands, however important, nor membership of a religious institution, nor attendance at worship. To be 'with him' is what counts.

The man with an unclean spirit: Mark 1.21-28

21. They went to Capernaum; and when the Sabbath came, he entered the synagogue and taught.

22. They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes.

23. Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit,

24. and he cried out, 'What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God'.

25. But Jesus rebuked him, saying, 'Be silent, and come out of him!'

26. And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him.

27. They were all amazed, and they kept on asking one another, 'What is this? A new

teaching - with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him’.

28. At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.

This story is one of many similar ones in Mark, for whom they have great significance. The demons were the first to recognize Jesus as the Messiah, the Holy One of God. (See also 1.34; 3.11; 5.7.) The afflicted man spoke in the plural, perhaps to highlight the contrast to the One who was present, ‘What have you to do with us? Have you come to destroy us?’ (The *Jerusalem Bible* has the demons, not the man, speaking.) Jesus responded by acting with authority: ‘He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him’. Mark twice (vv.22, 27) emphasizes Jesus’ authority. It came from his personality, not from an official position, for he had none. Jesus’ authority, like his teaching, is exercised in action; his works of power were parables in action. Mark points to it again in Jesus’ claim to forgive sins (2.10), and to have authority over the Sabbath (2.28). Mark is building up his case that Jesus is from God and has the power of God at work in him.

What was the problem that troubled the man in the synagogue? Was it a mental illness of some kind, or a brain disorder such as epilepsy? In the Hebrew bible, there are no instances of demonic possession. The episode may be a way of

dramatizing the contrast between the forces of evil, which could not but recognize Jesus as the Messiah, and the leaders of his own people, who refused to do so?

When Jesus cured someone suffering from mental illness, what vocabulary did the gospel writers have to describe such illness? Perhaps no more than a popular vocabulary based on inadequate medical knowledge, namely, the language of possession. Jesus was truly a man, a man of a particular time and place, which is not our time and place. He accepted the theology, the medical understanding, and the folklore of his *milieu*. If he were on earth today, the kind of unclean spirits (“demons”), he would want to free people from might be the old reliables – addictions e.g. to money, power, sex, alcohol, or drugs, or from unforgiveness, fear, hatred, etc.

This story has a broadly similar character to others in Jesus’ early ministry. Jesus meets a human need, and draws people to himself in a personal way. He challenges people, especially religious authorities, to re-think their ideas and attitudes.

Jesus heals many at Simon's house: Mark 1.29-34

29. As soon as they left the synagogue, they entered the house of Simon and Andrew, with James and John.

30. Now Simon's mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they told him about her at once.

31. He came and took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them.

32. That evening, at sundown, they brought to him all who were sick or possessed with demons.

33. And the whole city was gathered around the door.

34. And he cured many who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons; and he would not permit the demons to speak, because they knew him.

V.29: 'they entered the house'. In similar private situations, Jesus often gives his disciples a fuller explanation of his actions and teaching.

V.31: the words 'he lifted her up' may also mean 'he raised her from the dead'. This usage is found in 5.41; 8.31; 9.9-10; 10.34; 14.28; 16.6. There is a message in the implication that the sign of her restoration to full life was a readiness for service.

There is a tradition that Simon Peter and the other apostles, except perhaps John, were married. It is based in part on this passage of the gospel, and in part also on the fact that it was

unusual for a man in Jesus' time not to marry. 'Be fruitful and multiply' (Genesis 1.22) was the first of God's commands to his people - the only commandment man ever kept, say some! - and a man or woman without a child was considered an incomplete person. The same is true in many parts of the Third World today. It was almost inconceivable for a person to choose not to marry; it was, and is, seen as a denial of one's humanity, or even as a refusal to fulfil one's primary duty as a human being, to reproduce, and, implicitly, therefore, as a rejection of family, community and society.

Celibacy was not part of mainstream Jewish tradition, although communities such as the Essenes may have included celibates. The celibacy of Jeremiah (16.1-13) is probably unique in the Hebrew bible, both as to the fact and to its significance. He was told not to take a wife, and not to go into any house of mourning or feasting. This was intended as a warning to the people of Israel that their day of doom was coming, because they had abandoned God, and were about to be expelled from the land.

The Catholic church bases its exclusion of women from the ministerial priesthood on the principle that the church cannot do other than Christ did. Since he did not ordain women, neither can the church, so the argument goes. But Jesus chose married men, such as Simon, as his

closest disciples. Yet the church excludes married men, allowing only celibates. In this respect, it not only does other than Christ did, but it actually excludes those he included. One of the characteristics of Jesus that is so sharply in contrast with the Pharisees is that, while they were exclusive, he was inclusive.

Did Jesus ordain bishops, priests and deacons? Did he ordain anyone, as ordination is understood today – making a priest of someone who was not a priest before? He chose disciples and gave them a mission, or commission, but is that the same? Was Jesus himself a priest? The letter to the Hebrews creates an elaborate theological construct about the priesthood of Jesus, but it also states, ‘If he were on earth, he would not be a priest at all, since there are [Jewish] priests who offer gifts according to the law’. (Hebrews 8.4)

Something of the status of women in Jesus’ time is expressed in that we are not told the name of the woman Jesus healed. She was simply, ‘Simon’s mother-in-law’; she was defined in relation to the men in her life. Probably her husband was dead at this stage; otherwise she would likely have been described as So-and-So’s wife. And the moment she rose from her sick bed, she was back at work without a break, serving the visitors. This seems to have been taken as a matter of course. Perhaps it was also a matter of pride for her: she may have wanted to

show that she was not going to allow her illness, now gone, to stop her from being a good hostess in a culture where the guest was king. Maybe it also makes the point that the healing of an individual is a step on the road to that person's service to the community.

Mark makes Jesus' acts of healing seem easy: 'He came and took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then the fever left her...' 'He cured many who were sick... and cast out many demons'. It seems as effortless as, 'Let there be light... and it was so'. (Genesis 1.14, 15) Was it really so easy, or did it tire Jesus? There are suggestions elsewhere that it did.

'He would not permit the demons to speak, because they knew him'. This recurs in Mark's gospel. The demons, or evil spirits, were the first to recognize who Jesus was, in contrast to his disciples who were slow to understand. Jesus commanded the evil spirits to silence, perhaps because the less they said about anything the better. For Mark, what was of central importance about Jesus was his suffering, death and resurrection. Until the apostles understood that, they had nothing to say, so he required silence of them. It was not until they experienced the reality of the resurrection that they were able to speak truly of who Jesus was.

A preaching tour in Galilee: Mark 1.35-39

35. In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed.

36. And Simon and his companions hunted for him.

37. When they found him, they said to him, 'Everyone is searching for you'.

38. He answered, 'Let us go on to the neighbouring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do'.

39. And he went throughout Galilee, proclaiming the message in their synagogues and casting out demons.

Jesus prayed when: -

- his mission from his Father was revealed (Luke 3.21-22);
- before calling the apostles (Luke 6.12);
- he blessed God at the multiplication of the loaves (Matthew 14.19; 15.36; Mark 6.41; 8.7; Luke 9.16; John 6.11);
- was transfigured on the mountain (Luke 9.28-29);
- he healed the deaf-mute (Mark 7.34);
- he raised Lazarus from the dead (John 11.41 ff.);
- he taught his disciples to pray (Luke 11.1);
- the disciples return from their mission (Matthew 11.25 ff. Luke 10.21 ff.);

- he blessed children (Matthew 19.13);
- he prayed for Peter (Luke 22.32) and before asking for Peter's confession of faith. (Luke 9.18)

Jesus went into the desert and the hills to pray (Mark 1.35; 6.46; Luke 5.16; Matthew 4.1; 14.23);

- he rose early in the morning to pray (Mark 1.35);
- he spent the night in prayer (Luke 6.12);
- he prayed for long periods (Matthew 14.23, 25; Mark 6.46, 48);
- he customarily prayed in the synagogue (Luke 4.16);
- he prayed in the Temple, which he called a house of prayer. (Matthew 21.13)

He prayed: -

- the customary prayers of the Jewish people, such as a blessing over meals (Matthew 14.19; 15.36);
- at the last supper (Matthew 26.26; John 17.1-26);
- at the meal in Emmaus (Luke 24.30);
- he sang the psalms with his disciples (Matthew 26.30);
- at the approach of his passion (John 12.27 f.);
- during his agony in the garden (Matthew 26.36-44);

- on the cross (Luke 23.34, 46; Matthew 27.46; Mark 15.34);

‘In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission’. (Hebrews 5.7) Now, raised from the dead, ‘He is able for all time to save those who approach God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them’. (Hebrews 7.25)

The desert is a place of identification with the outcast, the rejected. It is also a place in which one can stand back from the daily routine and gain a broader vision of reality.

Jesus cleanses a leper: Mark 1.40-45

40. A leper came to him begging him, and kneeling he said to him, ‘If you choose, you can make me clean’.

41. Moved with pity, Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him, and said to him, ‘I do choose. Be made clean!’

42. Immediately the leprosy left him, and he was made clean.

43. After sternly warning him he sent him away at once,

44. saying to him, ‘See that you say nothing to anyone; but go, show yourself to the priest, and

offer for your cleansing what Moses commanded, as a testimony to them’.

45. But he went out and began to proclaim it freely, and to spread the word, so that Jesus could no longer go into a town openly, but stayed out in the country; and people came to him from every quarter.

V.40: The leper knelt, not only as a sign of the earnestness of his plea, but so that his shadow would not fall on Jesus and thereby make him ritually unclean through that “contact” - such was the extent of the exclusion of the leper by the law of Moses. But the man was desperate, so he came to Jesus on his knees; desperate people are not worried about their decorum. Or it could be that he didn’t have feet he could walk with.

The leper said, ‘If you choose’. It was a pitiful remark, suggesting despair. He had reason to: in the tradition of the time, leprosy was seen as a punishment by God for sin, and led to social and religious rejection. Maybe he had lost hope and didn’t expect much.

V.41: The first thing Jesus did was to stop doing whatever he was doing, and look at the man and listen to him. He was moved with pity for him. Then he touched him; he did not keep him at arm’s length, or out of smelling range; he touched the untouchable. Jesus seemed stung by the man’s remark and replied, ‘Of course I want

to!’ And then he healed him. Jesus looked, listened, pitied, touched and healed. That was how he treated the leper, the outcast.

V.44: Jesus therefore not only healed a man of a skin disease; he re-integrated an outcast into the community. He succeeded where the priests and the law had failed. The man’s offering of the prescribed gift would remind them that, in Jesus, God’s grace was present, and the community was in need of healing.

V.45: Jesus sternly warned the healed man to say nothing to anyone. Was it to forestall the enthusiasm for the spectacular which might cause people to miss the essential, in this case, a message about welcoming outcasts, illustrating the point that God, through Jesus, was intervening in the world to show his will to overcome all evil?

There was an incident in the life of the seventeenth-century Spanish Carmelite friar, John of the Cross: ‘While he was in Lisbon, the other friars urged him to come with them to visit a famed stigmatic of that city, but he refused; drawn by the ocean, he remained on the shore reading his bible while the others went off to observe the curious phenomenon’. (*The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross*, translated by Kieran Kavanaugh OCD and Otilio Rodriguez OCD, revised edition, ICS Publications, Institute

of Carmelite Studies, Washington, DC, 1991, p.28) For Jesus, what mattered was not to have people standing gaping in amazement, but to show them that God wants to overcome evil, whatever its form.

Did Jesus order the healed man to silence so as to keep secret who he [Jesus] was, on account of political expectations that might be aroused, expectations which were no part of his mission? That seems likely, and is a point that Mark repeats.

But was it realistic to ask the leper to say nothing to anyone? How could a person keep quiet about such a healing? It goes against human nature; we want to tell people good news, especially news about ourselves as good as that. And, in any event, his family and friends could hardly help noticing, and asking questions. But, by doing what Jesus had asked him not to do, the man made Jesus an outsider: 'Jesus could no longer go into a town openly, but stayed out in the country'.

Despite this, 'people came to him from every quarter'. Perhaps outcasts recognized in Jesus a kindred spirit, and felt an affinity for him. Maybe also, in this reversal of roles, there is here a hint of Jesus being rejected through taking on himself the sin, evil, pain and suffering of the world.

Between 2.1 and 3.6, Mark recounts five incidents, in each of which objections are raised to Jesus and his actions: -

First: forgiving sins, 2.1-12;

Second: eating with sinners, 2.15-17;

Third: a question about fasting, 2.18-20;

Fourth: the pronouncement about the Sabbath, 2.23-28;

Fifth: the man with the withered hand, 3.1-6.

Among the religious leaders present on those occasions, negativity and cynicism were having a field day, posing as orthodoxy, wisdom and fidelity. Ordinary people react differently: ‘they were all amazed and glorified God, saying, “We have never seen anything like this!”’ This division between the religious leaders and the general population is a recurring theme of Mark’s.

Jesus heals a paralytic: Mark 2.1-12

1. When he returned to Capernaum after some days, it was reported that he was at home.

2. So many gathered around that there was no longer room for them, not even in front of the door; and he was speaking the word to them.

3. Then some people came, bringing to him a paralyzed man, carried by four of them.

4. And when they could not bring him to Jesus because of the crowd, they removed the roof above him; and after having dug through it, they let down the mat on which the paralytic lay.

5. When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, 'Son, your sins are forgiven'.
6. Now some of the scribes were sitting there, questioning in their hearts,
7. 'Why does this fellow speak in this way? It is blasphemy! Who can forgive sins but God alone?'
8. At once Jesus perceived in his spirit that they were discussing these questions among themselves; and he said to them, 'Why do you raise such questions in your hearts?'
9. Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, "Your sins are forgiven", or to say, "Stand up and take your mat and walk?"
10. But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins - he said to the paralytic -
11. I say to you, stand up, take your mat and go to your home.
12. And he stood up, and immediately took the mat and went out before all of them; so that they were all amazed and glorified God, saying, 'We have never seen anything like this!'

When Jesus cured someone, it was more than an act of compassion to an individual sufferer; it had wider significance. Mark spells it out in this account of the healing of a paralytic. The punch-line is: 'so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins - he said to the paralytic - I say to you, stand up, take your mat and go to your home'. (vv.10-11) The

conclusion to be drawn is that, since it is only God who can forgive sins, then Jesus, who does something greater than simply telling a person that his sins are forgiven, is God among us.

Mark has Jesus speak of himself as the Son of Man, and exercising the divine power of forgiving sin. This is an evocation of Daniel: -

13. As I watched in the night visions,
'I saw one like a son of man coming with the clouds of heaven.

And he came to the Ancient One and was presented before him.

14. To him was given dominion and glory and kingship,
that all peoples, nations and languages should serve him.

His dominion is an everlasting kingdom that shall not pass away,
and his kingship is one that shall never be destroyed'. (7.13-14)

The Hebrew title 'son of man' - it could equally well be 'son of a man' or 'son of the man' - means a human being. It is the only title Jesus claims for himself; the gospels use it over eighty times, and of him alone; it is not used in the Letters. It is a title that underlines Jesus' humanity. In Mark - apart from 2.10 - the title is used only in the second half of the gospel, where it is linked to the theme of suffering. It is as Son of Man that Jesus suffers and dies. The title has a

messianic character, and came to be fused with that of the Suffering Servant of Isaiah.

But in Daniel above, the title has an apocalyptic character; the one who bears it is not one who suffers. The title 'the Ancient One' means God. For Daniel, who did not have the idea of a personal Messiah, the son of man of the vision is a person given power by God to rule over the nations, something strongly suggestive of a political role. Jesus' use of the expression - which would have brought Daniel to the minds of his hearers - in reference to himself, seems very strange if he wanted to avoid the role of a political messiah. When, in 14.62, Jesus accepted it and referred to this text from Daniel, it evoked a condemnation of blasphemy from the high priest. Did Jesus say it here, or was it put into his mouth by the early Christian community to meet a purpose of its own, namely, to say that Jesus was not only the Messiah but the Son of God? This seems likely. The text reads more naturally if v.10 is omitted; and the 'you' seems to refer to readers rather than the scribes. Having so sternly warned the healed leper to say nothing to anyone (1.43-44), it would seem entirely at variance with that for Jesus now to proclaim the matter so emphatically.

Jesus calls Levi: Mark 2.13-17

13. Jesus went out again beside the sea; the whole crowd gathered around him, and he taught them.

14. As he was walking along, he saw Levi son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax booth, and he said to him, 'Follow me'. And he got up and followed him.

15. And as he sat at dinner in Levi's house, many tax collectors and sinners were also sitting with Jesus and his disciples - for there were many who followed him.

16. When the scribes and the Pharisees saw that he was eating with sinners and tax collectors, they said to his disciples, 'Why does he eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?'

17. When Jesus heard this, he said to them, 'Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I have come to call not the righteous but sinners'.

In the time of Jesus, Palestine was under occupation by the Romans, and they operated a privatized system of tax collection. They contracted the work out to collectors, stipulating what revenue they (the Romans) wanted from a particular piece of territory. It was up to the collectors to raise that revenue, by whatever means they found workable. Anything they raised over and above that was their fee.

Such a system gave the collectors every incentive to be as extortionate and unscrupulous

as they could get away with, since that was how they would make their money. The more they raised above the amount laid down as the Roman slice of the pie went into their pocket. The system also had a substantial political spin-off for the Romans: it was the locals who did the dirty work for them. Romans were not directly involved in the collection process; its visible face was local. This system divided the people against themselves, while providing the Romans with the revenue necessary to control the territory. 'Divide and conquer' was the motto of Rome's imperial rule, and this was one application of it. As a result, the tax-collectors were despised and hated by the Jewish population as collaborators with the occupying power.

It was from this group that Jesus called Levi. And Levi followed him, apparently as readily as had Simon, Andrew, James and John before him. (1.16-20) What a choice! Why did Jesus choose him? Was it that he saw in him a worst case scenario – if I can do something with him, there's hope for the rest? Or had there been a lot going on under the surface in Levi that Jesus identified in some way? We can only surmise, but we know that Levi, while he lost a job, found a mission; he is better known to us by the name of Matthew, the writer of the first gospel. (See Matthew 9.9; 10.3; and also notes on Simon the Zealot at pp.59-60 below.)

What is in question in the story of the dinner in Levi's house is two different views of what faith is about. For the scribes and the Pharisees, religion seemed to have for its goal making people moral. Its object was to get people to observe God's teaching. Jews had 365 proscriptions (one for every day of the year), and 248 prescriptions or laws of direction (one for every bone in the body, it was said), making 613 in all. Each of these precepts was analysed in detail as to what was forbidden or not. "Sinners" was a general term for those who either did not know the teaching, or did not observe it. The Pharisees and scribes were the religiously rigorous, who made it their life's passion to know and observe the teaching as fully as possible. For them, righteousness before God was an attainment, something to be brought about by unrelenting effort. They were mostly dedicated people who sincerely wanted to do what was right. But they were also blinkered, unable to see beyond their own understanding, and judgmental about those who did not share their passion for the observance of the teaching. They avoided the company of "sinners".

Jesus stepped outside that box and saw religion in terms of relationships: between oneself and God; between oneself and other people; with oneself; and between oneself and nature. Righteousness before God was a gift, not an achievement. Good moral conduct was the effect,

not the cause, of being right with God. All are sinners, some of whom recognize the fact, and ask for God's forgiveness.

When Jesus said, 'I have come to call not the righteous but sinners', he did not mean that he wanted tax collectors to become Pharisees; nor did he mean that those who observed the law of Moses had no place with him. But it was a fact that those who walked with him were predominantly from among those regarded as sinners. (See v. 15) Jesus had the same message for both: God is infinitely loving, full of compassion for human weakness and sinfulness. That message found a home in the hearts of those who knew they were sinners. In the case of the Pharisees, scribes and lawyers, it was another matter. Jesus often had to use different, even harsh, language with them; he had to try to break through a hard shell of complacency and self-approval which found security in fidelity to observances.

For the sinners, God was their ruler; for the Pharisees, rules had - unwittingly - become their God. That is a story which has been re-enacted in every generation of Christians since Jesus.

A question about fasting, and more: Mark 2.18-22

18. Now John's disciples and the Pharisees were fasting; and people came and said to him [Jesus], 'Why do John's disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?'

19. Jesus said to them, 'The wedding guests cannot fast while the bridegroom is with them, can they? As long as they have the bridegroom with them, they cannot fast.'

20. The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast on that day'.

21. 'No one sews a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old cloak; otherwise, the patch pulls away from it, the new from the old, and a worse tear is made.'

22. And no one puts new wine into old wineskins; otherwise, the wine will burst the skins, and the wine is lost, and so are the skins; but one puts new wine into fresh wineskins'.

Prayer, fasting and alms-giving were three pillars of Jewish devotional life. John's disciples fasted, as he did, and perhaps also in protest at his death at the hands of Herod Antipas. The Pharisees fasted in keeping with Jewish custom. So it must have puzzled them that Jesus' disciples, who, after all, were Jews, and some of whom - like Andrew (see John 1.35, 37, 40) - had been disciples of John's, did not. (The reference to 'the disciples of the Pharisees' is puzzling, as the Pharisees did not have disciples.)

In reply, Jesus says that guests don't fast at a wedding. He presents himself, figuratively, as the bridegroom, and his disciples as his guests. There is probably a link here with John 3.29, where the Baptist said, 'The friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom's voice. For this reason my joy has been fulfilled'. Jesus is the 'bridegroom' who is with them, so it is a time for rejoicing. The time for fasting will come when Jesus is no longer with them.

From its starting-point in the question about fasting, Jesus widens the discussion to make a point of his own. By implication, he is saying that his disciples should do as he does, their actions should be like his, and they should take their cue from him. He also indirectly claims authority over the Law of Moses.

But he goes further than that. By setting himself in the role of bridegroom, Jesus is claiming something greater than his hearers likely understood, at least at the time. The prophets had spoken of God as Israel's bridegroom: -

'Your Maker is your husband, the Lord of hosts is his name'. (Isaiah 54.5);

Jeremiah is told to call Israel to repent, saying, 'I remember the devotion of your youth, your love as a bride'. (2.2)

Hosea depicts Israel as God's unfaithful wife, who deserts him but whom he calls back, 'I will

take you for my wife forever... in righteousness and in justice... in faithfulness'. (2.19-20)

Verses 20-21 may originally have been in another context, but inserted here because they help to underline that, with Jesus, there is a break from the past. Jesus is saying that, whether in regard to fasting or anything else, in him something new has begun.

Almost from the beginning of his public life, Jesus encountered opposition and misunderstanding. What is remarkable about this is that most of it came, not from atheists or agnostics - there were few of them at the time - but from the religious leaders of his time. He was killed by an alliance between them and what might today be called the forces of law and order. The very people who should have been the first to receive him were instead the first to reject him.

This wasn't because the Pharisees and other religious leaders were a malicious body of people. On the contrary, they were mostly devout, conscientious people who sincerely wanted to follow the law of God, and were committed to it. But they had too limited a vision.

For them, religion was a matter of rituals and routines, of practices and observances. Jesus wanted it to be a celebration, like a wedding

party. Why don't Jesus' disciples fast? Because there's a wedding on. Jesus saw faith as something new and fresh, with all the power and danger that this involves. When he taught, people said, 'Here is a teaching that is new – and with authority'. (1.27)

The Pharisees were cautious, careful conservatives: their signature tune was, 'Give me that old time religion; it's good enough for me'. For the religious leadership, that was too risky. Jesus spoke of putting new wine into new wineskins, knowing that new wine, still fermenting, could, perhaps, burst old, desiccated skins. A new spirit needs new structures. They said, 'The old is better'. For them, every ideal had to be fenced in by law and sanction; it could not be left alone: that was to trust people too much. For them, absolute values required absolute rules, and agreed values could point only to agreed conclusions, approved by lawfully constituted authority.

For them, order and discipline were dominant values rather than occasional helps in moments of need. They had reduced religion to a control system. Religious people sometimes become active and willing accomplices in that process.

Religious systems are sometimes road-blocks instead of road-signs on the way to God. They take away freedom, while affirming a

commitment to it; they take away joy and celebration, leaving only the dead hand of formalism. What of today? The Pharisees are dead, but is pharisaism?

Jesus added that an old cloak can't be patched with new cloth; that would simply tear it more. He called for, and created, a new situation, new facts on the ground. There is more than one way of killing Jesus: stultifying his message through lack of vision, courage, or imagination will do it as effectively as crucifixion.

Start here

A pronouncement about the Sabbath: Mark 2.23-28

23. One Sabbath he was going through the grain-fields; and as they made their way his disciples began to pluck heads of grain.

24. The Pharisees said to him, 'Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the Sabbath?'

25. And he said to them, 'Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry and in need of food?'

26. He entered the house of God, when Abiathar was high priest, and ate the bread of the Presence, which it is not lawful for any but the priests to eat, and he gave some to his companions'.

27. Then he said to them, 'The Sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the Sabbath;

28. so the Son of Man is lord even of the Sabbath’.

The Sabbath was of immense importance in Jewish tradition: -

‘Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy. Six days you shall labour and do all your work. But the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work.... For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the seventh day and consecrated it’. (Exodus 20.8-11)

Sabbath, or Shabbat, is derived from the Hebrew word for *rest*. Rabbis listed thirty-nine different categories of work which were forbidden on it.

The disciples of Jesus clearly infringed these regulations by plucking heads of grain on their way. The objection was not that they were stealing: Deuteronomy stated, ‘If you go into your neighbour’s standing grain, you may pluck the ears with your hand’ (23.25), but the Pharisees held that to do so on the Sabbath constituted threshing.

Jesus defends his disciples by reference to an incident recounted in 1 Samuel 21.3, 4, 6, when David said to the priest, ‘Give me five loaves of bread, or whatever is here’. The priest answered

David, 'I have no ordinary bread at hand, only holy bread.... The priest gave him the holy bread, for there was no bread there except the bread of the Presence'. The bread of the presence is described in Leviticus 24.5-9. (The priest in the incident was not Abiathar, but Ahimelech, his father.) The point Jesus was making here is that, 'The Sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the Sabbath'; the law was made for the person, not *vice versa*. The person always has priority.

I remember an elderly priest telling me that, in his student days at the seminary, he and his colleagues were forbidden to talk on their way to Mass one Christmas night lest a snowflake – it happened to be snowing - fall into their mouth and melt, thereby breaking the Eucharistic fast, and rendering them unable to make Holy Communion. A handbook of moral theology widely used in Catholic seminaries up to the Nineteen Sixties had this to say about the fast prescribed before receiving the Eucharist: -

'Communion is forbidden under grave sin even though one has taken only the *smallest amount* of food or drink, e.g. a few drops of medicine'.

'Swallowing blood from bleeding gums does not break the fast. However, if one swallowed the blood sucked from a bleeding finger the fast would be broken'. It further explained, 'That which is taken must, according to the common opinion, be digestible. Hence, the fast is not

broken by smoking, swallowing a hair, a few grains of sand, a piece of chalk, glass, iron, wood, and probably not by swallowing pieces of fingernails, paper, wax or straw'. The book added that the fast was not broken by chewing tobacco unless one swallowed the juice, nor by inhaling dust, steam, raindrops or an insect, nor by a priest who swallowed a piece of cork from the wine bottle in the split second before drinking from the chalice. It also dealt with the problem of particles of food caught between the teeth, and sucking cough-drops or lozenges before midnight the night before receiving the Eucharist. (Heribert Jone, *Moral Theology*, translated by Urban Adelman, Mercier, Cork, 1961, nn.507-508. The italics are in the original. The book went through eighteen editions in English, German, French, Italian, Portuguese, Dutch, Polish, Spanish and Arabic.)

There is a tendency among Christians for the Pharisees to be those that everyone loves to hate. No one has a good word to say for them. They are popularly seen as two-faced hypocrites, saying one thing and doing another, not practising what they preached, and being scrupulous over trivia while missing the essentials. But it might be more accurate to see them as narrow and legalistic, seeing righteousness before God as an achievement rather than a gift. But it seems to be a facet of human psychology that we become like those we hate.

Throughout history, Christians have replicated the attitudes of the Pharisees. We have created a caricature of the Pharisees, misrep-resenting and distorting them. This enables us to avoid facing in ourselves the Pharisee who reduces religion to rituals and observances, as, for instance, in - ‘Go to Mass, say your prayers and you’ll get to heaven!’

As with the question about fasting (2.18-20), Jesus takes up the issue at hand, but then goes beyond it to make his own point. The story is not essentially about the Sabbath; it is about what religion means, and who Jesus is. The punch-line ‘The Sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the Sabbath’ (v.27) states a basic principle: religion is there to serve people, not the other way round. People are the foundation, the cause and the end of every social institution. (Pope John XXIII, Encyclical Letter *Mater et Magistra*, nn.218-219)

It is difficult for people living in the twenty-first century to grasp the significance of the claim to be ‘lord even of the Sabbath’. (v.28) In Jewish tradition, only God was lord of the Sabbath. To say that such a claim was far-reaching is an understatement. It was a hint, at least, of a claim to divine authority, and must have shocked and disturbed Jesus’ hearers. Some scholars hold that, as v.28 does not follow logically from v.27, it was an addition by the early Christian

community to reflect their developed understanding of who Jesus was, and is here put into his mouth. Whether that is so or not, the implication of the text is that Jesus has divine authority over the law.

The man with a withered hand: Mark 3.1-6

1. Again he entered the synagogue, and a man was there who had a withered hand.
2. They watched him to see whether he would cure him on the Sabbath, so that they might accuse him.
3. And he said to the man who had the withered hand, 'Come forward'.
4. Then he said to them, 'Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the Sabbath, to save life or to kill?' But they were silent.
5. He looked around at them with anger; he was grieved at their hardness of heart and said to the man, 'Stretch out your hand'. He stretched it out, and his hand was restored.
6. The Pharisees went out and immediately conspired with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him.

A minor point being made here is similar to that in the previous passage: meeting human needs takes priority over observance of the law. Only in danger of death did Jewish tradition allowed healing on the Sabbath. Clearly, the man with the withered hand was not in such a

situation, so, in terms of Jewish law, Jesus should not have healed him on that day.

The story has the sound of something written with much editorial work. Right at the start, Mark says, ‘they watched him... so that they might accuse him’. That points to v.6, with its conspiracy to destroy Jesus. There is a deep contrast - which is the heart of the story - between Jesus who heals, and the Pharisees and Herodians who conspire to kill - both on the Sabbath. Hence Jesus’ question, ‘Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the Sabbath, to save life or to kill?’ To that question, they were silent.

There is a perverse twist in a conspiracy linking Pharisees and Herodians. The Pharisees’ priorities were spiritual; they wanted to be zealous followers of the law of God. The Herodians were described by the Jewish historian, Flavius Josephus, as ‘those who think with Herod’. Perhaps they wanted to see the Herod dynasty become rulers of a united Israel under Rome, with which the Herods had always kept favour. Priorities for them were political. The two were at opposite ends of the religious and political spectrum, yet here they make common cause. Probably neither wanted a Messiah who might upset the existing system. They begin to form an alliance on the basis that, ‘The enemy of my enemy is my friend’.

It is highly likely that the man in the story was planted, being used as bait. In the name of religious law, it was considered wrong to help him on the Sabbath. Jesus was angry at this: bad enough not to help a person in need; worse to use his condition as a trap for another; worse still to demand that the victim not be helped because the day in question was the Lord's day. This was a perversion and distortion of God, who wants us to help people in any time or place.

Jesus 'looked around at them with anger; he was grieved at their hardness of heart'. (v.5) Jesus was emotional; there was nothing impassive, cold, or aloof about him. Mark, alone among the gospel writers to mention his anger, has other instances of his emotions. Jesus: -

- 1.41: was moved with pity;
- 1.43: sternly warned a man;
- 3.12: sternly ordered evil spirits;
- 5.40: put a group of mourners out of the house;
- 5.43: strictly ordered people;
- 7.6: called people hypocrites;
- 8.12: sighed deeply in his spirit;
- 8.17-21: berated his disciples for stupidity in a barrage of nine questions, culminating with, 'Do you not yet understand?'
- 8.33: was savagely angry, 'Get behind me, Satan!'
- 9.19: was impatient: 'How much longer must I put up with you?'

9.23: was vehement, perhaps sarcastic: 'If you are able!'

9.36-37: was gentle and tender; 10.16 also.

12.24: spoke bluntly: 'Is not this the reason you are wrong, that you know neither the scriptures nor the power of God?'

14.32-39: prayed to his Father in grief and distress.

Jesus showed a full emotional range of tenderness, anger, impatience, toughness, even sarcasm. He was a real person.

A multitude at the seaside: Mark 3.7-12

7. Jesus departed with his disciples to the sea, and a great multitude from Galilee followed him;

8. hearing all that he was doing, they came to him in great numbers from Judea, Jerusalem, Idumea, beyond the Jordan, and the region around Tyre and Sidon.

9. He told his disciples to have a boat ready for him because of the crowd, so that they would not crush him;

10. for he had cured many, so that all who had diseases pressed upon him to touch him.

11. Whenever the unclean spirits saw him, they fell down before him and shouted, 'You are the Son of God!'

12. But he sternly ordered them not to make him known.

The “sea” in question is the Sea of Galilee, also known as Lake Tiberias, a body of water no more than 21 km at its longest and 13 km at its widest.

Idumea (Edom) was a territory south of Judea, which is itself south of Galilee. It was united with Judea about one hundred and fifty years before Jesus’ birth, and its population forced to convert to Judaism.

Tyre and Sidon are two coastal towns north of Galilee in present-day Lebanon. They were in Gentile territory, but with a significant Jewish population; the people who came from there to see and hear Jesus were probably Jews. But the mention of them indicates a wider reach for Jesus’ mission than the merely local.

‘Beyond the Jordan’ River is to the east. To the west lies the Mediterranean Sea.

In v.8, Mark is saying that people were coming to Jesus from south, north and east, that is, from every populated area. It was significant that people also came from Jerusalem, which was the religious and political capital. Perhaps this was all the more significant in that Jesus had not yet preached in any territory except Galilee. The list of place-names hints at a wider, more universal, reach in this mixed audience.

Mark also speaks of ‘a great multitude’, ‘great numbers’, and the need of a boat ‘because of the crowd, so that they would not crush him’. The people came because they heard ‘all that he was doing’. It was his works of power perhaps more than his teachings that drew them. This would be the case especially with those who were ill. Where medical services are primitive or non-existent, people will travel great distances to anyone who gives them hope.

Verses 10-12 are similar to 2.34: ‘And he cured many who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons; and he would not permit the demons to speak, because they knew him’, with the added detail that they ‘pressed upon him to touch him’. Contact matters, especially human contact, and Jesus did not stand apart from it. He did not come to bring a philosophy or an ideology that aims at the head; he literally touched the whole person, including the body.

Jesus appoints the Twelve: Mark 3.13-19

13. He went up the mountain and called to him those whom he wanted, and they came to him.

14. And he appointed twelve, whom he also named apostles, to be with him, and to be sent out to proclaim the message,

15. and to have authority to cast out demons.

16. So he appointed the twelve: Simon (to whom he gave the name Peter);

17. James son of Zebedee and John the brother of James (to whom he gave the name Boanerges, that is, Sons of Thunder);

18. and Andrew, and Philip, and Bartholomew, and Matthew, and Thomas, and James son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus, and Simon the Cananaean,

19. and Judas Iscariot, who betrayed him.

The normal process in the master-disciple relationship was that the disciple chose the master; Jesus reversed this: he 'called to him those whom he wanted, and they came to him'. John says, 'You did not choose me but I chose you'. (15.16) He invited; they responded. The call was to himself, not to a teaching, a theology, a church, a moral system, or an ideology. A disciple is a follower of Jesus, not a student of Christianity; unlike the disciples of the rabbis, whose task was to remember as faithfully as possible what the rabbi taught, the disciples of Jesus were to be, in the first place, witnesses to his life, suffering, death and resurrection.

Jesus appointed twelve, whom he named apostles, 'to be with him'. For Mark, this was virtually a definition of discipleship. The number twelve was significant. There were twelve tribes of Israel, and twelve prophets. Later, the book of Revelation (21.14) spoke of the new Jerusalem: 'the wall of the city has twelve foundations, and on them are the twelve names of the twelve

apostles of the Lamb.... the twelve gates are twelve pearls...' (21.21) A link is being established.

Matthew and Luke, as well as Mark, give a list of the apostles' names. Those in common to the three lists are: -

Simon Peter and his brother Andrew, James and John, sons of Zebedee, Philip and Bartholomew, Matthew and Thomas, James son of Alphaeus, and Judas Iscariot, the one who betrayed him.

If Simon the Cananaean and Simon the Zealot are one and the same person then his name is also in common; this probably is the case, as Luke translated the Aramaic word *kan'an* as Zealot. The Zealots were a sect of fanatical nationalists whose idea of messianism was limited to the pursuit of Jewish independence. They were assassins, who acquired the nickname of 'stabbers' in Rome, for their habit of concealing daggers beneath their clothes for use on their victims in crowded areas. If Simon really was one of them, he would likely have been happy to use his dagger on another apostle, Matthew (also known as Levi), the tax collector and collaborator with Rome. Does it say something about the personality of Jesus that he was able to have two such hugely differing people in his chosen group?

Mark and Matthew have Thaddaeus, while Luke has Judas, son, or possibly brother, of James.

All three Gospel lists of the apostles' names describe Judas Iscariot as the one who betrayed Jesus. It is thought that 'Iscariot' may come from *is sakariot*, meaning, the man in charge of payments, or treasurer. That is supported by John's depiction of Judas: 'he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it'. (12.6) There may be a suggestion that Simon the Cananaean (or Zealot) and Judas Iscariot may have been a pair, like Peter and Andrew, James and John.

The word 'apostle' means 'someone sent'. (Some early manuscripts omit the phrase 'whom he also named apostles'.) They form a distinct group known as 'the twelve'. Following the death of Judas Iscariot, they were known as 'the eleven', before reverting to the original title when he was replaced by Matthias: 'they cast lots for them, and the lot fell on Matthias, and he was added to the eleven apostles'. (Acts 1.26) Yet, when James, the son of Zebedee, died in Acts 12.2, no replacement was sought. The gospels do not consider the twelve to be a perpetual institution, since the conditions for membership could not be met except by the first generation of Palestinian Christians: they were to have been members of the group from the baptism of John

to the ascension of Jesus, and to be witnesses of his resurrection. (Acts 1.21-26) The twelve were, first and foremost, disciples who were chosen by Jesus to be with him. The term 'apostle' did not become a title in the gospels, still less an office. Luke uses the term 'apostle' often in his Gospel and in Acts; Matthew and Mark use it only once each, and John not at all.

In the gospels, the apostles' task was to preach repentance, to make disciples, to baptize, to cast out demons. In Luke, the mission given to 'the seventy', in 10.1-12, is very similar to that given to the twelve in 9.1-6.

In Acts, they preside over the Christian community; they speak in the name of Jesus; they perform works of wonder in his name; they have the ministry of the word; they impose hands on the seven 'deacons'; they exercise leadership in the church.

'The twelve' and 'apostles' are not synonymous. The term 'apostle' was applied, among others, to Paul and Barnabas, and to Andronicus and Junia (or Julia), 'prominent among the apostles, who were in Christ before I [Paul] was'. (Romans 16.7) Paul mocks 'super-apostles' in 2 Corinthians 12.11, and denounces 'false apostles' in 2 Corinthians 11.13.

Other prominent workers in the early church, such as Timothy or Apollos, were not given the title of apostle, probably because they lacked the prime requisite, to have been a personal companion of Jesus.

Paul had been given a mission by the church at Antioch with the laying on of hands (Acts 13.1-3), but did not consider this to make him an apostle. His claim to the title he based on his conversion experience on the road to Damascus (Acts 9.1-22; 22.3-16), and the twelve accepted this. (Galatians 1-2)

The mission of the twelve came into operation with the gift of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. (Acts 2.1-4)

Were the twelve baptized? Did they receive it from John, or from a disciple of his, or from Jesus, or not at all? The gospel does not say.

Jesus and his family: Mark 3.19-21

19b. Then he went home;

20. and the crowd came together again, so that they could not even eat.

21. When his family heard it, they went out to restrain him, for people were saying, 'He has gone out of his mind'.

Jesus ran into trouble, and from a quarter least expected - his family. The *Jerusalem Bible*

translation is even stronger: they were ‘convinced he was out of his mind’. ‘They went out to restrain him’ – from what? From healing people? Hardly. From preaching? – wandering rabbis were nothing new. From gathering a following and choosing companions? There were risks in that from the authorities of the synagogue and of the empire. From making claims about himself, such as being lord of the Sabbath (2.28), which they might have felt went beyond being pretentious and into the blasphemous? Were the family afraid that Jesus was going too far, losing the run of himself, getting delusions of divinity? By suggesting that Jesus was insane, they were implying, in terms of the prevailing understanding of mental illness, that Jesus was possessed. Mark reinforces this by placing a charge of possession in the following verse. That Jesus was rocking the boat was undeniable, and people in power neither like that nor overlook it. The powerless are aware of that, and are afraid.

It reminds me of a young Catholic man I knew in New Zealand who stopped going to Sunday Mass. This caused his family much worry: was he losing the faith? After two or three years of this, he came in contact with a charismatic prayer group, re-discovered joy in prayer and went to daily Mass. This also caused his family worry: was he becoming a fanatic? And, in recent years, the Irish poet, Séamus Heaney, was advised by his mother, ‘Whatever you say, say nothing’. She

was afraid he might rock the boat; there were 'boats' that needed rocking to get them unstuck from the mud, but they did not want that. He did rock the boat - and went on to win the Nobel Prize for literature. It's not uncommon for those closest to the scene to have least understanding of it, or of the persons involved. It is a theme to which the gospels return on several occasions.

A spin doctor would have cut this incident with Jesus' family from the story as bad public relations. It must have been tempting to Mark to do so to forestall potential embarrassment. To report that his family thought Jesus was going crazy, even possessed, and needing to be restrained, must have been difficult. I wonder was Mark urged by those who read a first draft of his gospel to omit it? I can imagine what might have been said: 'The story will lose nothing without it'; 'It could be misinterpreted'; 'Why take an unnecessary and avoidable risk?' Matthew and Luke, both of whom draw on Mark as a source, and record the story which follows, omit it. (Matthew 12.22-32; Luke 11.14-23) But the fact that Mark includes it, when he could easily have omitted it and no one be the wiser, strengthens his credibility. For him, the story illustrates a constant theme: misunderstanding from Jesus' friends, opposition from the religious leadership, and support from the general population.

Jesus' rejection by his family was a foretaste of his rejection on a larger scale by the family of Israel. The insiders become outsiders, while those on the outside - the Gentiles - become insiders.

This story also illustrates something deeper - what has been called "the scandal of the ordinary". It was the "ordinariness" of Jesus that people found an obstacle. If he had had a showman's personality, been a "celebrity", indulged people's liking for the dramatic, they would have followed him. But who was he? 'Is not this the carpenter?' (6.4) Why take any notice of him? We prefer the divine to keep a safe distance where we don't have to get involved. Jesus on the pedestal of divinity is easy to cope with; Jesus, the human like us, can't be so easily kept at arm's length. (See 6.1-6.)

Jesus encounters further opposition: Mark 3.22-30

22. And the scribes who came down from Jerusalem said, 'He has Beelzebul, and by the ruler of the demons he casts out demons'.

23. And he called them to him, and spoke to them in parables, 'How can Satan cast out Satan?

24. If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand.

25. And if a house is divided against itself, that house will not be able to stand.

26. And if Satan has risen up against himself and is divided, he cannot stand, but his end has come.

27. But no one can enter a strong man's house and plunder his property without first tying up the strong man; then indeed the house can be plundered.

28. Truly I tell you, people will be forgiven for their sins and whatever blasphemies they utter;

29. but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit can never have forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin' -

30. for they had said, 'He has an unclean spirit'.

Beelzebul (or Beelzebub) was a god of the northern Philistine city of Ekron. (Baal, or Bel, was a god widely venerated in the Middle East and elsewhere. The Irish word for the month of May is *Bealtaine*, meaning 'the fire of Baal', and refers to the practice of child sacrifice by burning as part of a fertility rite.) The name is translated as 'lord of the flies', though 'of the flies' may be a Hebrew pun belittling the Philistine god, the meaning of whose name has now been lost.

A high-powered delegation from the capital has arrived, and begins with a conclusion: 'He has Beelzebul, and by the ruler of the demons he casts out demons'.

In vv.23-27, Jesus turns their case against them, pointing out that if he was ejecting Satan by means of satanic power, then Satan was fighting

against himself. Since this is most unlikely, it follows both that Jesus is other than Satan, and stronger than Satan.

The phrase, 'Truly I tell you' is emphatic. Any sin, even the most serious, may be forgiven, but one who is so malicious as to attribute good to evil would neither recognize sin as such, nor seek forgiveness. There is something particularly perverse about witnessing good works done by a power which could only have come from God - and then attributing them to 'an unclean spirit'. Cynicism can reach a point where it becomes impervious to goodness, to persuasion, or to reason; its hardened shell can then be broken only by great personal suffering, or by someone doing what Jesus did, bringing it out into the open and forcing it to look itself in the face. There is in Jesus a powerful moral sense which is outraged by the wilful refusal of good.

The true kindred of Jesus: Mark 3.31-35

31. Then his mother and his brothers came; and standing outside, they sent to him and called him.

32. A crowd was sitting around him; and they said to him, 'Your mother and your brothers and sisters are outside, asking for you'.

33. And he replied, 'Who are my mother and my brothers?'

34. And looking at those who sat around him, he said, 'Here are my mother and my brothers!'

35. Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother’.

‘Brothers and sisters’ (v.32) is a loose term which may mean ‘relatives’; it does not necessarily imply siblings. Mary’s perpetual virginity is suggested, though not demonstrated, by scripture, but not here. (*Catholic Commentary on Holy Scripture* {CCHS}, Nelson, London, 1975, 663d)

When Jesus made a choice, it was a choice for, rather than a choice against. What he said here was not a choice against his mother and relatives, though it likely reflects disappointment at their attitude. It was a choice for whoever does the will of God. Up to this point in the gospel, an underlying theme has been the acceptance or rejection of Jesus by various groups. Here he is saying that commitment to God takes priority over blood relationship. That is the basis of acceptance by him.

Some scholars see significance in the phrase ‘standing outside’, and suggest that it means those who are outside the community of faith, even though they may call themselves ‘brother’ or ‘sister’. In 1 Corinthians 5.11-13, Paul urges Christians ‘not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother or sister’ who is immoral, and then twice refers to them as ‘those outside’. Clearly some of Jesus’ relatives did not

believe in him, and were among those who wanted to restrain him, thinking that he had gone out of his mind. (3.21) Jesus was not to be tamed. He said, 'Truly I tell you [a phrase denoting emphasis], no prophet is accepted in the prophet's hometown'. (Luke 4.24) Was he speaking from personal experience? Whatever one makes of this interpretation, it is clear that, for Jesus, spiritual kinship is first in the kingdom (kindom) of God.

Was it the case that Mary, as well as other members of his family, simply did not understand him at this stage of his life? Was Mary perhaps a mother who wished her son would just do the ordinary things, like getting a regular job, marrying, having a family, "settling down"? Perhaps she had to go through a learning process about him, as, like others, she had to gradually come to understand who he was and what his mission was, and to make the difficult adjustment of accepting that his mission had a claim on him which had priority over the ties of family and blood? It is difficult for a mother to acknowledge that she does not know her son, when she thought she did.

The phrase 'the will of God' is one of the most loaded and abused terms in the religious vocabulary. Here are some examples: -

On 27 November 1095, Blessed Pope Urban II, a reforming pope, preached on a hillside at

Clermont in France the first part of a campaign for a crusade: 'You must hasten to carry aid to your brethren dwelling in the East, who need your help for which they have often entreated.... The Turks, a Persian people, have attacked them.... [Muslim and Christian Arabs had lived together peacefully in the Byzantine Empire for centuries prior to the arrival of the Seljuks].... They have seized more and more of the lands of the Christians, have already defeated them seven times in as many battles, killed or captured many people, destroyed churches, and have devastated the kingdom of God.... I, not I, but God exhorts you as heralds of Christ... to hasten to exterminate this vile race from our lands and to aid the Christian inhabitants in time.....' He went on to describe the Turks as 'despicable, degenerate and enslaved by demons'. The assembled knights responded to his call with shouts of *Dieu le veult!* [God wills it!] The Crusaders entered Jerusalem on 15 July 1099. Jews were burnt alive in the synagogue, and the bishop of Pisa wrote to Pope Urban that 'in the portico of Solomon and in his Temple, our men rode in the blood of the Saracens up to the knees of their horses'. (From *Fulcher of Chartres: a History of the Expedition to Jerusalem, 1095-1127*, English translation by Frances R. Ryan and H. S. Fink, University of Tennessee Press, 1969.)

In the Hermitage museum in Saint Petersburg, Russia, is a suit of armour belonging to Czar

Boris Godunov. It is made of 9,000 steel links of chain mail, each stamped with the words 'God is with us' in Old Slavonic, the liturgical language of Russian Orthodoxy. When the emperor went into battle, he wanted to know that God was with him and his army. I have heard a Russian Orthodox priest defend killings by Czar Ivan the Terrible on the grounds that 'he killed people's bodies in order to save their souls'. And similarly, German soldiers in World War I wore a buckle on their belt embossed with the words, *Gott mit uns* (God is with us.)

The *Souldiers Catechisme* composed for Parliament's "armie" in England in 1642 was part of Parliament's moral ammunition in its coming war against King Charles. It included the following: -

Question 2. Is it lawfull for Christians to be soldiers?

Answer: Yes doubtlesse: we have Arguments enough to warrant it: God calls Himself a man of war, and Lord of Hosts.

Abraham had a regiment of 318 Trained men.

David was imployed in fighting the Lord's battels.

The Holy Ghost makes honourable mention of David's worthies. [Etc.]

(*Chronicle of the World*, edited by Derrik Mercer, Dorling Kindersley, London, 1996, p.543.) The 1500 people of Drogheda, Ireland - Irish civilians, English royalists, Catholic priests

and surrendered soldiers - slaughtered on Cromwell's orders by his worthies on 11 September 1649, might have wished to dissent. Or those of Wexford, similarly slaughtered later.

Ten minutes' drive from where I live is a mural depicting the coat of arms of the Ulster Freedom Fighters, a paramilitary group with a history of sectarian murder. Its motto is 'Quis separabit?' a Latin abbreviation of, 'Who will separate us from the love of Christ?' (Romans 8.35)

Abraham Lincoln said that before people can say 'God is on our side', they must first ask the question, 'Are we on God's side?'

In his Christmas sermon of 2003, Rowan Williams, the Archbishop of Canterbury, said that 'religious faith has too often been the language of the powerful, the excuse for oppression, the alibi for atrocity. It has appeared as... intolerant of difference... as a campaigning, aggressive force for uniformity, as a self-defensive and often corrupt set of institutions indifferent to basic human welfare'.

"Holy" people, when they believe they are doing God's will, can be unstoppable in their determination and unscrupulous in their methods, seemingly thinking it unnecessary to assess their conduct by ordinary criteria of decency and humanity, once they have the supposed sanction

of “the will of God”. Richard Dawkins of *The God Delusion* has a valid point in saying that good people do good things and bad people do bad things, but, if you want to get good people to do bad things, you give them a religious reason. He might have added *or an ideological one*. Religion has indeed been the excuse, the occasion, or the cause of violence and oppression, in the name of God’s will.

I don’t think God’s will is a plan mapped out for us in heaven, and which we must obey, in a tug-of-war with God. The real challenge is truly to know, accept and love ourselves, and heal the divisions within us. The struggle is not between us and God, but between our true self and the false selves that we, or others, impose on us. If we truly knew ourselves, and understood our deepest needs, then we should know God’s will. ‘Find the door of the inner chamber of your soul, and you will discover that this is the door into the Kingdom of heaven’. (Saint John Chrysostom quoted by Archbishop Anthony Bloom, *Living Prayer*, DLT, London, 1975, p.108) It is possible to say that God’s will is that we should love one another and be true to ourselves. A simple rule of thumb is to ask the question, ‘What would Jesus do?’

The parable of the sower: Mark 4.1-9

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

Here, as elsewhere, Jesus shows himself familiar with the practicalities of life. Maybe, knowing that sound carries well over water, he chose a boat as a speaking platform to reach a very large crowd.

Jesus taught in parables. 'Jesus' parables are something entirely new. In all the rabbinic literature, not one single parable has come down to us from the period before Jesus.' (Joachim

Jeremias, *Rediscovering the Parables*, SCM Press, London, 1966, p.10) But, 'When Jesus chose to speak in parables he was following a convention familiar to his hearers.' (Wilfrid J. Harrington O. P., *Mark: Realistic Theologian*, Columba Press, Dublin, 1996, p.49)

Jesus did not treat his hearers as babies to be spoon-fed. (Hitler is quoted as saying, 'Fortunately for me, most people don't think,' and he was happy for it to be like that. By contrast, Jesus wanted to wake people up.) Part of the purpose and process of a parable, like a riddle, symbol or *koan*, is to engage the hearers, to draw them in, so that they work at discovering its truth for themselves. A feature of this way of teaching is that, unlike an allegory, a parable makes only one point. Parables could be in words or in works. Allegories are meant to convey many points, and each element in them has significance, even if sometimes forced or artificial.

Here Jesus draws a picture in people's heads from the difficulties of farming. In Palestine, seed was first scattered on the ground, and then ploughed in. Any pathway through the fields made by people using short cuts would be ploughed. The ground is often rocky. The farmers' work is necessary, but is no guarantee of success; yet, despite the difficulties, it may produce an abundant harvest. The figures of

thirty, sixty and a hundredfold are sometimes dismissed as exaggeration, but try counting the grains on a cob of maize, if you will, or the seeds in a paw-paw fruit! And one maize plant may have two or three cobs, while one paw-paw tree may have as many as ten fruits.

The farmer ploughs and plants, but God, the creator of soil, sun and seed, of air and rain, gives the growth. The point of the parable seems to be that, despite the inadequacy of human effort, God will bring success. Perhaps it was a message for Jesus' disciples to encourage them in the face of the misunderstanding and opposition he experienced, or an attempt by the early Christian community to explain to itself why Jews, as a whole, had not accepted Jesus. It is an assertion of confidence in the triumph of God's work at harvest-time, that is, the end of time.

An interpretation of the parable: Mark 4.10-20
10. When he was alone, those who were around him along with the twelve asked him about the parables.

11. And he said to them, 'To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside, everything comes in parables;

12. in order that "they may indeed look, but not perceive, and may indeed listen, but not understand; so that they may not turn again and be forgiven"' .

13. And he said to them, 'Do you not understand this parable? Then how will you understand all the parables?

14. The sower sows the word.

15. These are the ones on the path where the word is sown: when they hear, Satan immediately comes and takes away the word that is sown in them.

16. And these are the ones sown on rocky ground: when they hear the word, they immediately receive it with joy.

17. But they have no root, and endure only for a while; then, when trouble or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately they fall away.

18. And others are those sown among the thorns: these are the ones who hear the word,

19. but the cares of the world, and the lure of wealth, and the desire for other things come in and choke the word, and it yields nothing.

20. And these are the ones sown on the good soil: they hear the word and accept it and bear fruit, thirty and sixty and a hundredfold".

V.11 has a Gnostic flavour, but there is a sense in which it may be better understood. Saint Anselm wrote, 'I do not seek to understand in order to have faith, but I have faith in order to understand. For I believe even this: I shall not understand unless I have faith'. (*Proslogion*, 1) Stained glass windows mean nothing when seen from the outside; from the inside, they are clear and

expressive. To understand matters of faith requires more than the exercise of intelligence; there is a listening with the heart that goes beyond it. It is like what Blaise Pascal meant when he wrote, 'The heart has reasons of which reason knows nothing'. (*Pensées*, n.423, Krailsheimer edn.) Similarly, Saint Bonaventure spoke of being receptive to God with 'the eye of the body, the eye of the mind, and the eye of the heart', roughly, information, understanding and perceptiveness.

V.12 is a quotation from Isaiah 6.9-10. It suggests that the purpose of parables is to prevent understanding, in case people might be converted and forgiven. This is irreconcilable with the nature and purpose of the gospels. Indeed, it is exactly the opposite of one of the main thrusts of Mark in particular, which is that outsiders accept Jesus, while insiders reject him. Maybe, in some inverted way, the verses are an attempt by later Christians to explain why so few people had followed Jesus. Or perhaps the verse has been misplaced; in reading the gospels, context is everything.

In v.14, the sower sows seed, which is the word. But, in vv. 15-20, the seed becomes people, of four different types.

Vv.14-20 takes the story as an allegory, exhorting people to examine themselves on their

response to the word, and an encouragement to persevere in the face of persecution. It has the character of a moralistic sermon, which was not Jesus' way of teaching. It suggests a community on the defensive, seeing its relationship with others in terms of 'we the insiders' and 'they the outsiders'. This frame of mind is closer to that of the Pharisees than to the type of community Jesus was set on creating with its motif of including the excluded.

The vocabulary used in vv.14-20 contains seven words not found elsewhere in the gospels of Matthew, Mark or Luke; they are Pauline and come from apostolic preaching. This suggests that what we have here is a re-working of the parable by the early Christian community - perhaps in the form of a pre-baptismal instruction - which then placed it in Jesus' mouth. It illustrates well the three-stage process by which the gospels were formed, namely, Jesus' words and actions; the understanding of them by the Christian community; and the committal to writing of that understanding. The Christian community of the present time is no less under the influence of the Holy Spirit and therefore no less under a responsibility to interpret the words and actions of Jesus. In addition, the text illustrates the virtual impossibility of identifying any gospel passage as "the very words of Jesus".

A lamp under a bushel basket: Mark 4.21-22

21. He said to them, 'Is a lamp brought in to be put under the bushel basket, or under the bed, and not on the lampstand?

22. For there is nothing hidden, except to be disclosed; nor is anything secret, except to come to light'.

This sounds like a saying from another context. If it is linked to the preceding, it is by way of contradiction: where vv.11-12 speak of secrecy, and knowledge from which others are excluded, this says 'there is nothing hidden except to be disclosed, nor is anything secret, except to come to light'.

It makes the obvious point that it is useless to light a lamp, and then hide it. Was it a response to a question? Answering a question with a question was not uncommon, then or now. (See John 1.38: 'What are you looking for?' answered by 'Where are you staying?') What gave rise to such a response? Is it saying that the truth will out? If so, when? It doesn't always come out in human life. Is it saying that, before God, there are no secrets, and that all will be revealed later, perhaps at judgment, or in heaven? Was it a rebuke to some who, aware that knowledge is power, wanted to reserve it to themselves, to be, so to speak, the keepers of the lamp, and that Jesus was saying that truth, like light, is for everyone? Was the saying directed at religious

leaders, accusing them of hiding the light of God's truth from people?

Without knowing the context - and we don't - it is difficult to go beyond speculation.

Matthew 5.15-16 turns the saying into an exhortation to give good example, while Luke 8.16-17 takes it to mean that just as light shines by its own power, so does truth persuade by its own power.

Another saying: Mark 4.23-25

23. 'Let anyone with ears to hear, listen!

24. And he said to them, 'Pay attention to what you hear; the measure you give will be the measure you get, and still more will be given you.

25. For to those who have, more will be given; and from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away'.

The Gospel is always a wake-up call: 'Listen!... Pay attention...' Much of what Jesus did was to wake people up and get them to think. He not only taught people what to think, but how to think, or - perhaps more accurately - to think. He did not pour ideas into people's heads like someone pouring water into an empty bucket. To do so is to treat people with contempt; he treated people with respect. If it sometimes seems that

people have minds like an empty bucket, it is because they have been taught by others not to think; it is not the natural human condition.

Is it not true that generous people evoke generosity in others? There is reciprocity between giving and receiving; they are not opposites, but complementary. It is in giving that we receive.

Against the seeming recommendation of social injustice of v.25, it may be asked, 'To whom would you rather give a gift, to a person who would use it, or one who would allow it go unused? Would a woman prefer to bake a cake for someone who ate it and enjoyed it, or for one who put it in a cake tin and let it go stale?' Gifts or talents which are used grow and develop; left unused, they fade away. Is it saying, to use the language of Christian theology, that God's life in a person is not static, that grace unused will be lost?

The parable of the growing seed: Mark 4.26-29
26. He also said, 'The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground,
27. and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how.
28. The earth produces of itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head.

29. But when the grain is ripe, at once he goes in with his sickle, because the harvest has come’.

This parable opens with a standard formula: ‘The kingdom of God is as if....’ The kingdom of God is the central theme of the preaching of Jesus. It is a difficult reality to pin down, and probably necessarily so. It is a present and yet a future reality, without spatial limitations. It is not a political institution of any kind, so the translation of the Greek *basileia* as ‘kingdom’ is unfortunate. Rule, or kingly rule, would be better. God’s kingdom is the power of God actively, if quietly, present in all reality. It is sometimes loosely, though happily, described as, ‘the world as God would like it to be, God’s view of the big picture’. It is about the presence and action of God in the universe, and its best expression is in the life and ministry of Jesus, who is its King. ‘Where God is accepted, where Gospel values are lived, where the human being is respected, there is the Kingdom’. (Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences, Office for Evangelization, Conference at Hua Hin, Thailand, November 1991)

In this parable, we may ask: who is the sower – God, or Jesus, or anyone? Is the kingdom of God, the seed, the growth or the harvest? Is it the parable of the seed growing in secret, or of the patient farmer? One thing may be said of it: it is a parable of growth, and it is God who gives that

growth. Humans should resist the temptation to force the issue. Once he has done his job, the role of the sower is passive. All he has to do is sleep and rise and wait until the harvest. The parable contrasts the insignificance of the beginning and the triumph of the end.

One interpretation is that God is the sower, the seed is the word, the harvest is in the present, that is to say, the kingdom of God is present in Jesus, the long period of waiting is over, the climax has come. God has intervened definitively in the world in and through Jesus. God's purpose has not failed and will not fail.

The parable of the mustard seed: Mark 4.30-32
30. He also said, 'With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it?

31. It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth;

32. yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs, and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade'.

The mustard seed is not, in fact, 'the smallest of all the seeds on earth', nor does it grow to become 'the greatest of all shrubs'. It may have seemed so to Jesus and his hearers, but then Jesus

was not teaching botany; he was using a figure of speech based on day-to-day observation.

His point seems to be about small, seemingly insignificant, beginnings leading to something great. It is another parable of growth being brought about by God's power. It draws on Ezekiel, 'On the mountain height of Israel I will plant it, in order that it may produce boughs and bear fruit, and become a noble cedar. Under it every kind of bird will live; in the shade of its branches will nest winged creatures of every kind'. (17.23) And it finds a later echo in Paul saying, 'I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth'. (1 Corinthians 3.6)

The use of parables: Mark 4.33-34

33. With many such parables he spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it;

34. he did not speak to them except in parables, but he explained everything in private to his disciples.

Parables are like icons in words. Just as an icon is more than a religious painting, so a parable is more than a story. As with icons, we are meant to look, not so much at them, as through them. Parables are symbols, not concepts; they point beyond themselves, beyond the limits of the rational and the logical; they appeal to the imagination. They open up horizons; they do not

fence in a teaching. In reading them, a question worth asking is, 'Are the parables about God or about us?' Often they are like a mirror held up in front of us, asking, 'Where are you in the picture?' They are open-ended, inviting questions and searching.

'He explained everything in private to his disciples'. This is a strange phrase in a gospel like Mark's which emphasizes so much the failure of his disciples to understand Jesus. When we reflect, too, that Mark three times describes Jesus as foretelling his passion, death and resurrection, and though the disciples 'questioned what this rising from the dead could mean' (9.9), they totally failed to see it coming or even believe in it after it happened. How could this be if Jesus had explained everything in private?

It underlines a separation between the disciples, who saw themselves as his followers, and the general body of those who came to see and hear him, who may have been motivated by nothing more than curiosity, or by a desire to get something. John has Jesus say to people, 'You are looking for me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves'. (6.27) Perhaps it makes the point that God is not accessible to the neutral observer; God is Father for believers.

It may also be that what is said by Mark to have been explained in private to the disciples, here and elsewhere (in 7.17; 9.29, 33; 10.10-12; 13.3, for example) was, in reality, the understanding that the Christian community of Mark's time regarded as the meaning of what Jesus said, their understanding of him rather than what he actually said. Mark re-wrote the story to take account of later developments, a risky procedure. Why should it stop with his community? Indeed, it could be said that it hasn't. Jews say that Christians have turned Jesus into a Gentile, and they are probably right. And Christians of our time have domesticated Jesus, editing out his passion, including his anger, and also his humour, among other features.

The series of five parables (4.1-4.32) is now followed by a series of three miracles. (4.35-5.43)

Jesus stills a storm: Mark 4.35-41

35. On that day, when evening had come, he said to them, 'Let us go across to the other side'.

36. And leaving the crowd behind, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was. Other boats were with him.

37. A great windstorm arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already being swamped.

38. But he was in the stern, asleep on the cushion; and they woke him up and said to him, 'Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?'
39. He woke up and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, 'Peace! Be still!' Then the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm.
40. He said to them, 'Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?'
41. And they were filled with great awe and said to one another, 'Who, then, is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?'

Jews, unlike Phoenicians, were never famous as mariners; they were afraid of the sea. For them, it was a place of destructive power, evoking images of dread: 'Save me, O God, for the waters have come up to my neck. I have come into deep waters, and the flood sweeps over me'. (Psalm 69.1, 2) But it was also a place where God asserted his saving power: -

'Some went down to the sea in ships,
doing business on the mighty waters;
they saw the deeds of the Lord,
his wondrous works in the deep.
For he commanded and raised the stormy wind,
which lifted up the waves of the sea.
They mounted up to heaven,
they went down into the depths;
their courage melted away in their calamity;
they reeled and staggered like drunkards,
and were at their wits' end.
Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble,

and he brought them out from their distress;
he made the storm be still,
and the waves of the sea were hushed.
Then they were glad because they had quiet,
and he brought them to their desired haven.
Let them thank the Lord for his steadfast love,
for his wonderful works to humankind.
Let them extol him in the congregation of the
people,
and praise him in the assembly of the elders'.
(Psalm 107.23-32)

Mark, in this incident, has Jesus asserting calming power over the sea. His point seems to be that, if Jesus does works which are proper to God alone, then there is a conclusion to be drawn: Jesus is God in human form.

Is the account to be taken literally? Is it credible as it stands? Did Jesus truly calm the sea with a word? Or did Mark create the story, leaving his hearers to make the association between the action of God and that of Jesus, with its corollary? Jews have a long tradition of story-telling.

When I was a missionary in Zambia I remember hearing a story of how the first bishop of the diocese was said to have raised a dead man to life. I asked a friar of the mission where this was said to have happened about this. He explained that the bishop had left the house early

in the morning to go to his car in the garage. Walking across the garden, he found a man lying motionless on the ground. 'Was he dead?' I asked. 'No', replied my informant, 'but he was dead drunk'. The bishop shook him to see if he was alright; the man woke, stood up, having slept off the worst of his hangover, and went home. Some people saw this, put 2 and 2 together, and made 22 of it.

Was the incident on the Sea of Galilee like this? It is known that storms blow up suddenly there, and calm down again as quickly. Was it such an incident, and that Jesus was wakened just when the storm was about to abate, and then a creative imagination went to work on the incident, possibly recalling Psalm 107 above –

'he made the storm be still,
and the waves of the sea were hushed' - and the story grew as it was re-told, until it came to be accepted as fact?

I can recall being hailed as a miracle-worker when a man whom I anointed with the sacrament of the sick recovered promptly. His family were surprised, delighted and grateful. They attributed it to me. I was embarrassed by their adulation, and said I thought a more likely explanation was that he had taken the right medicine but that did not diminish their acclamation of me.

Or was it otherwise? The *Jerome Biblical Commentary* says of it that, ‘the event has been so re-worked in its transmission that it is all but impossible to isolate the brute fact from its credal interpretation in the church’. (*The Gospel according to Mark*, n.30, iii, A) That interpretation was usually motivated by catechetical (instructional) concerns.

The whole of life is one; all things are interconnected. We differentiate between them for the purpose of analysis, teaching, or writing, for instance, but, in reality, life is like a tapestry: all is interwoven, and everything depends on, and affects, everything else. Instead of a tapestry, some have used the (better) analogy of a symphony, where the harmony of the music is the product of the relationship, or indeed is the relationship, between the notes. Try to analyse them separately, and you reduce the music to meaninglessness.

This is implied in what has been (inaptly) called chaos theory. Small actions within a system may have very large consequences, if, for example, they happen at a tipping point. Jesus’ relationship with nature is all of a piece with his relationship with God, with others, and with himself. Relationships are at the heart of everything, and, ultimately, all relationships are one.

The German Nobel Prize-winning physicist, Max Planck, wrote, ‘As a man who has devoted his whole life to the most clear-headed science, to the study of matter, I can say, as a result of my research about the atoms, this much: there is no matter as such. All matter originates and exists only by virtue of a force which brings the particles of an atom to vibration and holds the... minute solar system of the atom together.... Mind is the matrix of all matter’. (Cited in Diarmuid Ó Murchú, *Quantum Theology: Spiritual Implications of the New Physics*, Crossroad Publishing Company, New York, 1997, pp.102-103) Relationships are at the heart even of matter.

A person who was as integrated as Jesus was, as whole, complete, and self-possessed, is in harmony with nature. I can recall a man, a gentle soul, who could sit in a garden, and birds would come, land on him, and feed from his hand. Buddhists have Siddhartha Gautama, like Jesus, calming the sea. This is not a question of “mind over matter”, to quote the cliché, but rather acknowledging that the distinction we make between them, while necessary for practical purposes, may obscure an inner unity. What, for instance, is the relationship between mind and brain, between spirit and body? ‘The mind is not only in the brain.... It is also in the... glands, and immune system’. (Joel L. Swerdlow, “Quiet Miracles of the Brain”, *National Geographic*,

June 1995, p.26) For practical purposes, we distinguish between space and time, yet physics tells us that they form a continuum. Maybe it is possible to speak also of a mind-matter continuum.

This Gospel passage has long been seen by Christians as an image of Jesus saving people in time of distress. He might seem to be oblivious to their danger - 'asleep on the cushion' - but he woke, rebuked first the sea and then the disciples for their lack of faith. One message of the story is: in time of trouble, have faith in Jesus' saving power.

Jesus heals the Gerasene demoniac: Mark 5.1-20

1. They came to the other side of the sea, to the country of the Gerasenes.
2. And when he had stepped out of the boat, immediately a man out of the tombs with an unclean spirit met him.
3. He lived among the tombs; and no one could restrain him any more, even with a chain;
4. for he had often been restrained with shackles and chains, but the chains he wrenched apart, and the shackles he broke in pieces; and no one had the strength to subdue him.

5. Night and day among the tombs and on the mountains he was always howling and bruising himself with stones.
6. When he saw Jesus from a distance, he ran and bowed down before him;
7. and he shouted at the top of his voice, 'What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I adjure you by God, do not torment me'.
8. For Jesus had said to him, 'Come out of the man, you unclean spirit!'
9. Then he asked him, 'What is your name?' He replied, 'My name is Legion; for we are many'.
10. He begged him earnestly not to send them out of the country.
11. Now there on the hillside a great herd of swine was feeding;
12. and the unclean spirits begged him, 'Send us into the swine; let us enter them'.
13. So he gave them permission. And the unclean spirits came out and entered the swine; and the herd, numbering about two thousand, rushed down the steep bank into the sea, and were drowned in the sea.
14. The swineherds ran off and told it in the city and in the country. Then people came to see what it was that had happened.
15. They came to Jesus and saw the demoniac sitting there, clothed and in his right mind, the very man who had had the legion; and they were afraid.

16. Those who had seen what had happened to the demoniac and to the swine reported it.

17. Then they began to beg Jesus to leave their neighbourhood.

18. As he was getting into the boat, the man who had been possessed by demons begged him that he might be with him.

19. But Jesus refused, and said to him, ‘Go home to your friends, and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and what mercy he has shown you’.

20. And he went away and began to proclaim in the Decapolis how much Jesus had done for him; and everyone was amazed.

Mark emphasizes the crossing to ‘the other side’. (4.35; 5.1) It was the other side of the sea, literally and metaphorically. ‘The country of the Gerasenes’ was across the Sea of Galilee, east of the River Jordan, the territory of a pre-Israelite Gentile people, about whom little is known. This was Jesus’ first “foreign mission”. His first work of power among the Gentiles is similar to his first among his own Jewish people. (See 1.21-28) In each case, he heals a man possessed by an evil spirit; the spirit was the first to recognize who he was and to make that known; and the incident leads to Jesus’ fame spreading throughout the region. (1.28 and 5.14, 16, 20)

In this story, a powerful contrast is drawn between the disturbed state of the man before the

healing, and his calm, settled state after it. (vv.2-5 and 15) Jesus' power over nature, if that is the way to describe it, was healing, not destructive. His healings were more than acts of kindness to suffering individuals, but point to something greater, and it is that which interests the gospel writers. The story may be considered a parable in action. What is its point? It seems to be to announce to the Gentiles who Jesus is. The demoniac had been explicit, calling Jesus, 'Son of the Most High God'. (v.7)

The story, in Mark, Matthew (8.28-9.1) and Luke (8.26-39), all mention the herd of swine into which Jesus expelled the legion of evil spirits. Mark has a detail: the herd numbered 'about two thousand'. They run into the lake and are drowned – though swine can swim! The mention of them underlines that this happened among Gentiles; Jews do not keep swine, seeing them as unclean: 'the pig... is unclean for you'. (Leviticus 11.7)

What is the significance of this matter of the swine? It is difficult to understand, unless perhaps there is here some Jewish prejudice against a Gentile people and their customs. Maybe their drowning represents Jesus making a clean sweep of the whole situation, like the use of the phrase 'not one of them remained' describing the Egyptians drowned in the Red Sea as the

Israelites made their escape. (Exodus 14.28) Or is it suggesting that evil is self-destructive?

Why were the people afraid? (v.15) Why fear someone who exercises power in the service of good? Why did they ask him to leave? (v.17) Is it reducing matters to absurdity to ask whether it was the owners of the swine that wanted him to leave? - he had destroyed their livelihood. Is it stretching matters too far to see in their attitude an allusion to Isaiah, 'I was ready to be sought out by those who did not ask, to be found by those who did not seek me. I said, "Here I am, here I am", to a nation that did not call on my name'? (65.1) Perhaps not, since Isaiah 65.4 speaks of a people who 'sit inside tombs, and spend the night in secret places, who eat swine's flesh...'

But, in contrast to 1.34, 1.43-44, 3.11-12, and 5.43, where Jesus enjoins silence, here (vv.19-20) he instructs the man to tell people about it. Maybe it was because, in the first instances, he was among Jews, and wanted to prevent misunderstanding of his mission by a people who, at the time, saw the Messiah in political terms. Among Gentiles, where there was no expectation of a Messiah, his name could be freely made known without such risk. The healed man, transformed from fury to calm, now becomes the first missionary to the Gentiles.

The Decapolis was a loose federation of ten Palestinian cities of Greek culture but Roman rule, on the east of the River Jordan, stretching as far north as Damascus in Syria. Jesus' fame was beginning to spread outside his own country, and among the Gentiles.

A parable, unlike an analogy, makes only one point, and always at the risk of creating a new difficulty. This story of the healing of the demoniac sounds like one of those children's stories where someone has a difficulty, but a fairy godmother comes, waves her wand, says the magic words, puts things right, and then goes away, leaving everyone happy. Human experience tells us that, while we all, from time to time, need and welcome a helping hand, essentially, we have to face and deal with our problems alone. While Jesus' action must have come as a great relief to the suffering man - he wanted to stay with Jesus - and while it also demonstrates that Jesus wanted to free people from whatever diminished their humanity, it could have had the effect of reinforcing in people a sense of dependence and helplessness, so that they looked to outsiders to solve their problems. But, if it is good to give hungry people some fish, thereby providing them with a meal, is it not better to teach them how to fish, so that they may provide themselves with a lifetime of meals?

A girl restored to life and a woman healed:

Mark 5.21-43

21. When Jesus had crossed again in the boat to the other side, a great crowd gathered around him; and he was by the sea.

22. Then one of the leaders of the synagogue named Jairus came, and, when he saw him, fell at his feet

23. and begged him repeatedly, ‘My little daughter is at the point of death. Come and lay your hands on her, so that she may be made well, and live’.

24. So he went with him. And a large crowd followed him and pressed in on him.

25. Now there was a woman who had been suffering from haemorrhages for twelve years.

26. She had endured much under many physicians, and had spent all that she had; and she was no better, but rather grew worse.

27. She had heard about Jesus, and came up behind him in the crowd and touched his cloak,

28. for she said, ‘If I but touch his clothes, I will be made well’.

29. Immediately her haemorrhage stopped; and she felt in her body that she was healed of her disease.

30. Immediately aware that power had gone forth from him, Jesus turned about in the crowd and said, ‘Who touched my clothes?’

31. And his disciples said to him, ‘You see the crowd pressing in on you; how can you say, “Who touched me?”’

32. He looked all around to see who had done it.
33. But the woman, knowing what had happened to her, came in fear and trembling, fell down before him, and told him the whole truth.
34. He said to her, 'Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease'.
35. While he was still speaking, some people came from the leader's house to say, 'Your daughter is dead. Why trouble the teacher any further?'
36. But hearing what they said, Jesus said to the leader of the synagogue, 'Do not fear, only believe'.
37. He allowed no one to follow him except Peter, James, and John, the brother of James.
38. When they came to the house of the leader of the synagogue, he saw a commotion, people weeping and wailing loudly.
39. When he had entered, he said to them, 'Why do you make a commotion and weep? The child is not dead but sleeping'.
40. And they laughed at him. Then he put them all outside, and took the child's father and mother and those who were with him, and went in where the child was.
41. He took her by the hand and said to her, '*Talitha, cum*', which means, 'Little girl, get up!'
42. And immediately the girl got up and began to walk about (she was twelve years of age). At this they were overcome with amazement.

43. He strictly ordered them that no one should know this, and told them to give her something to eat.

The story starts with Jesus back in Jewish territory, having returned from his visit east of the Jordan. As he has often done before, Mark points to the size of the crowd; he is interested in quantities and numbers. A leader of the synagogue approaches Jesus, seemingly with confidence, suggesting that not all the religious leadership had adopted a negative attitude to him. He tells of his fears for his daughter's life, and asks Jesus to 'lay your hands on her', so that she may be made well, and live. The expression is unusual, since healing by imposition of hands is found nowhere either in the Hebrew Bible or rabbinic writings. But the intensity of his plea is obvious, and Jesus' response is immediate: 'he went with him'.

Then, as elsewhere, (3.19b-21; 6.6b-13; 11.12-14; and 14.54), Mark interposes another story. He does this seemingly to heighten the dramatic effect, to keep people waiting to see what happens, or to set the "inner" story in a particular context.

A woman suffering from a haemorrhage approaches him, and Mark, in his usual way, is frank: her physicians, he says, have not only failed to heal her; they have made matters worse.

She touched Jesus' cloak, seeming to think her healing would be automatic, through contact. The text suggests she was right in this, for, 'Immediately her haemorrhage stopped; and she felt in her body that she was healed of her disease'. Jesus' reaction reinforces it, for, 'Immediately aware that power had gone forth from him, Jesus turned about in the crowd and said, "Who touched my clothes?"' It is as if it happened mechanically, without his consent.

There are different kinds of touches, varying in significance. They can mediate gentleness, desire, correction, anger or love; they may draw attention. Even a baby can tell the difference: you don't wash a baby like you wash a plate. Her touch had a poignant significance: because she was suffering from a loss of blood, it made Jesus ritually unclean.

A normal reaction would have been outrage, but Jesus seemed untroubled by it, and turned the occasion into an opportunity to make his own point, saying, 'your faith has made you well'. It was her faith - which she had shown in her approach - not a mere touch that had healed her. This is a constant theme with the Gospel writers: without faith, there are no miracles. The incident provides one example among several in which Jesus showed that where religious or societal conventions were an impediment to his mission he ignored them.

Following the interruption, Mark resumes the story of the young girl. Jairus is told that she is dead. Overhearing (other texts read ‘ignoring’) what they say, Jesus said to him, ‘Do not fear; only believe’. He returns to the heart of the matter: faith. Fear, rather than doubt, is the enemy of faith. Doubt is faith’s necessary complement, preventing it from degenerating into credulity. Faith and doubt are like the two poles of a battery; they need each other. ‘We come to the house of faith, only after we have travelled through the forest of doubt’. (Peter Abélard)

Jesus brings with him Peter, James and John, his closest associates. (They were also with him at his transfiguration: 9.2-8.) This is probably to be part of their training.

He comes to the house, and there is a commotion, ‘people weeping and wailing loudly’. This recalls to me memories of Africa, where the same custom existed. Apart from the immediate family, whose grief was genuine, it was mostly a performance, and a request for silence would bring a prompt response. There was a highly expressive word – *kuza!* – in the local language, Silozi, and it worked wonders on such occasions.

Jesus then said, problematically, ‘The child is not dead but sleeping’. If she really had been

only sleeping, the entire story becomes pointless. In the Bible, the word 'sleep' sometimes means just that; at other times, it means day-dreaming, unawareness, stupidity, or death, but there is no clarification there. Did he mean that, in the sight of God, death was nothing more than sleep? The mourners' laughter at him shows they believed the girl was dead. It is a difficulty, and hard to resolve.

Then Jesus cleared the people from the house. There is a hint of anger in this as if he was offended that people doubted God's power. But it was necessary to have some calm. He went in, taking only the girl's parents and his three disciples. He took the girl by the hand and said to her, 'Little girl, get up!' 'And immediately the girl got up and began to walk about'.

Mark, as is common with him, has an eye for details: 'she was twelve years of age', and then adds a very human – and practical – touch: Jesus 'told them to give her something to eat'. As so often elsewhere, Jesus 'strictly ordered them that no one should know this'. What chance was there of that?

In three miracle stories, Mark has given us a picture of Jesus as a man having power over nature, over evil spirits, and over death. Who could such a man be? He leaves the reader to

draw the conclusion: Jesus is God in human form.

The rejection of Jesus at Nazareth: Mark 6.1-6a

1. He left that place and came to his hometown, and his disciples followed him.
2. On the Sabbath he began to teach in the synagogue, and many who heard him were astounded. They said, 'Where did this man get all this? What is this wisdom that has been given to him? What deeds of power are being done by his hands!
3. Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?' And they took offence at him.
4. Then Jesus said to them, 'Prophets are not without honour, except in their hometown, and among their own kin, and in their own house'.
5. And he could do no deed of power there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them.
- 6a. And he was amazed at their unbelief.

V.3 It is notable that Jesus is referred to as the son of Mary, not the son of Joseph, suggesting that Joseph might have been dead by then.

Jesus' relationship with his extended family was troubled: -

‘His family... went out to restrain him, for people were saying, “He has gone out of his mind”’. (3.21)

And in Mark 3.31-35: -

31. ‘Then his mother and his brothers came; and, standing outside, they sent to him and called him.

32. A crowd was sitting around him; and they said to him, “Your mother and your brothers and sisters are outside, asking for you”.

33. and he replied, “Who are my mother and my brothers?”

34. and looking at those who sat around him, he said, “Here are my mother and my brothers!

35. Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother”’.

Now, here in Nazareth, his hometown, tensions arise again. Although those who heard his teaching were astounded, their sense of wonder soon turned to rejection. Instead of pride in the local man who makes good, it sounds like, ‘Who does he think he is? He’s getting beyond himself. He’s no better than the rest of us’.

It recalls an incident from Nicaragua in the early Nineteen Eighties, when a Capuchin friar was invited to paint a mural in a church, in an area called Bluefields. The church was closed while he worked; when the day of the re-opening came, everyone crowded in to see the figure of Jesus on the wall behind the altar. The people made plain their disappointment. The figure, they

said, was just like an ordinary man, like someone you'd meet as you walked down the street. Jesus had been depicted as short, with black hair, yellowish skin and brown eyes, wearing jeans and a shirt, just like the local men. They said he should have been shown as tall, handsome, with long, fair hair and blue eyes, wearing a flowing white robe and gazing off into the distance, contemplating eternity. What the people of Bluefields wanted was not Jesus of Nazareth or of Nicaragua, but of Hollywood.

Jesus 'could do no deed of power there'. (v.5) Not, 'he did no deed', but 'he could do no deed'. It was not a refusal, but an inability. And the verse that follows supplies the explanation: 'he was amazed at their unbelief'. The "failure" of Jesus to work miracles in Nazareth is analogous to the "failure" of God to forgive those who do not ask for forgiveness or who wilfully refuse to acknowledge their sins as such. Had the appropriate disposition - faith in him - been present in his audience, Jesus would have healed. But 'God who created us without us, did not wish to save us without us'. (Saint Augustine, *Sermon* 169.11.13; PL 38.923)

Were Jesus' healings sometimes examples of the *placebo* effect? Where the "healer" and patient both believe in the efficacy of a treatment, the desired effect may follow, even if there is no recognizable cause-and-effect relationship

between treatment and result. What Jesus said - ‘only believe’ (e.g. 5.36) - describes how the *placebo* effect works.

That effect takes place independently of the spiritual or moral qualities of the “healer”. The Siberian *staretz*, Rasputin (1871-1916), a far from moral man - his slogan was ‘sin that you may obtain forgiveness’ – seemed able to stop haemorrhages in the haemophiliac Czarevich Alexei, even by phone at a distance of several hundred kilometres, *because* the Russian imperial family, and he, believed in his power. The *placebo* effect is applicable in modern medicine also, for instance, in testing the effects of medication.

The Nazarenes’ attitudes hardened from skepticism, to opposition, to disbelief. What was behind this? Was it jealousy? Was it the pettiness of the small town? Did they think little of their village, perhaps because of hearing it said, ‘Can anything good come out of Nazareth?’ (John 1.46) Or was it a refusal to believe that what is ordinary and everyday may be a channel of grace? One can sense the feeling, ‘He’s just one of us. What’s special about him?’ In the Hebrew Bible, Jacob says, ‘Surely God is in this place – and I did not know it!’ (Genesis 28.16)

The rejection of Jesus by the people of his own town of Nazareth at the close of his ministry in

Galilee is in contrast to the welcome given him by the people of his adopted town of Capernaum at the start of his ministry. (1.21-27) It is a foreshadowing of his rejection at a wider level by Israel, his own people. 'He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him'. (John 1.11) The rejection of Jesus is a mystery which never ceases to hold Mark's attention. He sees it as part of God's plan, not in the sense that God caused it, but that God anticipated it - similarly anticipating human sinfulness - took it into account, overcame it, and made it the springboard for a plan of salvation in which Jesus would ultimately be accepted by humanity. God 'destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will'. (Ephesians 1.5)

Mark 6.6b-13: the mission of the twelve

6b. Then he went about among the villages teaching.

7. He called the twelve and began to send them out two by two, and gave them authority over the unclean spirits.

8. He ordered them to take nothing for their journey except a staff; no bread, no bag, no money in their belts;

9. but to wear sandals and not to put on two tunics.

10. He said to them, 'Wherever you enter a house, stay there until you leave the place.'

11. If any place will not welcome you, and they refuse to hear you, as you leave, shake off the dust that is on your feet as a testimony against them’.

12. So they went out and proclaimed that all should repent.

13. They cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them.

‘Who is Jesus?’ Mark 6.14-16

14. King Herod heard of it, for Jesus' name had become known. Some were saying, ‘John the baptizer has been raised from the dead; and for this reason these powers are at work in him’.

15. But others said, ‘It is Elijah’. And others said, ‘It is a prophet, like one of the prophets of old’.

16. But when Herod heard of it, he said, ‘John, whom I beheaded, has been raised’.

The ‘it’ that Herod Antipas had heard of was, presumably, the mission of the twelve. Herod would make it his business to know about popular preachers such as John and Jesus, in case they became a focus of discontent. The question, ‘Who is Jesus?’ is one that many people were asking. None, seemingly, said he was the Messiah. That is not surprising, since these were still early days in his mission.

The text also indirectly raises the question: What kind of man was Herod? He was Jewish; he had to be, in view of his position, but here he sounds superstitious rather than religious, with his, 'John, whom I beheaded, has been raised'. He sounds worried. His manner of life, with its mixture of war, adultery, luxury, spying and murder, shows little evidence of commitment to Judaism. He was, likely, a petty local puppet of Rome's, who would do whatever he felt he had to do to stay in power, and who needed all the political skills he could muster in a dangerous world of power-games and intrigue.

The death of John the Baptist: Mark 6.17-29

17. Herod himself had sent men who arrested John, bound him, and put him in prison on account of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, because Herod had married her.

18. For John had been telling Herod, 'It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife'.

19. And Herodias had a grudge against him, and wanted to kill him. But she could not,

20. for Herod feared John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man, and he protected him. When he heard him, he was greatly perplexed; and yet he liked to listen to him.

21. But an opportunity came when Herod on his birthday gave a banquet for his courtiers and officers and for the leaders of Galilee.

22. When his daughter Herodias came in and danced, she pleased Herod and his guests; and the king said to the girl, 'Ask me for whatever you wish, and I will give it'.

23. And he solemnly swore to her, 'Whatever you ask me, I will give you, even half of my kingdom'.

24. She went out and said to her mother, 'What should I ask for?' She replied, 'The head of John the baptizer'.

25. Immediately she rushed back to the king and requested, 'I want you to give me at once the head of John the Baptist on a platter'.

26. The king was deeply grieved; yet out of regard for his oaths and for his guests, he did not want to refuse her.

27. Immediately the king sent a soldier of the guard with orders to bring John's head. He went and beheaded him in the prison,

28. brought his head on a platter, and gave it to the girl. Then the girl gave it to her mother.

29. When his disciples heard about it, they came and took his body, and laid it in a tomb.

The Jewish historian, Flavius Josephus, suggests that Herod's reason for arresting John was that he was popular, and therefore a potential source of opposition. John's rebuke to him may have provided a convenient diversionary excuse. Mark has got the details of Herod's matrimonial entanglements wrong. That isn't surprising - they were complicated - and the Herod family's habit

of giving different family members combinations of just a few names made matters more difficult. Philip was the husband of Salome (the dancer), not of Herodias. Salome was a daughter of Herod Philip and Herodias, who had first been married to another Herod, who was a half-brother of Herod Antipas. Not simple.

‘Herod feared John’: people, perhaps especially the powerful, fear, and yet are fascinated by, those rare souls who tell them the truth and are not afraid to die for it. Czar Ivan the Terrible of Russia, a megalomaniac autocrat who fully merited his name of Terrible, accepted blunt rebuke from Vasily the Holy Fool, after whom Saint Basil’s cathedral in Red Square in Moscow is named. The Russian writer, Alexander Solzhenitsyn, in his address accepting the Nobel prize for literature in 1970, pointed out that a dictatorship, no matter how seemingly secure, is vulnerable to truth, and is secure only when there is not even a single person who will openly speak one word of truth. John was courageous, Josephus describing him as ‘someone wholly dedicated to the truth’; that is a good description of a prophet.

Mark says of Herod, ‘when he heard him, he was greatly perplexed’. Herod danced to a different tune from John, and likely had little idea of what John was talking about; they were on different scales of values and priorities. And yet

he ‘liked to listen to him’. Surrounded as he probably was by sycophants, it might have come as a welcome relief to listen to someone who spoke frankly.

When Herod’s birthday party got going, it is easy to imagine that he became drunk, and then made a stupid promise, which he regretted but did not have the courage to withdraw, for fear of loss of face. The vindictiveness of the girl and her mother is startling, even by the standards of the despotic rule of the day.

Perhaps the story of the unjust killing of a popular hero has been embellished; indeed it is very likely. It shows signs of heavy editorial work undertaken with a view to creating an impression. ‘When his disciples heard about it, they came and took his body, and laid it in a tomb’. (v.28) In 15.45-46, Jesus’ disciples do the same for him. Ironically, it was Herod who spoke of John’s ‘resurrection’, saying, ‘John, whom I beheaded, has been raised’. (6.16) This may have been intended by Mark to foreshadow the resurrection of Jesus in 16.6. The sense that Mark is suggesting a parallel between John and Jesus is reinforced by noting that he calls John ‘a righteous and holy man’; Jesus is called ‘the Holy and Righteous One’ in Acts 3.14. Mark says of John that Herod ‘liked to listen to him’ (v.20); and, of Jesus, that ‘the large crowd was listening to him with delight’. (12.37) By doing

so, Mark may be suggesting that John's fate will be that of Jesus also.

It seems likely that Mark had in mind the story of King Ahasuerus (Greek, Xerxes) in the Old Testament book of Esther. Six times in vv.14-26, Mark calls Herod king, though he wasn't. He was tetrarch, ruler of a quarter of a kingdom, and Mark must have known that. In Esther, King Ahasuerus 'gave a banquet for all his officials and ministers' (1.3); 'drinking was by flagons without restraint' (1.8); 'when the king was merry with wine' (1.10), he quarrelled with his queen, Vashti, and dismissed her. Then Esther comes on the scene: 'the girl pleased him (2.9); 'she won his favour and devotion, so that he set the royal crown on her head and made her queen.' (2.17) Another banquet, called "Esther's banquet", followed: 'As they were drinking wine, the king said to Esther, "What is your petition, Queen Esther? It shall be granted you. And what is your request? Even to the half of my kingdom, it shall be fulfilled"' (7.2) Esther asks for the life of her 'foe and enemy' (7.6), and her wish is granted; he is killed. (7.10)

The parallels between the stories are too strong to be coincidental. The book of Esther is unusual: it makes no mention of God; alone of Old Testament books, no remains of it in Hebrew were found among the Dead Sea scrolls at Qumran; and modern biblical scholars describe it

as a historical romance. Why did Mark introduce allusions to such a problematic source? They diminish the credibility of his account as history, an account which some regard as 'evidently legendary'. (Harrington, p.24)

Why also did Mark insert the story between the sending of the twelve (6.6b-13), and their return? (6.30-32) Was it to dramatize the cost of discipleship?

Feeding the five thousand: Mark 6.30-44

30. The apostles gathered around Jesus, and told him all that they had done and taught.

31. He said to them, 'Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while'. For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat.

32. And they went away in the boat to a deserted place by themselves.

33. Now many saw them going and recognized them, and they hurried there on foot from all the towns and arrived ahead of them.

34. As he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things.

35. When it grew late, his disciples came to him and said, 'This is a deserted place, and the hour is now very late;

36. send them away so that they may go into the surrounding country and villages and buy something for themselves to eat’.

37. But he answered them, ‘You give them something to eat’. They said to him, ‘Are we to go and buy two hundred denarii worth of bread, and give it to them to eat?’

38. And he said to them, ‘How many loaves have you? Go and see’. When they had found out, they said, ‘Five, and two fish’.

39. Then he ordered them to get all the people to sit down in groups on the green grass.

40. So they sat down in groups of hundreds and of fifties.

41. Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to his disciples to set before the people; and he divided the two fish among them all.

42. And all ate and were filled;

43. and they took up twelve baskets full of broken pieces and of the fish.

44. Those who had eaten the loaves numbered five thousand men.

There is something warm and homely about this gathering of Jesus and the apostles. (In the passage, Mark uses the word ‘apostles’ once, and ‘disciples’ twice. Are they the same group? Were the ranks of the twelve porous?) It may have been a post-mission assessment, but, more likely,

it was firstly a coming together, a renewal of friendship, a celebration of each other's company. Jesus calls them away by boat to a deserted place all by themselves to rest a while. This was what he himself had done earlier: 'he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed.' (1.35)

This call to rest and eat meals in peace suggests a practicality in Jesus that is reminiscent of his telling the parents of the girl he had raised from death to give her something to eat. (5.43) Jesus was a Jew, and showed it in his recognition of the importance of meals in family- and community-building. There is a sense, too, that the apostles had become his family in view of his rejection by his own. Maybe he needed them as they needed him.

The crowd followed them on foot, all looking for something. The disciples' hope for rest was shattered, as earlier with Jesus, when they were the ones who shattered it: 'Simon and his companions hunted for him. When they found him, they said to him, "Everyone is searching for you."' (1.36-37) Instead of seeing the people as a nuisance, Jesus felt compassion for them. 'He began to teach them many things.' Mark doesn't often give the content of Jesus' teaching, but uses it to point to his revealing who he was. And then they had to be fed, because most had come

without food. ‘They were like sheep without a shepherd.’ (v.34)

The disciples make the problem known to Jesus; his response is to put it back in their hands. They bring it to him again, saying, ‘Are we to go and buy two hundred denarii worth of bread, and give it to them to eat?’ Were they being sarcastic, or simply abrupt? They seem to have been so elsewhere, as with the question, ‘You see the crowd pressing in on you: how can you say, “Who touched me?”’ (5.31), and later again in the Gospel. (8.4; 10.26b)

Jesus answers in effect, ‘There isn’t much food, but start with what you’ve got, even if it’s not enough.’ Then, when they do as Jesus tells them, ‘all ate and were filled’ (v.42), one of several uses of the word ‘all’ in the text, perhaps a hint that God does not do things by halves.

One theory about this story is that Jesus simply motivated people to share what they had, and then there was enough to go round. That seems to contradict both the point about two hundred denarii - a denarius, (Latin, plural denarii), was an average day’s pay for a labourer - worth of food needing to be bought, and also the disciples’ reporting back to Jesus that all they had were five loaves and two fish. The theory undermines the story. I recall the occasion when Pope John Paul II celebrated Mass in the Phoenix Park in Dublin

in 1979. When it was over, a million people shared their food freely. No one thought anything of it, much less considered it miraculous.

A minor point is that Mark, always something of a statistician, has the numbers: it would cost two hundred denarii to feed the people; there were five loaves and two fish; the people sit in groups of hundreds and fifties; the leftovers filled twelve baskets; and the men alone numbered five thousand. And he has an eye, too, for details: they sat on 'the green grass.' Are these data evidence, or not, of Mark's being an eye-witness?

The text has several allusions to figures and events in the Hebrew bible. The use of the word 'rest' in v.31 would evoke the image of God as the shepherd who give rest to his flock (Isaiah 65.10), and the arrival of the Israelites in the Promised Land. The 'sheep without a shepherd' suggests Psalm 23, 'The Lord is my shepherd'. The hundreds and fifties in v.40 would evoke memories of Moses acting similarly, for instance, in delegating authority to tribal leaders in Deuteronomy 1.15. The 'eating and being filled' recalls the manna in the desert which the people 'ate and were well filled.' (Psalm 78.29) The twelve baskets left over may be a link to the twelve tribes of Israel and the twelve apostles, as may also be the case with the woman who suffered from the haemorrhage for twelve years,

and the girl whom Jesus raised from death being twelve years old. These allusions we may mostly miss. When we are aware of them, they may seem artificial, even contrived. They may seem like relentless, even annoying, punning, and raise questions about their purpose, about the style of the writer, and about the factual accuracy of his narrative.

Is Mark in this story thinking of the Eucharist and presenting the feeding of the five thousand as a foretaste of it? 'Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to his disciples to set before the people' (v.41) Describing the institution of the Eucharist, he says that Jesus 'took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it he broke it, gave it to them...' (14.22)

A similar link is apparent between 8.6 and the account of the institution of the Eucharist in 1 Corinthians 11.23b-24. Was the story created for that purpose? It is not in the normal style of a miracle story: there is no appeal for help at the start, and no expression of wonder by the onlookers at the end. If it was created for effect, it gives a different character to Mark's writing, and raises questions about his other stories as well. Is it a mistake to take the story literally? Nearly all biblical scholars agree that the creation story in Genesis should not be so taken. Was the story composed perhaps a generation after Jesus'

time, in the light of a different understanding of who he was, and then projected back into his time so as to be a parable in action of the Eucharist? John very clearly gives the same story a Eucharistic significance. (6.1-14)

Jesus walks on the water: Mark 6.45-52

45. Immediately he made his disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, to Bethsaida, while he dismissed the crowd.

46. After saying farewell to them, he went up on the mountain to pray.

47. When evening came, the boat was out on the sea, and he was alone on the land.

48. 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 sea. He intended to pass them by.

49. But when they saw him walking on the sea, they thought it was a ghost and cried out;

50. 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'.

51. Then he got into the boat with them and the wind ceased. And they were utterly astounded,

52. for they did not understand about the loaves, but their hearts were hardened.

This text is sometimes cited as another example of Mark's faulty knowledge of Palestine's

geography: Bethsaida is on the same (Eastern) side as Jesus; he did not have to cross the lake to get there.

In the atmosphere of heightened messianic fervour following the miracle of the loaves and fishes, perhaps Jesus felt the need to pray because the people's adulation and expectation were a source of temptation to him.

The story recalls the stilling of the storm in 4.35-41. The similarities between the two accounts are obvious: in both, the event takes place in the evening after saying farewell to the crowd; there is a crossing of the lake; a storm develops; the disciples are afraid; Jesus tells them not to fear; he calms the storm, and they express astonishment.

There are dissimilarities also: in 6.45-52, Jesus goes away to pray; the 'great windstorm' of 4.37, which nearly swamped the boat, is here just a strong headwind that made for hard rowing; Jesus is not in the boat, and 'intended to pass them by' (which has echoes of Luke 24.28: 'he walked ahead as if he were going on.')

An obvious question poses itself: are 4.35-41 and 6.45-52 accounts of separate events, or separate accounts of the same event? Perhaps the latter is more likely.

In v.52, Mark sees what happened in the multiplication of the loaves and the fish as the explanatory key to this story. What is his point? That a man who can do the first miracle is able also to do the second? He says of the disciples that their hearts were ‘hardened,’ a word he usually reserves for the Pharisees. Matthew gives a different ending to the same story: ‘those in the boat worshipped him, saying, “Truly you are the Son of God.”’ (14.33)

The disciples were afraid. Of what? Of drowning, if the boat sank, is one answer, though Mark’s account suggests it was Jesus they were afraid of: ‘when they saw him walking on the sea, they thought it was a ghost and cried out.’ This is similar to Luke’s account of a meeting between Jesus and some disciples after his resurrection: ‘They were startled and terrified, and thought that they were seeing a ghost’. (24.37)

But there is another way of looking at it. Sometimes we are afraid of our strengths even more than of our weaknesses. We are afraid to believe in ourselves, our potential, or the possibilities that are already latent in us. We live below our best; we belittle ourselves, although we are capable of becoming much more than we are, since we are made in the image and likeness of God who is infinite. (Genesis 1.27)

Was Jesus implicitly saying to the disciples that not only he, but they, had capacities beyond what they previously thought? Was it a call to leave the safety of where they were, the security of how they thought, and the familiarity of what they did? Was it this that scared them? In Matthew 14.22-33, Peter, despite his fear, has the courage to leave the security of the boat and venture out into the deep.

Healing the sick in Gennesaret: 6.53-56

53. When they had crossed over, they came to land at Gennesaret and moored the boat.

54. When they got out of the boat, people at once recognized him,

55. and rushed about that whole region and began to bring the sick on mats to wherever they heard he was.

56. And wherever he went, into villages or cities or farms, they laid the sick in the marketplaces, and begged him that they might touch even the fringe of his cloak; and all who touched it were healed.

Once again, Mark refers to the boat and its crossings of the lake. Is he suggesting that life is a journey more than an arrival, a fluid movement more than a fixed point, dynamic more than static? Gennesaret is a plain near Capernaum, on the shore of the Sea of Galilee (which is also

called Lake Tiberias or, in Luke 5.1, Lake Gennesaret.)

Jesus' fame as a healer had spread, so people came to him in large numbers. Some were perhaps afraid, as people tend to be in the presence of those they regard as greater than themselves, or who evidently have power they do not have. They 'begged him that they might touch even the fringe of his cloak; and all who touched it were healed'. Their attitude was like that of the woman in 5.25-34, who said, 'If I but touch his clothes, I will be made well'. And Jesus healed her because of her faith: 'your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease'. (5.34) They seemed afraid to touch *him*, as if that would be rash or presumptuous, but felt that touching his clothes would be both permissible and effective, because power went out from him.

The longing for something to touch, to take hold of, as a way of making contact with something greater than ourselves seems to be deep-seated in us. People pay big money for a dress that belonged to Jacqueline Kennedy, Marilyn Monroe or Princess Diana, for the shades of Bono of U2, for President John F. Kennedy's rocking chair; they like to have their photo taken with the high and mighty; Elvis Presley has the cult following of a demigod; TV celebrities, soccer heroes and film stars have the

status formerly given to saints: they are idolized, paid millions and are followed everywhere by autograph hunters. It was, or is, the same with the relics of the saints. In the Middle Ages, towns fought wars for the possession of relics. Half the population of Ireland turned out in 2001 to touch a casket containing a bone of Saint Thérèse of Lisieux, and mittens of Saint Pio of Pietrelcina are passed around in hospitals in the hope of a healing. People who don't normally attend church still come on Ash Wednesday for the ashes, or to touch the cross on Good Friday.

Is it both evidence of insecurity and a search for greatness by proxy, a vicarious fulfilment through contact with the high and mighty? Is it saying, 'I'm nothing; I'm no good; but if I can just get a toe-hold, any contact with this great person, then that will give me some status, some position, something that lift me out of my insignificance'? (Who, for example, would remember Lee Harvey Oswald if he had not shot John F. Kennedy?) Is this testimony to the extent to which people have low self-esteem, thinking and living below their best, even imagining that it represents modesty or humility to do so, and feeling that to think well of oneself is to 'have notions', 'getting beyond yourself', 'getting too big for your boots'. How many people there are who are afraid even to express an opinion unless they are sure it will win approval! Yet we were not born that way; there is nothing self-

deprecating about children; on the contrary, they celebrate themselves, they are delighted with themselves. Jesus constantly made it clear to people that it was their faith which saved them: 'your faith has made you well'. (5.34) Was he saying, 'You are great; you are good; realize the greatness which is already in you. Bring your potential to life'? He said elsewhere, 'I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly'. (John 10.10)

In this text, as elsewhere, (in 3.20-22, for instance), Mark contrasts the enthusiasm of the people with the hostility of the authorities in the passage that follows.

He also states of Jesus' cloak that 'all who touched it were healed'. He doesn't actually say, though he clearly implies, that Jesus healed them. It is a characteristic of Mark's that he uses the passive to speak of the action of God. (C. H. Dodd)

Three traditions of the elders: Mark 7.1-23

(a) Washing: 7.1-8

1. Now when the Pharisees and some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem gathered around him,
2. they noticed that some of his disciples were eating with defiled hands, that is, without washing them.

3. (For the Pharisees, and all the Jews, do not eat unless they thoroughly wash their hands, thus observing the tradition of the elders;
4. and they do not eat anything from the market unless they wash it; and when they come from the marketplace, they do not eat unless they purify themselves, and there are also many other traditions that they observe, the washing of cups, pots, and bronze kettles.)
5. 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?'
6. He said to them, 'Isaiah prophesied rightly about you hypocrites, as it is written,
"This people honours me with their lips,
but their hearts are far from me;
7. in vain do they worship me,
teaching human precepts as doctrines.'"
8. You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition'.

Mark, as before, in 3.22, creates the atmosphere of an inquisition: 'some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem gathered around him'. A high-powered delegation had come from the capital on a fault-finding mission. And, of course, they found it: some of the disciples of Jesus did not observe the prescribed rules of cleanliness. (v.2)

In vv.3-5, Mark offers his Gentile readers an explanation of Jewish customs. When Jesus was asked why his disciples did not follow the tradition, he quoted Isaiah 29.13. The customs about washing had probably developed out of concern for hygiene, and were given religious authority to reinforce them. Leviticus 15 gives an example of such rules, introduced with, ‘The Lord spoke to Moses and Aaron, saying, “Speak to the people of Israel and say to them...”’ (15.1)

Captain James Cook, the eighteenth-century British explorer of the South Seas, is said to have given pigs to tribal leaders of one of the Pacific islands, and asked them to lay a *tapu* (taboo) on them, prohibiting their killing for a generation. The pigs flourished; then the *tapu* was lifted; people were free to hunt them, and had a reliable source of protein for generations to come. This was Cook’s way of undermining cannibalism - a simple idea that worked effectively, it seems.

Both situations raise the question of invoking the name of God over something which does not come from God. They seem to have been situations in which God was said to have laid down rules which, in fact, came simply from human authority. However desirable the goals - obviously hygiene is preferable to dirt, and eating pigs preferable to eating people - is there not here a violation of the commandment, ‘You shall not

make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God'? (Deuteronomy 5.11) Is it not a matter of using religion as a means of social control? Where that is done, religion is valued, not for its truth, but for its usefulness. Put bluntly, it amounts to saying, 'It doesn't matter whether it's true or not, as long as it achieves a worthwhile goal'. Once such a principle is admitted, religion is negated. 'You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition'. (v.8)

(b) *Corban*: 7.9-13

9. Then he said to them, 'You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God in order to keep your tradition!

10. For Moses said, "Honour your father and your mother"; and, "Whoever speaks evil of father or mother must surely die".

11. 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) -

12. then you no longer permit doing anything for a father or mother,

13. thus making void the word of God through your tradition that you have handed on. And you do many things like this'.

In an age without pensions, insurance, or social welfare there was a covenant: parents look after children in their youth; children look after parents in their old age. What Jesus was referring

to was a practice which allowed a son to evade the responsibility of caring for his parents. A loophole was created whereby a son (the responsibility rested with the sons) could dedicate to the temple the money or other resources he would have used on his parents. It was known as *corban*, an Aramaic word, meaning *offering to God*. While thus dedicated, he still retained its ownership and its use, so he lost nothing by doing it. This made the temple into a kind of bank, with the resources offered in *corban* as part of its reserve. But it abandoned the elderly parents to fend for themselves.

This devious and selfish practice violated the commandment of God to care for parents that Jesus quoted. (Deuteronomy 5.16; the other quotation is from Leviticus 20.9.) Jesus denounces the violation of God's commandment; it is one of many instances where he shows a powerful concern for justice. The *corban* practice is believed to have died out in the first century because of popular opposition.

(c) Defilement: 7. 14-23

14. Then he called the crowd again and said to them, 'Listen to me, all of you, and understand:

15. there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile'.

16. 'Let anyone with ears to hear listen'.

17. When he had left the crowd and entered the house, his disciples asked him about the parable.
18. 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,
19. since it enters, not the heart but the stomach, and goes out into the sewer?' (Thus he declared all foods clean.)
20. And he said, 'It is what comes out of a person that defiles.
21. For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder,
22. adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly.
23. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person'.

The setting described here is common in Mark (e.g. 4.1-20; 9.14-29). Jesus teaches publicly, and then expands on the topic later in a house, with his disciples, whom he takes to task for their failure to understand. In Jewish tradition, various things could defile a person, such as eating certain foods, or touching a corpse. Jesus takes up this point, perhaps in answer to a question, and reverses the usual understanding, saying that it is not things which come from without, but those that come from within, that defile a person.

‘His disciples asked him about the parable’. (v.17) It is not clear what is meant by this. Where is the parable?

Jesus explains and elaborates; he takes up a point about foods considered unlawful, and says that they cannot defile a person; if there is anything wrong with them, the body will discharge them. He makes the point that real defilement comes from within, from the human heart, and gives a list; they defile a person.

The phrase, ‘Thus he declared all foods clean’ (v.19) is, most likely, an addition by Mark, or a later copyist. The story has a universalist character: Jews would have been surprised, perhaps shocked, that Jesus, either explicitly or implicitly, declared all foods clean. What about *kosher* and non-*kosher*? Surely not pig-meat? Perhaps Jesus was looking to a wider Gentile audience, to whom Jewish prescriptions would have been a mystery. He is speaking about ‘the human heart’. (v.21)

In these three incidents relating to Jewish tradition, Jesus rejects man-made additions and alterations that claim God’s sanction; he re-asserts the primacy of the Ten Commandments; he focuses on the essentials; and he breaks out of the limitations of Jewish tradition into something more universal.

Is Jesus also implying that not only the Jewish religion, but all religion, though limited and provisional, has a propensity to self-aggrandizement that needs checking? He rejected the word of men claiming to be the word of God. For instance, he set aside the notion of “clean” and “unclean” things; holiness was not about such matters but about wholeness. The *Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation of the Second Vatican Council, Dei Verbum*, states, ‘Sacred Tradition, sacred Scripture and the *magisterium* [teaching authority] of the Church are so connected and associated that one of them cannot stand without the others.’ (n.10.) The statement is an example of recognizing a need for checks and balances. The same passage also states, ‘This Magisterium is not superior to the Word of God, but is its servant....’ However, it is not difficult to think of examples of teaching which have little support in scripture or tradition, but nonetheless are presented as binding on the faithful - ‘*Roma locuta est; causa finita est*’. (‘Rome has spoken; the matter is closed’), or ‘*Ipse dixit*’, (‘He said it’, “he” usually referring to the pope.) This is to suggest that *solum magisterium* is self-validating. To state or to assume that is to make self-justifying power the issue behind every issue, (and the use of the language of service in its support does not change that). People react to this, not with obedience, but by walking away, leaving *magisterium* talking to itself. There is more than a hint of anger in Jesus’ saying,

‘Listen to me, all of you, and understand.... Do you not see...?’ (vv.14, 18; and also vv.6-7) Jesus’ anger is nearly always related to an abuse of religion.

People create the technology they need: the Inuit of North America invented the fur coat, not the refrigerator. And people create the religions they need; religion is a creation of the human mind. Religion is a system of meaning and values, of motivation, and of control: -

Meaning and values: humans have a need for direction and a sense of purpose, especially ultimate purpose regarding the perennial questions, on the meaning of life, of evil, suffering, and death, and for shared values to give coherence, stability, and continuity to society; the cult is the basis of the culture.

Motivation: humans need motivation that enables them to look beyond the self, and to reach out to the other, or to the Other.

Control: individuals and societies need control; self-control through a developed conscience is the most effective, the most up-building, the most humanizing.

There needs to be critical solidarity between those three elements. If, for example, the third comes to predominate, then religion becomes a control system, imposing directions which the believer is expected to assimilate and internalize

as having come from God. The Emperor Napoleon recognized the political value of this when he said, 'If France were a nation of Jews, I would re-build the temple of Solomon....' 'I regard religion, not as the mystery of the Incarnation, but as the secret of the social order'. (Cited by Robert Aubrey Noakes, 'Napoleon's Attitude towards Religion', *The Month*, Vol. CLXXVII, No.919, January-February 1941, p.33) Such religion becomes an ideology, a substitute for God, a complete system which renders God redundant, saying, in effect, 'Believe in the system; that's all you need do'. 'Most religious institutions have been more comfortable when people stay within a church-reliant faith rather than progress to the normal adult language of faith-as-decision'. (Fowler, quoted by Michael Paul Gallagher S.J., *Free to Believe: Ten Steps to Faith*, DLT, London, 1988, p.57) If one accepts the basic premises, the rest follows. Religions have attempted to do this, to parse and analyse the mystery, thereby neutering it and falling into idolatry, where a man-made understanding of God becomes a substitute for the reality of God.

To say that religions are creations of the human mind is not to say that they are untrue, or fabrications; nor does it mean that God does not self-reveal. God can, and does, self-reveal through prophets, including non-Christians ones (the Buddha, Mohammed, Guru Nanak, Gandhi, and others), and especially through Jesus, who,

most powerfully of all, is (not merely teaches) the message (the Word) that God communicates in and through the human. And the human is limited, imperfect, and dependent.

This means that no religion can claim an absolute value for itself. There is only one absolute - God. If we make an absolute of religion, then we have turned it into an idol, faith into an ideology, and the church (or mosque, synagogue, temple etc.) into a puppeteer working the levers of a control-system. We thereby make religion into a substitute for God. That is to ignore the commandment: 'You shall not make for yourself an idol.... You shall not bow down to them or worship them...' (Deuteronomy 5.8-9) Maybe that frame of mind was what Jesus set out to correct in these three challenges to his religious tradition.

To 'see' Jesus means to believe in him; there are hints of this in 7.18; 8.24-25; 10.51; 15.32; 16.7.

The Syrophoenician woman's faith: Mark 7.24-30

24. From there he set out and went away to the region of Tyre and Sidon. He entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there. Yet he could not escape notice,

25. but a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet.

26. Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophoenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter.

27. 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'.

28. But she answered him, 'Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs'.

29. Then he said to her, 'For saying that, you may go - the demon has left your daughter'.

30. So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.

The opening phrase 'From there he set out and went away', underlines that it was a point of departure for Jesus, this venture from his own land and people. A similar phrase is used in 1.35, where Jesus begins his ministry in Galilee, and in 10.1, where he leaves Capernaum for the region of Judea and beyond the Jordan. The hinterland of the coastal cities of Tyre and Sidon was the predominantly Gentile region of Phoenicia, though it also had a Jewish population.

There is also a reference, common in Mark, to Jesus' frustrated desire for secrecy.

Then Mark develops the story in a circular pattern: -

| | |
|---------------------|------|
| Tyre | v.24 |
| Into a house | v.24 |
| Demon | v.26 |
| Out of the daughter | v.26 |
| Children | v.27 |
| Bread | v.27 |
| Dogs | v.27 |
| Dogs | v.28 |
| Bread | v.28 |
| Children | v.28 |
| Out of the daughter | v.29 |
| Demon | v.29 |
| Into a house | v.30 |
| Tyre | v.31 |

Perhaps this was a memory device, or a literary style Mark favoured. He uses the same method in 1.1-15 and 13.5-23. The word repeated at the centre of the story is its focus.

The woman was a Gentile. In the situation described, she was probably embarrassed: a woman taking the initiative, addressing a man of a different race and religion; a Gentile asking a Jew for a favour. Then, to make matters worse, Jesus virtually calls her a bitch, a term even more insulting in the Middle East than in the West. The word “dog” was used by Jews of the time as a term of contempt for Gentiles. Scripture scholars point out that the position of the word at the core of the story, and its repetition, heightens its impact.

The woman was an outsider, but, in the first place, and above all, she was a loving, courageous, and “liberated” mother, prepared to risk humiliation in the hope of her daughter being freed. Jesus at first refuses her request, but seems to have been won over by her quick-witted repartee; she had got the better of him; he knew it, and appeared to enjoy it. (v.29) He grants her request. Why did he refuse her - and so brutally - in the first place? Was it that he had some growing to do, to grow out of a narrow racial and religious background, and learn to look at the broad human picture? To acknowledge this as a possibility is to do no more than give full value to his humanity: ‘He increased in wisdom’. (Luke 2.40, 52)

Jesus cures a deaf man: Mark 7.31-37

31. 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.

32. They brought to him a deaf man who had an impediment in his speech; and they begged him to lay his hand on him.

33. He took him aside in private, away from the crowd, and put his fingers into his ears, and he spat and touched his tongue.

34. Then looking up to heaven, he sighed and said to him, ‘Ephphatha’, that is, ‘Be opened’.

35. And immediately his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly.

36. Then Jesus ordered them to tell no one; but the more he ordered them, the more zealously they proclaimed it.

37. They were astounded beyond measure, saying, 'He has done everything well; he even makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak'.

This describes Jesus as going from one Gentile area to another. Tyre is a coastal town to the south of Sidon in present-day Lebanon; in Jesus' time, the region was known as Phoenicia. It is strange that Mark describes Jesus as returning 'from the region of Tyre... by way of Sidon towards the Sea of Galilee, in the region of the Decapolis', since that would involve moving north, when the Sea of Galilee and the Decapolis were to the south-east. Maybe it is another example of Mark's inaccurate geography.

The laying on hands in healing is found also in 6.5: 'he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them', and in 8.23: 'He took the blind man... and laid his hands on him'. People may have seen this done before as, 'they begged him to lay his hand on him'. (v.32) Other healers did likewise, using also a foreign word and spittle. In some cultures, spittle is seen as having special significance. In Zambia, illiterate people of the older generation would sometimes 'sign' a letter with spittle, and the note, 'This is my spittle'. A

distinguished visitor might be greeted by a gentle - and respectful - spray of spittle towards the face.

‘He took him aside in private, away from the crowd...’ Was this out of consideration for the man’s privacy, or for secrecy? The latter seems more likely, in view of Mark’s preoccupation with it, and Jesus’ elsewhere healing people openly. It is like, ‘He took the blind man by the hand and led him out of the village’. (8.23)

Mark preserves the word ‘Ephphatha’, as he did with ‘Talitha, cum’ in 5.41. Was this to suggest an eye-witness presence, or that the wording was considered to be of particular significance? The Catholic liturgy of baptism retains something akin to this, in a prayer known as the Ephphatha, where the priest touches the baptized on the ears and mouth, saying, ‘The Lord Jesus made the deaf hear and the dumb speak. May he soon touch your ears to receive his word, and your mouth to proclaim his faith, to the praise and glory of God the Father’. The people in this story received and proclaimed the word of Jesus, and gave praise and glory to God the Father.

‘He sighed’ - a prayer from the heart, an unspoken thought, a deep-felt wish, an earnest appeal to God. And, ‘Immediately his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke

plainly'. The language Mark uses is that of liberation: 'opened', 'released', 'spoke plainly'. Jesus wants people to hear and speak plainly. He is concerned to free people from whatever diminishes their humanity or limits their potential, and this applies to the social order no less than to the individual.

There is no mention here of an evil spirit, or of faith. Perhaps the fact that the healing took place in Gentile territory might account for this.

The preoccupation, one might say obsession, Mark shows for secrecy is again evident here: 'Then Jesus ordered them to tell no one; but the more he ordered them, the more zealously they proclaimed it'. (v.36) The other gospel writers differ from him in this. Taken in its context, both here and elsewhere, it sounds unrealistic. Could anyone expect such a matter to remain unspoken of? Is it not asking people to act in a way that is contrary to normal human behaviour?

It is surprising that Mark, who is concerned to show Jesus as the Messiah, did not refer here by name to Isaiah, who wrote: 'the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then the lame shall leap like the deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy'. (35.5-6) He was surely aware of the text, as the words for 'who had an impediment in his speech'

(v.32) is used in only these two instances in the bible.

V.37: People said, 'He has done everything well'. A little like, 'God saw everything that he [God] had made, and indeed, it was very good'. (Genesis 1.31)

As elsewhere, Mark records people's joyful admiration for Jesus with a response more enthusiastic than anywhere in his Gospel, 'They were astounded beyond measure'. An alternative translation is even more effusive, 'They were more than excessively astonished'. (*Jerome Biblical Commentary*) Was it that a Gentile audience did not have the preconceptions, and possibly the prejudices, of a Jewish audience and therefore responded without inhibition? Mark, with his openness to the Gentiles, may here be saying that they, who were once deaf and silent about God, now hear and speak of God joyfully.

A point of some significance about this story is that the man's name is not given. The same is true of other characters in Mark's gospel, such as Simon's mother-in-law, 1.29-31; the leper, 1.40-45; the paralytic, 2.1-12; the man with the withered hand, 3.1-6; the Gerasene demoniac, 5.1-20; the girl and woman healed, 5.21-43; the Syrophoenician woman, 7.24-30; the blind man at Bethsaida, 8.22-26, and the boy with a spirit, 9.14-29. (An exception is the blind man,

Bartimaeus, 10.46-52.) In Jewish tradition, to leave people un-named would be understood as saying, 'They're nobodies'. Mark's audience was Gentile, and they might, or might not, see things in the same way. Perhaps this is Mark's way of showing that it was the nobodies, the outsiders, some of them Gentiles, who received Jesus, and, in consequence, were blessed by him - healed, enabled to see, speak and hear, freed - in contrast to his own people, who rejected him. The nobodies were the ones who understood.

There is a striking parallelism of content and sequence in the passages from 6.35 to 8.26: -

Jesus feeds five thousand: 6.35-44

Jesus feeds four thousand: 8.1-9

Crossing the lake: 6.45-52

Crossing the lake: 8.10a

Landing from the boat: 6.53

Landing from the boat: 8.10b

Controversy with Pharisees: 7.1-23

Controversy with Pharisees: 8.11-13

Dialogue about bread: 7.24-30

Dialogue about bread: 8.14-21

Healing a man at the lake: 7.31, 37

Healing a man at the lake: 8.22-26

What significance has this? One obvious interpretation is that the same stories are being re-told, though with variations. Saint Augustine suggested that one series was for Jews, the other

for Gentiles. This is reinforced by the language used: the terms for *basket* denote two different types, one Jewish, the other Greek. The implication may be that Jews and Gentiles find a common table in the Eucharist.

Feeding the four thousand: Mark 8.1-10

1. In those days when there was again a great crowd without anything to eat, he called his disciples and said to them,
2. 'I have compassion for the crowd, because they have been with me now for three days and have nothing to eat.
3. 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'.
4. His disciples replied, 'How can one feed these people with bread here in the desert?'
5. He asked them, 'How many loaves do you have?' They said, 'Seven'.
6. 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.
7. They had also a few small fish; and after blessing them, he ordered that these too should be distributed.
8. They ate and were filled; and they took up the broken pieces left over, seven baskets full.

9. Now there were about four thousand people.
And he sent them away.

10. And immediately he got into the boat with his disciples and went to the district of Magdala.

A comparison of this passage and 6.35-44 shows substantial similarity, but with some differences: -

In 6.35-44: five thousand men are fed;
there are five loaves, two fish and twelve baskets of leftovers;
it is the disciples who notice the people's hunger.

In 8.1-10: four thousand people are fed;
there are seven loaves, a few fish and seven baskets of leftovers;
it is Jesus who notices the people's hunger.

Elaborate - some might say far-fetched - interpretations have been put on the differences, such as that the seven ($4 + 3$) baskets of leftovers in 8.1-10 symbolize abundance (the numbers 4 and 3 having special symbolic significance), while, in 6.35-44, twelve (4×3) are left over, symbolizing superabundance.

Is this account another version of 6.35-44? If it describes a different event, why did the disciples ask, 'How can one feed these people with bread here in the desert?' having already seen Jesus do it? But, in 8.19-20, the two are spoken of by

Jesus and his disciples as separate events. There is probably no definitive answer.

The account seems directed to a Gentile audience; there is a hint in 8.3: 'some of them have come from a great distance'. The language, idiom and focus of the passage are Hellenistic (Greek).

The suggestion has been made that Mark's point in the double insertion is that Gentiles have an equal share in the Eucharist with Jews. This is strengthened by the similarity between v.6: Jesus 'took the seven loaves, and after giving thanks he broke them', and Paul's description of the Eucharist in 1 Corinthians 11.23b-24: Jesus 'took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it...'

It may be that the story came from a Eucharistic teaching of an early Gentile church influenced by Paul, and was included by Mark because of his universalist outlook.

The demand for a sign: Mark 8.11-13

11. The Pharisees came and began to argue with him, asking him for a sign from heaven, to test him.

12. 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'.

13. And he left them, and getting into the boat again, he went across to the other side.

Were the Pharisees thinking of what they were saying? They asked for a sign. Had they not been present when he healed the man in the synagogue with the withered hand? (3.1-6) Had they not heard of the other healings, of the storm stilled, the multitudes fed with a few loaves and fishes? Were those not signs? What did they want? Gimmicks? Miracles on demand to satisfy their curiosity, or their sense of being placed in judgment over Jesus? Did they see him as a performing puppet ready to jump when they pulled the strings? They asked him for a sign... *to test him.*

Clearly, the Pharisees had dug themselves into the trenches in a combative frame of mind. They ‘came and began to argue with him’; to argue, not to dialogue. In argument, truth is an early casualty, with justice and courtesy following soon after. A person may win an argument but lose the truth. Argument divides, hardens positions, and makes listening less likely. It sometimes involves posturing and bluffing, but people see through that, so the one who does it loses credibility. Argument distorts relationships and makes people unreceptive.

Dialogue is about listening, about trying to find what is true, just, or good in the other's position.

It means seeing the other as a fellow human being rather than an opponent. It requires clarity of expression, and a refusal to be drawn into personal attack or offensive bitterness. It recognizes that we might have something to learn from the other. It unites. It knows that those who listen are listened to. Dialogue recognizes that communication is more about the ears and the heart than the mouth and the mind.

Scripture scholars say that the wording of Jesus' refusal was an oath formula. The expression, 'this generation' is used in a context of severe blame: 'this adulterous and sinful generation' (8.38), or 'you faithless generation'. (9.19) 'Jesus sighed deeply in his spirit.... left them... and went across to the other side'. Perhaps, as in his temptation in the desert (Luke 4.12), he recalled the saying, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test'. (Deuteronomy 6.16) Perhaps he was angry with a wilfulness which, on the one hand, demands evidence, but, on the other, refuses to accept it when given. Jesus' signs did not seek to force assent, but to elicit faith.

People look for signs, and run after them when they find them. The moment someone shouts 'Apparition!' people run in droves, to see a moving or weeping statue, and the gloomier and more threatening the accompanying "message", the better. Are Jesus and the Gospel inadequate?

Father, forgive them; they know not what they do.

A point of some significance is Mark's preoccupation with a boat. He ends this story, and the previous one (v.10), with mention of it, and it occurs seventeen times up to this point. Is it a symbol of life as a voyage, a journey? Of Jesus being on the move? Or, more likely, is it that Jesus, in these many crossings of the lake, is moving between Jewish and Gentile territory. His works of power on one side correspond to those on the other. Is there here an implied message of universalism, of inclusiveness?

The yeast of the Pharisees and of Herod: Mark 8.14-21

14. Now the disciples had forgotten to bring any bread; and they had only one loaf with them in the boat.

15. And he cautioned them, saying, 'Watch out - beware of the yeast of the Pharisees and the yeast of the Herodians'.

16. They said to one another, 'It is because we have no bread'.

17. 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?'

18. Do you have eyes, and fail to see? Do you have ears, and fail to hear? And do you not remember?

19. 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'.

20. 'And the seven for the four thousand, how many baskets full of broken pieces did you collect?' And they said to him, 'Seven'.

21. Then he said to them, 'Do you not yet understand?'

This is a story that begins with bad faith and dull minds. In popular usage, yeast (v.15) was seen as an agent of corruption, and a symbol of bad faith. The story flows from the demonstration of the Pharisees' bad faith in vv.11-13, while the inclusion of the Herodians is possibly a reference to 3.6: 'The Pharisees went out and immediately conspired with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him'. Jesus is saying that where people are in bad faith, determined not to be convinced, no miracles will change their mind.

Mark portrays the disciples sleep-walking through life, day-dreaming, unthinking, unaware, and learning nothing from experience. Their response in v.16 illustrates this: 'It is because we have no bread'. (Christopher Clark's book, *The Sleepwalkers*, about Europe's leadership prior to World War I, comes to mind.)

‘Hardened’ (v.17) is a word normally used only of the Pharisees, though Mark used it before in a similar context: ‘they did not understand about the loaves, but their hearts were hardened’. (6.52)

The phrase ‘Do you still not perceive or understand?’ begins and ends Jesus’ series of questions; the duplication is probably for emphasis. V.18 draws on Jeremiah 5.21, ‘Hear this, O foolish and senseless people, who have eyes but do not see, who have ears but do not hear’, and a similar text in Ezekiel 12.2, both referring to the faithlessness of God’s people.

In this passage, Mark shows Jesus as an emotional person, with feelings of impatience and irritation mounting to a crescendo of anger. In v.12 also, his anger is evident. To some, this is scandalous: Luke, the writer of another Gospel, smoothes things over, censoring anger. Perhaps it is better to see Mark’s openness about it as recognition that Jesus was truly a human being, with human emotions. He was God-made-man, not God-acting-a-part.

Mark’s portrayal of the disciples as dim-witted is not without difficulty. While their attitudes may have been distorted by the political understanding of Messiahship then prevalent, that can hardly be a full explanation. After all, the crowds, most of whom would have seen Jesus

only once or twice, responded with enthusiasm. How, then, is Mark's representation of the disciples - who were with Jesus constantly and saw many more miracles - as dull and unresponsive to be regarded as credible? This is all the more problematic, not only in view of their evident good-will, but also that Jesus had earlier said to them, 'To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God'. (4.11) It is hard not to suspect that Mark has his own agenda, and is giving the evidence an angle. Is the over-drawn, or even contrived, background of dullness intended to highlight the disciples' later profession of faith in Jesus in vv.27-29?

One suggestion is that, except for v.15, the piece is of Mark's construction. It has his vocabulary, his themes of the disciples' failure to understand and of Jesus' rejection of the role of political messiah. This raises a larger question: what, in the Gospel, is truly from Jesus, and what has been put into his mouth by the Gospel writer - Mark, in this case - or the faith-community he represented? Some say the question is irrelevant, arguing that the text we have today is inspired by God, and whether it comes directly from Jesus, or Mark, or through whatever editorial process involved the early community, does not matter. But, especially in an age of "spin" and PR, people may find that argument difficult to accept.

In an extreme form, the same approach is found in Islamic attitudes towards the Qur'ân. Muslims see it, in its totality, as having come directly from God through Muhammad, and that every littlest part of it is divinely inspired. To undertake a critical examination of the text, whether as literature, or history, or otherwise, is seen by them as blasphemous. This all-or-nothing approach may account in part for the crisis in Islamic countries today between the so-called fundamentalists and the modernizers. It is Islam's "Modernist" crisis.

The point being made in 8.14-21 seems to be that Jesus, who fed thousands with bread, is the Messiah, able to give spiritual food to his followers. He is not a political Messiah, but a spiritual one. There are five direct or indirect references to bread in the passage; the text, taken with others starting from 6.35, may well have Eucharistic symbolism.

Jesus fires a volley of nine questions at his disciples, without waiting for answers. He sounds angry, impatient, frustrated at their slowness, especially in his last question, 'Do you not yet understand?' ('Are you still without perception?' *Jerusalem Bible*)

Why is he angry? He spoke to them about the 'yeast' of the Pharisees and Herodians. Yeast is used in turning dough to bread and fermenting

beer, among other things. It was, and is, seen as a process of corruption. He meant, 'Beware of their corruption.' But the disciples took it literally, thinking, 'It is because we have no bread.' Jesus seems to be saying, 'Don't take such a woodenly literal meaning out of what I say. Use your imagination; extend your minds.' When we open our bibles we are not meant to close our minds.

A fundamentalist view of scripture is not a more faithful one; it is a victory for stupidity. It mistakes certainty for truth, with the rock-like assurance of the closed mind. It is suspicious of risk, discovery, invention and creativity. It needs bogeymen: anyone from the devil to its critics will do. It needs someone to blame for all that's wrong, someone to point an accusing finger at. Self-criticism it sees as treason. It sees religion as an inheritance to be preserved like a museum exhibit more than a pilgrimage of faith. The Gospel writers were themselves far from "fundamentalist" in their use of scripture! In the final analysis, fundamentalism is a form of intellectual suicide.

Jesus cures a blind man at Bethsaida: Mark 8.22-26

22. They came to Bethsaida. Some people brought a blind man to him [Jesus] and begged him to touch him.

23. 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?'

24. And the man looked up and said, 'I can see people, but they look like trees, walking'.

25. Then Jesus laid his hands on his eyes again; and he looked intently and his sight was restored, and he saw everything clearly.

26. Then he sent him away to his home, saying, 'Do not even go into the village'. [An alternative reading is: 'Do not tell anyone in the village'.]

There are clear similarities between this story and the healing of the deaf man with the speech impediment in 7.31-37: -

- geographical locations are given: 7.31 and 8.22.
- people bring the sufferer to Jesus: 7.32 and 8.22.
- he takes him away from the crowd: 7.33 and 8.23.
- he uses spittle: 7.33 and 8.23.
- the effects of the cure are described in three phases: 7.35 and 8.25;
- he commands silence: 7.36 and 8.26.

There is - unusually - no mention of demons or faith in either story; this is not to say that there was no faith; it is implicit, both in the crowd and in the sufferers. Mark's point is that faith opens

eyes and ears to the power of God at work in the person of Jesus.

There are differences also: -

- with the deaf man, the cure is immediate (7.35);
- with the blind man, it is gradual (8.23-25), the only such case in the Gospels.

It may be that Mark is recording two separate events, not local variants of the one, and sees the healing of the deaf and the blind as a fulfilment of Isaiah: 'On that day the deaf shall hear... and out of their gloom and darkness the eyes of the blind shall see'. (29.18)

More significantly, the story is a link between what preceded and what follows. What preceded was about the "blindness" of the disciples: 'Do you have eyes, and fail to see?' (v.18) What follows is about their gradual growth in faith (v.28) - gradual like the healing of the blind man - culminating in Peter's 'You are the Messiah'. (v.29)

It is surely not a coincidence that the healing is described as taking place in Bethsaida, 'the city of... Peter'. (John 1.44) But Mark, in describing it as a 'village' (v.23), although it had a large population, may be revealing his ignorance of geography, or perhaps has deliberately located

the event there in order to create a link with Peter because of v.29.

In any event, the story is a transition from the lengthy instruction of the disciples, starting at 6.34, about Jesus being the Messiah, to a new understanding, starting at 8.31, of the nature of that messiahship as expressed, not in power, but in suffering.

There is a parallel also with the story of the healing of the blind man, Bartimaeus, in 10.46-52. Both stories mark the end of a teaching about Jesus' messiahship, and include a personal declaration about him.

For Jesus, to 'see' means to understand: 7.18.

Peter's declaration about Jesus: Mark 8.27-30

27. 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?'

28. And they answered him, 'John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets'.

29. He asked them, 'But who do you say that I am?' Peter answered him, 'You are the Messiah'.

30. And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him.

There are similarities between the story of the healing of the blind man and this one: -

- both begin by giving a location: vv.22 and 27
- Jesus moves away from the crowd: vv.23a, 27a
- he asks a question: vv.23b, 27b
- the answer is incomplete: vv.24, 28
- he pursues the matter: vv.25a, 29a
- full recognition follows: vv.25b, 29b
- he commands people to secrecy: vv.26, 30

There is here an abrupt change - so abrupt as to seem artificial - from the incomprehension formerly so strongly emphasized by Mark to Peter's new and emphatic profession of faith in v.29. Did Mark exaggerate the disciples' failure to understand, in order to lend greater force to Peter's breakthrough declaration? Mark seems to have exaggerated Jesus' demands for secrecy up to the point of unrealism, as in 1.44, 7.36, and 8.26. Was this to draw attention dramatically to the turnaround from v.30, 'he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him', to v.32, 'He said all this quite openly'?

This story marks a defining moment. Until this point, Jesus had been rejected by some, regarded by others as John the Baptist (6.14), a prophet (6.15), or Elijah. (6.15) Only the demons had

fully acknowledged him. (1.24, 34; 3.11; 5.7) Now, in this passage, the disciples come to see him as Messiah - *Christos* in Greek, Christ in English; the word means *anointed*. Jesus orders them ‘not to tell anyone about him’. While Peter now acknowledges him as Messiah, his understanding of that title is distorted; therefore, he and the rest should be silent, as they would have had nothing to communicate about him except their misunderstandings.

The title of Messiah was not a divine one, but had royal connotations. Jeremiah wrote, ‘The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In his days Judah will be saved, and Israel will live in safety. And this is the name by which he will be called: “The Lord is our righteousness”’. (23.5-6)

Ezekiel wrote similarly, ‘I will set over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them: he shall feed them and be their shepherd. And I, the Lord, will be their God, and my servant David shall be prince among them; I, the Lord, have spoken’. (34.23-24; also 37.24)

For Jeremiah and Ezekiel, the Messiah is a returning King David, the ideal ruler, the shepherd of his people.

In Zechariah, the royal character of Messiah is modified by the idea that, although victorious, he is humble: 'your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey.... He shall command peace to the nations; his dominion shall be from sea to sea, and from the River to the ends of the earth'. (9.9-10)

By the time of Jesus, this idea had been reduced to the political. Jesus never used the title Messiah of himself, preferring instead Son of Man (2.10, 28), or Servant. (10.45)

8.30 signals the end of the first part of Mark's gospel. It gives his answer to the question about Jesus, 'Who then is this?' (4.41) He now moves on to the second part, which portrays Jesus as the messiah who will suffer, die and rise again.

Jesus foretells his death and resurrection (the first time): Mark 8.31-32a

31. 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.

32. He said all this quite openly.

Mark has Jesus here foretelling his death and resurrection. There is a second such foretelling in 9.30-32, and a third in 10.32-34. The background against which it takes place is that of the disciples' constant misunderstanding of who Jesus is, and of the nature of Messiahship. In vv.27-30, there was a breakthrough with Peter's declaration that Jesus is the Messiah.

These predictions have been substantially influenced by the events they describe. While Jesus clearly said to his disciples that he was to suffer, die, and be raised again, it appears that Mark, writing his gospel a generation later, builds into the prediction something of what had happened.

In speaking of the Messiah, Jesus linked the title of Son of Man with that of Suffering Servant (of Isaiah). This is followed - perhaps at another time - by the assertion that those who wish to follow Jesus must also be prepared to suffer. The triumphalistic, politicized notions of a Messiah who is a powerful ruler, or judge, sitting in glory, Jesus repudiates.

It seems that Mark, in the light of various factors operative in his time, such as conflict between Christians and Jews, gives Jesus' predictions an anti-Jewish slant, adding to them details which draw on events that came after Jesus' statement.

Jesus' understanding of Messiahship may be better understood by referring to Isaiah's passage about the Suffering Servant of the Lord: -

52. 13. See, my servant shall prosper; he shall be exalted and lifted up, and shall be very high.

14. Just as there were many who were astonished at him – so marred was his appearance, beyond human semblance, and his form beyond that of mortals –

15. so he shall startle many nations; kings shall shut their mouths because of him; for that which had not been told them they shall see, and that which they had not heard they shall contemplate.

53.1. Who has believed what we have heard?

And to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?

2. For he grew up before him like a young plant, and like a root out of dry ground; he had no form or majesty that we should look at him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him.

3. He was despised and rejected by others; a man of suffering and acquainted with infirmity; and as one from whom others hide their faces he was despised, and we held him of no account.

4. Surely he has borne our infirmities and carried our diseases; yet we accounted him stricken, struck down by God, and afflicted.

5. But he was wounded for our transgressions,

crushed for our iniquities;
upon him was the punishment that made us
whole,
and by his bruises we are healed.

6. All we like sheep have gone astray;
we have all turned to our own way,
and the Lord has laid on him
the iniquity of us all.

7. He was oppressed, and he was afflicted,
yet he did not open his mouth;
like a lamb that is led to the slaughter,
and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent,
so he did not open his mouth.

8. By a perversion of justice he was taken away.
Who could have imagined his future?
For he was cut off from the land of the living,
stricken for the transgression of my people.

9. They made his grave with the wicked
and his tomb with the rich,
although he had done no violence,
and there was no deceit in his mouth.

10. Yet it was the will of the Lord to crush him
with pain.

When you make his life an offering for sin,
he shall see his offspring, and shall prolong his
days;

through him the will of the Lord shall prosper.

11. Out of his anguish he shall see light;
he shall find satisfaction through his knowledge.
The righteous one, my servant, shall make many
righteous,
and he shall bear their iniquities.

12. Therefore I will allot him a portion with the great,
and he shall divide the spoil with the strong;
because he poured out himself to death,
and was numbered with the transgressors;
yet he bore the sin of many,
and made intercession for the transgressors.
(Isaiah 52.13-53.12)

What did Jesus actually say at this time? Perhaps it was like this: 'The Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and die, and be raised again'. This was his understanding, and therefore, in contrast to his earlier demands for silence, 'He said all this quite openly'. (v.32a) The 'must' of v.31 is echoed again in 9.11; in both cases it represents God's will.

Peter's misunderstanding: Mark 8.32b-38

32.b. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him.

33. 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.'

Peter had come to see Jesus as Messiah, but did not yet know what that meant. His misunderstanding gives Jesus the opportunity of emphasizing yet again the difference between his view and theirs. His repudiation of Peter's

statement is powerful, even savage: ‘Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things’. (v.33) It is reminiscent of Jesus’, ‘Away with you, Satan!’ in Matthew 4.10, at the end of Jesus’ temptations in the desert. The rebuke was intended for the disciples’ ears: ‘turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter’.

There is something comically absurd in Peter’s “rebuking” Jesus, telling him what his mission should be, as if he knew best. Or was it that Peter was afraid, thinking, ‘If that’s what happens to Jesus, they’ll get me, too’?

On reflection, how understandable is the disciples misunderstanding! Who would have expected a suffering saviour? Who could have expected God to become man, not to command and control, but to serve and suffer? The disciples’ expectation is how many people see God - a Supreme Lord, in full control, ruling with sovereignty, putting matters right, settling injustices by the assertion of omnipotent power. But God the Superman disempowers humanity. Perhaps that is why Jesus rejects such a view so emphatically. Jesus, the human being, is the embodiment of God. He is God-in-humanity, humanity-in-God. He is God’s way of saying, ‘It’s humanity that matters’. God the Sufferer empowers humanity. Is all the human race for the last two thousand years in a slow learners’ class,

still making the same mistake as the disciples, still waiting for God to intervene like a Superman to rescue us from our difficulties? Such a view of God becomes impossible after Auschwitz.

It may also be said that the disciples' view of God is a masculine image. The God their Messiah suggests is perhaps the ultimate symbol of male assertiveness and self-sufficiency. The God revealed in Jesus comes in weakness, suffers, and dies like the rest of humanity. He is 'one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin'. (Hebrews 4.15) The God Jesus reveals has a feminine dimension.

God in Jesus may also be called God-who-fails. The Gospel account of Jesus' mission is not a success story. He failed to persuade even his own family, and his disciples deserted him. 'He came to his own and his own received him not.' (John 1.11) Perhaps the commonest of all human experiences is that of failure. Jesus has been there before us.

Mark's constant stress on the disciples' misunderstanding of Jesus was his way of asking the readers' questions for them. Is Jesus a teacher, an exorcist, a prophet, a healer, Elijah returned, Son of David, Isaiah's Suffering Servant, or Messiah? What does his self-designated title of Son of Man mean? Mark raises these questions through the literary device of the

disciples' misunderstanding, thereby enabling him to say, in effect, 'Yes, Jesus is all of those. But he's more than any or all of them'. So, who then, is Jesus, in the final analysis? Mark's answer is, 'Jesus is the Son of God'.

The followers of Jesus must be prepared to suffer: Mark 8.34-38

34. 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.

35. 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.

36. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life?

37. Indeed, what can they give in return for their life?

38. 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'.

This passage is generally regarded as a collection of sayings, spoken elsewhere, and inserted here by Mark who saw it as an appropriate context. The message is: as Christ, so also the Christian.

The expression, 'take up their cross', is probably not a reference to Jesus' crucifixion, but to the Jewish penitential practice whereby a person was anointed, or marked, by a + or x (the Hebrew letter *tau*) as a sign of conversion and dedication. (There is a relic of this in the Catholic practice of marking the forehead with ashes on Ash Wednesday as a sign of penance.) The phrase means that, unless a person is prepared to change and commit themselves to God, they cannot be a disciple of Jesus.

The phrases 'for the sake of the gospel' in v.35, 'of my words' in v.38, and 'when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels' in v.38, are almost certainly later additions.

The phrase 'this adulterous and sinful generation' (v.38) refers to infidelity to God, of which adultery was a symbol. In Jeremiah, Israel is rebuked for it: 'you have the forehead of a whore, you refuse to be ashamed'. (3.3)

The passage as a whole underlines forgetfulness of self for the sake of following Jesus as the one who leads to God. Its message is very different from philosophies of self-improvement, or a search for spiritual enlightenment, or a feel-good factor. Jesus is looking, not for dabbling dilettantes, but for committed followers. The focus of the passage is not on a teaching, a wisdom, or an ideal, but on a

person; not on the self, but on the Other, namely, God. Its motivation is not knowledge, but love. The least intelligent person is capable of it, because it is an act, not of the intellect, but of the will. It orientates the follower outwards, beyond the limitations of the self. And it is this forgetfulness of self which secures and saves the self. What benefit will it be to a person to gain everything, even the whole world, at the cost of their life, their self, their integrity? By letting go of the self for the sake of another, one re-discovers the self: 'It is in giving that we receive...'

Mark 9.1

1. 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'.

Among early Christians, many believed that Jesus would return in their lifetime and bring everything to a consummation; they would not 'taste death' until it happened. This isolated verse reflects that view. Mark has Jesus say it, and employs an emphatic form, 'Truly I tell you...' to reinforce that impression. He does the same again in a similar context in 13.30. But Jesus was to say, 'About that day or hour no one knows...' (13.32)

One side-effect was to suggest that the Christian community, the church, is 'the kingdom of God... come with power'. That misunderstanding has had seriously damaging effects in the life of the Christian community down to the present time, lending itself to the cultivation of power in place of service, to the church becoming self-serving instead of Gospel-serving. The church is not the kingdom; the kingdom is not the church. The kingdom is wider than it, and the church is no more than a sign pointing to it. When the church points to itself, instead of to the kingdom, it has nothing to say, and is not listened to. When it sees itself as an end in itself, instead of as a means to an end, it has lost its way. Jesus did not preach himself but the kingdom of God.

The Transfiguration: Mark 9.2-10

2. 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,
3. and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no fuller on earth could bleach them.
4. And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus.
5. 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'.
6. He did not know what to say, for they were terrified.

7. Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, 'This is my beloved Son; listen to him!'
8. Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them any more, but only Jesus.
9. 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.
10. So they kept the matter to themselves, questioning what this rising from the dead could mean.

Traditionally, the transfiguration is said to have taken place on Mount Tabor, but there are difficulties about that. There was a village on its summit in Jesus' time, so he and Peter, James and John would not there be 'apart, by themselves'. (v.2) Neither is Tabor 'a high mountain' - it is only 570 metres in height - though it seems so, as its slopes are steep and it stands in isolation on the plain of Esdraelon.

The story alludes to a key narrative of the Hebrew bible, the revelation of God to Moses on Mount Sinai: 'Then Moses went up on the mountain, and the cloud covered the mountain. The glory of the Lord settled on Mount Sinai, and the cloud covered it for six days; Moses entered the cloud and went up on the mountain'. (Exodus 24.15-16, 18) The cloud is a symbol of God's presence: 'The cloud covered the tent of meeting,

and the glory of God filled the tabernacle.... For the cloud of the Lord was on the tabernacle'. (See Exodus 40.34-38 and 13.21-22.) Peter's 'dwellings' in v.5 are the same as the 'tent' here; the *Douai Bible* uses the word 'tabernacle'.

Vv.2-3: The 'six days' of Exodus 24.16 may be reflected in Mark's 'six days later' (v.2), though the phrase is probably meant in the first instance to serve as a link to the events that took place at Caesarea Philippi (8.27-29), and the passage itself a confirmation of them.

'He was transfigured before them'. He was changed in appearance, his clothes dazzling white, like those of the young man in the empty tomb on the morning of the Resurrection. (16.5)

V.4: The reference to Elijah and Moses is significant. Key figures of the Hebrew bible representing respectively the prophets and the law, their presence serves as confirmation of Jesus and his mission; their absence at the end of the narrative suggests that they have given way to Jesus: 'when they looked around, they saw no one with them any more, but only Jesus'. (v.8) Jesus is greater than they.

Vv.5-8: Peter is again taking trying to take Jesus over and manage him. His heart is in the right place, but he cannot resist the temptation to sort people out "for their own good". He is often seen in the Catholic church as an image of the pope.

His words are a reminder of a perennial temptation, to “correct” Jesus, to nudge him in the right direction, to tell him who he is and what his mission should be (8.32b), to try to capture his vision in a structure. (v.5) But you cannot capture, or analyse, a mystery, whether in an institution, or a system of ideas such as a dogmatic definition or a theology, and the attempt to do so is idolatrous. Peter wanted to make the mystical experience last, to take hold of it and lock it up safely, but it is not amenable to that. However, he may be excused, as ‘He did not know what to say, for they were terrified’. (v.6) He, James, and John had been in communion with God, an overwhelming experience; when the vision had passed, ‘they saw no one with them any more, but only Jesus’. (v.8) The gospel says no more; perhaps there was silence, an end to words. But Peter remembered, ‘For he [Jesus] received honour and glory from God the Father when that voice was conveyed to him by the Majestic Glory, saying, “This is my Son, my Beloved, with whom I am well pleased”. We ourselves heard his voice coming from heaven, when we were with him on the holy mountain’. (2 Peter 1.17-18)

The voice from the cloud evokes memories of the baptism of Jesus: ‘a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased’. (1.11) It recalls also Isaiah on God’s servant, ‘Here is my servant, whom I

uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations'. (42.1)

V.9: Until Jesus had risen, the disciples could proclaim only their own view of the Messiah, which was not that of Jesus, so he 'ordered them to tell no one about what they had seen'.

While Mark looks back to the Hebrew bible, he also looks forward to the passion of Jesus in Gethsemane, on the Mount of Olives; there also Peter, James and John accompany Jesus. (9.2; 14.33) The disciples did not know what to say to him (9.6; 14.40); and Jesus, spoken of by God as his Son in 9.7, speaks to God as his Father in 14.36. The transfiguration is a message to the disciples, a foretaste of the resurrection.

Is this story a description of a visible and audible event, or of an inner experience? Virtually everything points to its being a mystical encounter experienced by Jesus and the disciples. It describes something analogous to the experiences of some saints; in those experiences, time, place and language are of no consequence; the experience transcends them. The story is an example of apocalyptic writing. To say that is not to say that it is a figment of the imagination, or mere fiction. The experience may be real. How does one describe the indescribable, except by using the language of imagery? And what

imagery are writers most likely to use, except what is familiar to them and their readers from their own tradition? So Mark drew on the imagery of the Hebrew bible in an attempt to say something rather than nothing about an experience which is essentially subjective and not amenable to critical verification. 'The Lord is king! Let the earth rejoice... light dawns for the righteous, and joy for the upright of heart. Rejoice in the Lord, you righteous, and give thanks to his holy name'. (Psalm 97. 1, 11-12)

A vision need not necessarily be visible to the human eye to be real, any more than a healing has to be physical to be real. The message is one of divine approval for Jesus, the suffering servant who is the messiah, his beloved Son.

The passage concludes with the familiar injunction to silence, and a further hint - the second - about Jesus rising from the dead; the first was in 8.31. Belief in a general resurrection of the dead at the end of the world was common in Jesus' time. What his disciples could not understand was his particular resurrection after his death. The passage underlies the idea that Jesus' resurrection is the time when they will understand; it is the moment of breakthrough.

The coming of Elijah: Mark 9.11-13

11. Then they asked him, ‘Why do the scribes say that Elijah must come first?’

12. 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?’

13. But I tell you that Elijah has come, and they did to him whatever they pleased, as it is written about him’.

Elijah was the great prophet of the past; no other is mentioned so often in the New Testament. Of him the scriptures said, ‘How glorious you were, Elijah... whose glory is equal to yours?’ (Sirach 48.4) There was a widespread belief that he would come again before the Messiah. Malachi wrote: ‘I will send you the prophet Elijah before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes’. (4.5) If Jesus is the Messiah, the disciples ask where Elijah is. In v.13, Jesus is understood as implying that John the Baptist was Elijah. The two were similar in their presence in the desert, their sudden entry on the scene (1 Kings 17), their dress (2 Kings 1.8), and the style of their preaching.

Jesus implies that, just as John was executed, so will he. John is the forerunner of Jesus in life and in death. ‘After John was arrested’, Jesus had said, ‘the time is fulfilled’. (1.14-15)

The end of the passage, 'as it is written about him' (v.13) may be an addition, either by Mark or by another hand, because there were no scriptures which foretold that John would be put to death.

The healing of a boy with a spirit: Mark 9.14-29

14. When they came to the disciples, they saw a great crowd around them, and some scribes arguing with them.

15. When the whole crowd saw him, they were immediately overcome with awe, and they ran forward to greet him.

16. He asked them, 'What are you arguing about with them?'

17. Someone from the crowd answered him, 'Teacher, I brought you my son; he has a spirit that makes him unable to speak;

18. 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'.

19. 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'.

20. And they brought the boy to him. When the spirit saw him, immediately it convulsed the boy, and he fell on the ground and rolled about, foaming at the mouth.

21. Jesus asked the father, 'How long has this been happening to him?' And he said, 'From childhood.

22. 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'.

23. Jesus said to him, 'If you are able! - All things can be done for the one who believes'.

24. Immediately the father of the child cried out, 'I believe; help my unbelief!'

25. When Jesus saw that a crowd came running together, he rebuked the unclean spirit, saying to it, 'You spirit that keeps this boy from speaking and hearing, I command you, come out of him, and never enter him again!'

26. 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'.

27. But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him up, and he was able to stand.

28. When he had entered the house, his disciples asked him privately, 'Why could we not cast it out?'

29. He said to them, 'This kind can come out only through prayer'.

Mark has built into this narrative similarities between Jesus and Moses (in Exodus 34.29-31). Both descended from a mountain: 'As they were coming down the mountain', and 'Moses came down from Mount Sinai'. Some physical change had taken place in them which evoked surprise

from people: ‘When the whole crowd saw him, they were immediately overcome with awe, and they ran forward to greet him’, and, ‘the skin of his [Moses’] face shone because he had been talking with God’. Both find unease between their followers and the people: ‘When they came to the disciples, they saw a great crowd around them, and some scribes arguing with them’, and ‘the Israelites... were afraid to come near him’. Both experience difficulty with the people: ‘You faithless generation, how much longer must I put up with you?’, and Moses had to call them to come to him because they were afraid. As he has previously done, Mark finds or creates links between Moses and Jesus. (See 1.12-13; 6.30-44; 9.2-8.)

In contrast to earlier healings (see 7.33 and 8.23), this one takes place in public. The description in vv.18, 20, 21, 22, 26 of the boy’s illness, with the exception of his going rigid (v.18), is a description of *grand mal* epilepsy. (See notes to 1.21-28 on pp.24-25 above.)

When the boy’s father says, in v.22, ‘if you are able to do anything, have pity on us and help us’, he speaks for any parent who has seen the suffering of a child, tried for help everywhere, failed to find it, and, in desperation, seizes with great intensity on the last chance. Jesus, in reply, takes up the man’s opening phrase, ‘If you are

able!’ Was he offended? It sounds sarcastic. Was he saying, ‘Do you doubt that I can do this?’

Nonetheless he says, ‘All things can be done for the one who believes.’ The father’s reply was magnificent, ‘I believe; help my unbelief!’ It was honest, not saying more than he could truthfully say. He had some faith; without it, he would not have come to Jesus in the first place. But he wasn’t sure, and who could blame him? Having being disappointed by Jesus’ disciples (v.18), how could he be sure of Jesus himself? So the father did what he could, and asked for help with what he couldn’t. In doing so, he speaks for all humanity. Everyone lives in the half-way house between doubt and certainty: the most thorough-going sceptic has some faith, the strongest believer some doubt.

The story is partly about the role of faith and prayer in healing. It also shows again Jesus’ power over evil in any form. Furthermore, it points out that the disciples, without Jesus, can do nothing. More significantly, however, placed as it is shortly after Jesus’ foretelling his death and resurrection, it makes the point that one who can ‘lift up’ this seemingly dead boy (vv.26-27) can also lift himself up from the dead. This usage of the term ‘lift up’ is found in 5.41; 8.31; 9.9-10; 10.34; 14.28; 16.6. The passage answers the disciples’ question in 9.10.

What are we to make of Mark's exorcism stories? In Genesis 1-3, the writer tells the story of creation, using the language, images, and ideas of the cosmology of his time - which is not our time. The heart of the creation stories is not *how* God created, but rather *that* God created, and *why*. Similarly, in the exorcism stories, Mark uses the language, images, and ideas of the pre-scientific medical understanding of his time. The heart of these stories is that Jesus freed people from whatever it was in their mind, body, or soul that impeded them from reaching their full humanity. The stories of bodily healing, or of feeding the hungry, are essentially the same. "Salvation", or "saving" people, is freeing them from anything that diminishes their humanity. And Jesus is the role model of what humanity is. So, for Mark, exorcism, healing, feeding the hungry, and saving are not separate activities, but rather different dimensions of one activity. Common to all of them is that salvation - whatever form it takes in a given instance, and it could be a cup of water to the thirsty - is a gift, that is to say, something given. There is recognition in the stories of human need - the gospels are a declaration of dependence - and of God who intervenes in human affairs to help, to "save", doing so by means of Jesus, the human face of God. And Jesus is the role model for humanity.

Jesus foretells his death and resurrection (the second time): Mark 9.30-32

30. They went on from there and passed through Galilee. He did not want anyone to know it;

31. 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’.

32. But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him.

Jesus continues on his way, a way that leads to Jerusalem, to his suffering, death and resurrection. Why did he not want anyone to know it? It does not here seem to be the concern for secrecy about his Messiahship that he so often showed before. Was it that he sensed his time was drawing to a close, his enemies were mustering their forces, and there was no point in giving them advance information about his movements? V.31 seems to suggest that.

For the second time, Jesus speaks of his coming death and resurrection. The first was in 8.31-32a, and the third in 10.32-34. A characteristic of the three texts is that each is followed by an incident in which Jesus’ followers are shown in a bad light, while someone outside their circle is shown favourably; there is mention in each, also, of the need of renunciation. If these are separate events, they show either remarkable coincidence or conscious reconstruction.

The wording in 9.30-32 is more emphatic than in 8.31-32a: instead of saying simply that Jesus, or perhaps his mission, is rejected, he is here said to be ‘betrayed’; and the word ‘kill’ is repeated.

As elsewhere, the disciples do not understand. Sometimes bad news is too big to take in. Many people, recalling the 911 attacks in the USA in 2001, say that, for a while, they could not take it in; they tried to make sense of the news by every explanation but the true one. Yet there seems to be more than that here, especially if this really was a second prediction, and not merely a second account of one event. Some scholars suggest that the repetition was a teaching device of Mark’s to underline the importance of the message.

Others suggest that the episode(s) is a reconstruction by the early church after the event. If there is here a prophecy truly made beforehand, that makes it difficult, if not impossible, to explain the disciples’ reaction to Jesus’ arrest and death, and their astonishment at his resurrection. How could people be surprised at something they’ve already been told about solemnly three times? ‘It is now generally agreed that the Passion Prophecies... which predict the individual resurrection of Jesus, have been written up in the light of the Easter Event’. (Dermot A. Lane, *The Reality of Jesus: an essay*

in Christology, Veritas, Dublin, 1975, p.168, n.6, of chapter 5)

Some authors split the difference, saying that Jesus did indeed foretell his death and resurrection, but only in general terms, and Mark, in the light of events, recounts the story with details drawn from those events.

Why were the disciples afraid to ask Jesus about it? (v.32) Did they fear a telling off like the one they got in the boat when they misunderstood what he said about yeast and bread? (8.14-21) One could argue that Jesus didn't suffer fools gladly, and might indeed have given them a blast, had they questioned him. Or was this verse added later, so as to excuse in some way the disciples' failure to understand?

Who is the greatest? Mark 9.33-37

33. Then they came to Capernaum; and when he was in the house he asked them, 'What were you arguing about on the way?'

34. But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest.

35. He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, 'Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all'.

36. Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them,

37. 'Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me'.

Jesus does not want anyone to know that he is passing through Galilee. (v.30) Yet he goes to Capernaum, his adopted town, to 'the house', presumably his own. That wasn't likely to ensure silence. What did Mark mean? Was it a slip?

Here is a very normal, and human, discussion among the twelve: which of us is Number One? Who is entitled to feathers in his cap? In every institution, there is a struggle about who is in and who is out, who is up and who is down. The will to power is a basic drive among men and women. But, when challenged to bring this out into the open and acknowledge it, the twelve are embarrassed into silence. No one wants to admit the squabble to Jesus, probably because they know that such concern has no place in his priorities.

For Jesus, authority is the power to serve, not to dominate. It is a means to an end, not an end in itself. The twelve, it seems, wanted to have it for the sake of having it, just to revel in it. They had still not understood what God's kingdom is about: it is to be people-serving not power-serving, other-serving not self-serving. Institutions are to exist for people, not *vice versa*. What Jesus did and taught gave a dignity to

service, challenging the idea that to be a servant is demeaning or belittling. But the service has to be real, not a mere title, or a token gesture used as a cover for control.

Vv.36-37 are difficult to understand in this context. Jesus is not holding up the child as an example of service, but making a different point, namely, that to welcome a disciple of his – in 9.42 he calls his disciples ‘little ones’ - is to welcome him. There are parallels to this elsewhere in the Gospel: ‘Whoever listens to you listens to me, and whoever rejects you rejects me, and whoever rejects me rejects the one who sent me’. (Luke 10.16) And, much more emphatically, ‘Very truly, I tell you, whoever receives one whom I send receives me; and whoever receives me receives him who sent me’. (John 13.20) Jesus associates the disciples with himself, and he with them, even when they are muddled.

Another exorcist: Mark 9.38-41

38. 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’.

39. But Jesus said, ‘Do not stop him; for no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me.

40. Whoever is not against us is for us.

41. 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’.

As Mark tells it, Jesus had scarcely finished associating himself with his disciples (in v.37b) than they misunderstand him. Perhaps they had begun to see the following of Jesus as a gathering into a holy huddle, a club separating insiders from outsiders – in other words, new Pharisees. The other exorcist was ‘not following us’; he wasn’t doing what they told him; he didn’t let them control him, so they tried to stop him. It is as if they want to take possession of Jesus, to claim copyright over him; no one should do anything in his name without their permission, because he is theirs, and they are his. He has just said it.

Correcting them, Jesus says, ‘Whoever is not against us is for us’. He also said, ‘Whoever is not with me is against me’. (Matthew 12.30) The two sayings are complementary, not contradictory. Jesus looks to wider horizons than those of his disciples. He welcomes the power of God wherever it is present. His work is inclusion, not exclusion, integrating outcasts into community. For him identity is created and maintained, not by laying down lines of demarcation dividing insiders from outsiders, but by doing, or not doing, the work of God.

The ways recounted by Mark, in which Jesus was misunderstood by his disciples, have been repeated in, and by, the Christian community in every generation since. How often has the Christian religion been the occasion, the excuse, and the cause of division among people, even to the extent of war!

V.41 is almost certainly an addition by the early Christian community. It uses the phrase 'Christ', which is apostolic; the Gospels normally use 'the Christ'. It reiterates the message of v.37. The two are combined in Matthew 10.42: 'whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple – truly, I tell you, none of these will lose their reward'.

Temptations to sin: Mark 9.42-50

42. '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.

43. 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.

45. And if your 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.

47. 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,
48. where their worm never dies, and the fire is never quenched.
49. For everyone will be salted with fire.
50. Salt is good; but if salt has lost its saltiness, how can you restore its saltiness? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another’.

A “stumbling block” is a scandal (Greek, *skandalon*), not the tabloid “shock horror” type but something that causes a person to fall, an obstacle like a stone on a path - in this instance an obstacle to faith. It is conduct or teaching that misleads a person, preventing them from coming to the truth. Jesus uses a powerful and graphic image: better to have a millstone hung around your neck and be thrown into the sea than to become an obstacle to someone’s faith. Jesus was not into religion as therapy, or wish-fulfilment, or the creation of comfort zones. He presents dramatic choices in either-or language. He underlines the fact that actions have consequences. Perhaps the person for whom Jesus has least respect is the one who tries to have the best of all worlds, sitting on the fence, taking the line of least resistance, and going with the flow.

‘Little ones’ refers not to children, but to disciples.

Vv.43-47: Perhaps this is what has been called ‘Semitic exaggeration’. Origen, the most important biblical scholar and theologian of the early Greek church, who lived in the third century, is said to have castrated himself in response to these verses, in order to preserve his chastity. But doing that does not stop the imagination.

The word used for hell is *Gehenna*, the name of a ravine south of Jerusalem used as a rubbish dump, where fires burned constantly. For some seven centuries, it was a symbol of punishment: ‘they shall go out and look at the dead bodies of the people who have rebelled against me; for their worm shall not die, their fire shall not be quenched, and they shall be an abhorrence to all flesh’. (Isaiah 66.24)

What is hell? One view presents heaven and hell as carrot and stick on a cosmic scale: ‘Be good boys and girls, and you’ll go to heaven; be bad boys and girls, and you’ll go to hell’. That belittles people. It also belittles the Christian message by making compliance, rather than a relationship with God, its goal. It uses terror tactics - cheap, unworthy, and demeaning, an abuse of religion. It also belittles the messenger by using fear to control people.

Is hell the Christian *gulag*? Whereas Stalin's was cold rather than hot – that's one difference, though not the most important – not even his malice could find a way of tormenting someone after death. But hell is everlasting – 'the fire is never quenched' (v.48); there is no reprieve, no possibility of escape. Is that what Jesus meant?

Another view has been well expressed by the Christian apologist, C. S. Lewis, 'In the long run the answer to all those who object to the doctrine of hell, is itself a question, "What are you asking God to do?" To wipe out their past sins, and, at all costs, to give them a fresh start, smoothing every difficulty and offering every miraculous help? But He has done so, on Calvary. To forgive them? They will not [i. e. refuse] to be forgiven. To leave them alone? Alas, I am afraid that is what He does'. (*The Problem of Pain*, Fontana, London, 1957, p.116)

These verses are about priorities, decisions and commitment. For Mark, renunciation is an inseparable element of the teaching of Jesus. What counts is self-denial not self-gratification, self-giving not self-seeking.

V.44 is missing. It is identical to v.48, and is not found in the best manuscripts.

Vv.49-50 are difficult. Salt is used to season food; it brings out the best in it, adding flavour. It preserves it from corruption. It was used as an antiseptic in the treatment of wounds. It was a means of exchange: people were paid in salt, often a precious commodity. (The word *salary* comes from the Latin, *sal*, salt; a good worker was “worth his salt”.) Jesus seems to call his followers to bring out the best in people and situations, add flavour to life, help prevent corruption, be healers, and facilitate exchange. And that calls for renunciation of self.

Vv.38-50 is probably a series of sayings gathered together from different times, places, and contexts. They may have formed the basis for *catechesis* (religious instruction of the faithful) among the early Christians.

The concluding phrase, ‘be at peace with one another’, may be a wrap-up phrase referring back to the dispute among the twelve which began the series. (9.33-34)

Teaching about divorce: Mark 10.1-12

1. 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.
2. Some Pharisees came, and to test him they asked, ‘Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?’

3. He answered them, 'What did Moses command you?'
4. They said, 'Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of dismissal and to divorce her'.
5. But Jesus said to them, 'Because of your hardness of heart he wrote this commandment for you.
6. But from the beginning of creation, 'God made them male and female'.
7. 'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife,
8. and the two shall become one flesh. So they are no longer two, but one flesh'.
9. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.
10. Then in the house the disciples asked him again about this matter.
11. He said to them, 'Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her;
12. and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery'.

The geographical information in v.1 is confusing. Judea is not beyond the Jordan; it is on its 'homeward', that is, Western bank.

The narrative exemplifies and underlines the authority of Jesus as a teacher: 'as was his custom, he again taught them'. (v.1)

The teaching follows a pattern standard in rabbinic circles: question (v.2); counter-question (v.3); a rejoinder which silences the original questioner (v.5); sometimes a further question (none here); private reflection with a select group (vv.10-12). The house (v.10) is a dramatic convenience by Mark for this latter purpose, as in 7.17, 9.28 and 33.

The reference in vv.3-4 is to Deuteronomy: -
‘Suppose a man enters into marriage with a woman, but she does not please him because he finds something objectionable about her, and so he writes her a certificate of divorce, puts it into her hand, and sends her out of his house; she then leaves his house and goes off to become another man’s wife. Then suppose the second man dislikes her, writes her a bill of divorce, puts it in her hand, and sends her out of his house (or the second man who marries her dies); her first husband, who sent her away, is not permitted to take her again to be his wife after she has been defiled; for that would be abhorrent to the Lord, and you shall not bring guilt on the land that the Lord your God is giving you as a possession’.
(24.1-4)

The “bill of divorce” was a simple note, stating, ‘I divorce you’. A scribe would write one for the illiterate.

It is curious that Jesus is quoted in vv.3, 5 as saying, ‘What did Moses *command* you?’ Moses

had not commanded anything in 24.1-4; he had, at most, *allowed* something, though the text may be read simply as a description of what happened, not as permission to do it. Jesus explains that this allowance was made by Moses 'because of your hardness of heart'. (v.4)

In vv.6-8, Jesus goes on to quote Genesis as the original source of teaching: 'God made them male and female' (1.27), and, 'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife'. (2.24) He is calling for a return to authentic sources. The legitimacy of divorce was accepted by all Jews in the time of Jesus; the only issue of debate was the ground for it. In the surrounding cultures of Rome, Greece, Egypt and Persia divorce was freely available to a man. Jesus prohibits it entirely, a huge innovation against the background of his time, and a striking move towards equality between men and women. In Jewish tradition, a man could divorce his wife; she could not divorce him; Jesus puts them both on the same footing. He sets aside Deuteronomy 24.1-4 in order to return to the original teaching. For a Jewish teacher to set aside what Moses had said was an enormous departure from rabbinic tradition, and assumed a claim to a higher authority.

V.9 is important for understanding how Jesus saw his mission: in effect, he says, 'This is what God says on the matter, even if Moses says

otherwise'. What he teaches is 'a wholly new idea not found in the Old Testament or rabbinical literature'. (*Jerome Biblical Commentary*, New Testament, p.44, just before 61)

Vv.10-12 reinforce the strength and originality of the teaching. V.11 introduces a new concept of adultery as an offence against a woman; in Jewish tradition, adultery was an offence only against a man: a woman who committed adultery violated her husband's property rights. V.12 takes Roman law into account; under it, a woman could sue her husband; in Jewish law, this was impossible. The verse suggests a context with which Jesus would have been unfamiliar. It is probably Mark, rather than Jesus, who speaks in it.

Although Jesus cites Genesis as the basis of his teaching, what he said was closer to provisions found in Leviticus: -

The priests... 'shall not marry... a woman who has been defiled; neither shall they marry a woman divorced from her husband. For they are holy to their God, and you shall treat them as holy, since they offer the food of your God; they shall be holy to you, for I, the Lord, I who sanctify you, am holy. When the daughter of a priest profanes herself through prostitution, she profanes her father; she shall be burned to death'. (21.7-9)

This latter provision is believed by Jews never to have been carried out. The Torah (teaching, or “law”) was seen by Jews primarily as an instrument of teaching rather than of regulation.

In Ezekiel, there is something similar; the priests ‘shall not marry a widow, or a divorced woman, but only a virgin...’ (44.22) These two texts contain provisions regarding the marriages of Jewish priests in the new temple of the messianic era. Underlying the entire passage (10.1-12) is Jesus’ claim to be the Messiah, and to having ushered in the final phase of human history. In him, the new temple has already been established. (Jesus ‘was speaking of the temple of his body’. John 2.21) Is 10.1-12 principally a statement of who Jesus is, namely, the Messiah who ushers in a new age? That is Mark’s preoccupation throughout his Gospel.

This teaching on divorce and remarriage is surely one of the hardest of the gospel. Is there anything closer to hell on earth than being trapped in a bad marriage? If, as the years roll by, a couple grow apart instead of closer, must they stay together, or, if they separate, remain single until one dies? Monogamous, faithful marriage for life is the ideal; what of those couples who fall short? What room does the radical exclusion of divorce-and-remarriage leave for human error or frailty?

But divorce breeds divorce. Every divorce diminishes all marriage. The words 'till death does us part' may become an empty formula, even a mockery, a joke in bad taste that someone sniggers at. The simultaneous polygamy of some Third World countries is paralleled by the serial polygamy of the First World. There is the reality of selfishness, where the ego demands to be satisfied, and is prepared to sacrifice others to achieve its purpose. There is, for example, male selfishness, which sees women as mere prick fodder, which fucks around, fucks up, and, finally, fucks off, leaving behind a trail of broken trust, distorted relationships, and damaged children who, in their turn, will find it difficult to enter into marriage as a permanent bond - and may treat all this as a merry frolic, a mere 'affair'. (There are parallels to this among females.) There is laziness, the simple unwillingness to make an effort, for example, to work at communicating. There is the reality of lust, which refuses to take no for an answer. Not every desire can, or should, be gratified, though that sounds outrageous to a world which believes they should be, as of right. Evil may be "nice" as well as nasty, banal as well as brutal. And there is stupidity, the failure to learn from mistakes.

I recall meeting a man who wanted me to conduct his forthcoming wedding ceremony. I asked him to give me the background. He began, 'Well, first, there was Mary. She was no good, so

I divorced her. Then there was Ann - even worse, a bad mistake'. And so on he went, counting the women off on his fingers, first on one hand, and then moving to the other as the list lengthened. He came to Number Eight. 'This one is going to be right. I'm going to make sure that this works'. 'What's her name?' I asked. He replied, 'I don't know, I haven't picked her yet'. I didn't conduct any wedding ceremony.

When I was a missionary in Zambia, a woman called to the mission in great distress, asking for help, and crying almost hysterically. After calming a little, she told me her story. She had been "sent away" by her husband, that is, divorced. This meant she would no longer see her children, since he had decided to keep them. She had no possessions other than the clothes she was wearing. She would have no choice but to return to her own village, where she would be regarded as a failure, because "she failed to please her husband". Since it is almost impossible for a woman in Third World countries to live as alone, the options open to her would be to find a man who would take her as his second or third wife. In that situation, she would most likely be a second-class partner in the marriage, and experience the resentment of the other wives. She could live by prostitution or brewing - the two often went together - and she would find some sort of recognition among the men of the village because she was available for sex. (A confrère of

mine told me of seeing a divorced woman being driven into a forest by a posse of her husband's relatives, female as well as male, who laughed at and ridiculed her. They had taken even the clothes she was wearing, leaving her entirely naked.)

There is a powerful emotional force in Jesus' teaching here. Did it come from family experience? Had Joseph divorced Mary? Is that why Jesus moved to Capernaum from Nazareth? Had Jesus experienced the cruelty of divorce at first hand? Is that why he was so vehement against it? Or was it that Jesus himself was married and widowed, or abandoned by his wife? Or even that he had married and divorced, and decided to live a single life thereafter?

Did Jesus marry? To some, the question is almost blasphemous. (Why?) Is it because we undervalue the humanity of Jesus, whom we proclaim in the Creed to be true God and true man? Is it because, despite all our assertions to the contrary, we regard sex as tainted, not fully right, not as "heavenly" as abstinence, not as good as its voluntary renunciation? That might be a view held by some Christians, but it was, and is not, a Jewish one. Jews have a saying that, at the end of life, God will call us to account for every pleasure which we did not enjoy.

The tradition of the Christian church from late in the second century is that Jesus did not marry. This is based on the silence of the gospels about any wife, marriage, or children of his.

The argument from silence cuts both ways. Jesus was a Jew, brought up according to Jewish custom. Jesus was often a non-conformist, but his parents were not. The gospels emphasize their fidelity to custom (Luke 2.21-23, 39, 41-42), and Jesus' subjection to them. (Luke 2.51) A Jewish father was considered to have five responsibilities towards his son: - to circumcise him; to redeem him (those two went together); to teach him the Torah; to teach him a trade; and to find a suitable wife for him. The gospel provides evidence that Joseph fulfilled the first four in relation to Jesus. There would seem to be a presumption in favour of Joseph's fulfilling the fifth requirement also.

The norm in Jewish tradition was that every person would marry. In the time of Jesus, the two great scholars, Hillel and Shammai, said, 'No man may abstain from keeping the law which says, "Be fruitful and multiply"'. (Genesis 1.22) That was the first of the positive precepts of the Torah. To be a rabbi one had to be married. To reproduce was considered a duty in Jewish circles because one's child might be the Messiah. The celebration of human love, of sexuality, and of marriage so strongly expressed in Psalm 45,

and the Song of Songs (or Song of Solomon), is in the mainstream of Jewish tradition. The Hebrew bible uses marriage as an image of the covenant relationship between God and his people. Jesus used images drawn from weddings as metaphors for his own messianic presence, and for heaven (e.g., Mark 2.19; Matthew 22.1-14), and 'the first of his signs' was at a wedding. (John 2.1-11)

If Jesus were unmarried, it seems strange that his many critics did not question him about something so very unusual. They were not shy about asking awkward questions, including ones related to marriage, such as the woman who had had seven husbands. (Matthew 22.23-33) A young man was considered marriageable by the age of sixteen, and Jesus did not begin his public life for another fourteen years or so after that. Was he single all that time?

If Jesus were like us in all things except sin (Hebrews 4.15), if he redeemed every human situation, if he were truly man, not role-playing, isn't marriage more likely than not to be a part of his life? If Jesus were celibate, why did Paul (in 1 Corinthians 7.5-8) not refer to it as a clinching argument in his case for celibacy, which, instead, he bases on his own experience? If original sin were, as Saint Augustine suggested, a sexually transmitted condition, would a faithful marriage

by Jesus not have been the most expressive way to redeem it?

In Luke, it is said that, ‘Soon afterwards he [Jesus] went on through cities and villages, proclaiming and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God. The twelve were with him, as well as some women who had been cured of evil spirits and infirmities: Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out, and Joanna, the wife of Herod’s steward Chuza, and Susanna, and many others, who provided for them out of their resources’. (8.2-3)

Does it not seem unlikely, at the least, that Jesus and his twelve closest followers - all married men, except perhaps John, - would have travelled round the country accompanied by women who were not their wives? It seems more likely that some of these women were wives of the twelve. Paul wrote, ‘Do we not have the right to be accompanied by a believing wife, as do the other apostles and the brothers of the Lord and Cephas?’ (1 Corinthians 9.5) Was Jesus the only one among them not to have his wife with him? If that were so, why is there no mention of it? (The Greek word for *women* also means *wives*, as is also the case in other languages.)

In Matthew 19.1-12, Jesus reiterates the teaching on divorce found in Mark. This evokes an astonished reply from the disciples: - ‘His

disciples said to him, “If such is the case of a man with his wife, it is better not to marry”. But he said to them, “Not everyone can accept this teaching, but only those to whom it is given. For there are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by others, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Let anyone accept this who can.’ (vv. 10-12)

What is Jesus talking about here? Is it perhaps celibacy after a divorce, perhaps as punishment for one too lightly entered into? Can it really be the case that he was proposing an ideal which, it seems, none of his immediate circle followed? Bachelorhood was not well thought of: ‘Where there is no wife, a man will become a fugitive and a wanderer’. (Sirach 36.30)

Does the above not suggest that the balance of probabilities is against a celibate Jesus, leaving the burden of proof with those who wish to maintain that he was such? (The above draws on James Wesley Stivers, *Hierogamy and the Married Messiah*, Idaho, 2003; and www.grailchurch.org/marriedjesus.htm)

Jesus blesses little children: Mark 10.13-16

13. People were bringing little children to him in order that he might touch them; and the disciples spoke sternly to them.

14. 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.

15. Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it'.

16. And he took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them.

Why did the disciples speak sternly to those bringing little children to Jesus? Was it that they were tired, and irritated by children who might be noisy, fidgety and restless? Maybe. Or maybe it is another example of the disciples' failure to understand Jesus' attitudes and priorities.

Jesus was indignant with the disciples, clearly saying to them that there is something important at stake here. He says, 'Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs'. There is a simple explanation: that Jesus loved children and therefore welcomed them. Perhaps this incident was intended to complement Jesus' previous teaching on marriage.

Some commentators see the story as an indirect reference to a later liturgical rite of baptism. It is

somewhat reminiscent of Jesus' own baptism: 'Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. John would have prevented him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" But Jesus answered him, "Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfil all righteousness"'. (Matthew 3.13-15) In Acts, there are similar examples: - the Ethiopian eunuch asks Philip, 'What is to prevent me from being baptized?' (8.36); and, later, Peter asks, 'Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?' (10.47); and again Peter says, 'If then God gave them the same gift that he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?' (11.17) The message seems to be: 'Let them come; they are welcome'. Mark may be re-telling the story from the perspective of a later controversy about infant baptism so as to suggest that Jesus favoured it.

V.15 is likely a genuine saying of Jesus recalled as he spoke it. In a different form, it reiterates v.14b. The introductory phrase, 'Truly I tell you' is emphatic, stressing its importance.

Jesus calls people to be child-like, not childish. What is it about little children that he upholds as an example for his disciples to follow? Is it that they are true to themselves, do not pose or posture, have no pretence? They do not hide

behind masks, or try to project images. They do not have hidden agenda. Is it that they readily recognize their dependence and feel no embarrassment in asking for help? A little child is far removed from the image of a Messiah of power asserting might over the nations. Is Jesus saying that, to receive the kingdom of God, a person should be ready to forego the ways of power and control, and instead be unaffected, trusting, and ready to freely acknowledge dependence on God?

The rich man: Mark 10.17-31

17. 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?’

18. Jesus said to him, ‘Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone.

19. 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”’.

20. He said to him, ‘Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth’.

21. 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’.

22. When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.

23. 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!'

24. And the disciples were perplexed at these words. But Jesus said to them again, 'Children, how hard it is for those who trust in riches to enter the kingdom of God!

25. 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'.

26. They were greatly astounded and said to him 'Then who can be saved?'

27. Jesus looked at them and said, 'For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible'.

28. Peter began to say to him, 'Look, we have left everything and followed you'.

29. 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 gospel

30. 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.

31. But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first'.

V.17. ‘A man’, not ‘a young man’, as in Matthew. (19.16-30) In Luke (18.18-30), he is an official, therefore unlikely to be young.

In Jewish tradition, ‘good’ was a title reserved for God.

The best may be the enemy of the good, and sometimes the good is lost for the sake of the best. Was the man a perfectionist? His question was based on an illusion – that eternal life is something you can gain by doing certain things. He seemed to think that if you did A, B, and C, then you would “inherit” eternal life. So, what were the necessary A, B, and C? – that was what he wanted to know. But, ‘it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God who shows mercy’. (Romans 9.16) Did the man think eternal life was self-actualized? Was he looking for a self-determined life? If he was, he sought something which goes contrary to human experience and tradition. These demonstrate that we are inter-dependent; the independent self, the autonomous individual, is a myth. ‘Let it be done to me according to your word’ (Luke 1.38) is different, and better.

Did the man understand that what he sought required renunciation, that there is no grace without discipleship, none without the cross? Did he perhaps fail to see grace as the treasure hidden in the field (Matthew 13.44), for the sake of

which people go and sell what they own, and then follow Jesus? Did he fail to see grace as the pearl of great price (Matthew 13.45-46), to buy which the merchant will sell all his goods? This grace is costly, costing people their lives, yet giving life. (This paragraph is adapted from Dietrich Bonhöffer on cheap grace in *The Cost of Discipleship*.) Was he ultimately into self-seeking instead of self-surrender?

V.18. Here Jesus seems either to be unaware of his divinity, or to set it aside for some reason.

V.19. Jesus brings his questioner down to earth by reminding him of what is expected of the follower of God. The man was enthusiastic, but perhaps had not counted the cost. Did Jesus have him in mind when he taught the parable about the man building a tower, or the king going to war? (Luke 14.28-33)

V.20. Can anyone truly say this? Few, if any. Maybe this man was such a one.

V.21. Jesus loved him, perhaps because he knew the man spoke the truth. He made it as attractive to him as possible: while calling for renunciation of possessions, he holds out a promise of 'treasure' in heaven. The renunciation of possessions is one step on a journey; it is meant to free a person from concern about possessions, knowing that they may possess a person,

rendering them unfree. That renunciation is a sign and a step towards the renunciation of self. The next step is to follow Jesus.

V. 22. The lure of wealth was too strong for him. This may be the only case in the gospel where someone directly refused Jesus.

V.23. Jesus seemed to consider wealth a greater impediment to entering the kingdom of God than just about anything else. That was contrary to the mood of the times which saw wealth as a sign of God's blessing. What we spend our money on is a good sign of what our priorities are.

V.24. It is largely a repeat of v.23, though with a shift from the simple fact of having wealth to trusting in it. The disciples' objection represented the prevailing view.

V.25. It may be that the word translated as camel (*camelos*) should be *camilos*, a rope. In either case, the point is the same. It is virtually impossible for someone attached to wealth, or, by implication, to security, or to self, to enter the kingdom of heaven; their attachment makes them unfree.

The passage reads better if vv.24 and 25 are switched.

V.26. Re-states even more strongly the reaction of the disciples in v.24: they were 'perplexed'.

Now they are ‘greatly astounded’, asking, ‘Then who can be saved?’ This raises a question: What is it ‘to be saved’? What is salvation? In Jesus’ understanding, it seems to mean deliverance from anything that diminishes a person’s humanity. Jesus himself is the exemplar of humanity at its fulness. Salvation is a gift, not an achievement, a point perhaps missed by Jesus’ questioner. The saving of humanity is the purpose of Jesus’ life: ‘the Son of Man came... to give his life as a ransom for many’. (10.45) The greatest threat to salvation is sin. Yet who can avoid it? Jesus, in his own life, accepted the paradox that those who seek to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life will save it. On the cross, he was mocked by those who said, ‘He saved others; he cannot save himself’. (Mark 15.31) But God saved him by raising him up.

V.27. A basic principle is stated here. It underlies everything Paul wrote.

V. 28. Peter asks a very human question: What’s in it for us?

Vv.29-30. Jesus spells it out: renunciation for his sake, or for the gospel, will be generously rewarded by God. But there will be persecution. The phrase ‘and for the sake of the good news’ (v.29) is probably an addition by Mark.

V.30, along with v.17, are the only places in Matthew, Mark and Luke where the phrase 'eternal life' is used.

The entire passage is about renunciation, a recurring theme in Mark, and the same point is made in each of the three parts of the text.

Jesus foretells his death and resurrection (the third time): Mark 10.32-34

32. 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,

33. 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;

34. they will mock him, and spit upon him, and flog him, and kill him; and after three days he will rise again'.

This is the third of Jesus' predictions in Mark of his suffering, death and resurrection, the others being in 8.31-32a, and 9.30-32. It is the longest, the most detailed, and the most specific. It follows very closely the account of Jesus' passion in chapter 15. Matthew (16.21; 17.22-23; 20.17-19) and Luke (9.21-22; 9.43b-45; 18.31-

34), along with Mark, have Jesus making this prediction three times, and drawing attention to it emphatically: 'Let these words sink into your ears...' (Luke 9.44) Mark says they were 'amazed' and 'afraid'. (v.32) Yet, though they heard these predictions, they seem neither to have foreseen his death nor awaited his resurrection.

How is this to be explained? Is it evidence of the human capacity for eliminating unwanted news, hearing what we want to hear, and ignoring, or even "forgetting", what we do not want to hear? There's an Irish expression - 'Bodhar Uí Laoghaire' - for a person who acts in that way.

The details of the prediction are widely regarded as an editorial insertion, what scripture scholars call *vaticinium ex eventu* (a "prophecy" arising out of the event). "Predicting" what has already happened seems dishonest to us, but it appears to have been an accepted literary device of the time. It seems impossible to answer the question definitively, and a preoccupation with this issue could distract from other aspects of the matter.

Did Jesus have a fixation with suffering, or even a death wish? One could make a case for that, especially in the light of John's Gospel. But he was nothing if not perceptive. He must have been aware, in the light of the history of previous

prophets, that his criticisms of the religious establishment would not go unchallenged. Isaiah, for example, had written, (1.11-18): -

1.11. 'What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices?' says the Lord;

I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams and the fat of fed beasts;

I do not delight in the blood of bulls, or of lambs, or of goats.

12. When you come to appear before me, who asked this from your hand? Trample my courts no more;

13. bringing offerings is futile; incense is an abomination to me. New moon and sabbath and calling of convocation - I cannot endure solemn assemblies with iniquity.

14. Your new moons and your appointed festivals my soul hates;
they have become a burden to me, I am weary of bearing them.

15. When you stretch out your hands, I will hide my eyes from you;
even though you make many prayers, I will not listen; your hands are full of blood.

16. Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil,

17. learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow.

18. Come now, let us argue it out, says the Lord:

though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be like snow;
though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool’.

There are many passages in a similar vein in the prophet Amos, and in Jeremiah 7.1-11, which Jesus later quoted: -

7.1. ‘The word that came to Jeremiah from the Lord:

2. Stand in the gate of the Lord's house, and proclaim there this word, and say, Hear the word of the Lord, all you people of Judah, you that enter these gates to worship the Lord.

3. Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: Amend your ways and your doings, and I will let you dwell in this place.

4. Do not trust in these deceptive words: "This is the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord”.

5. But if you truly amend your ways and your doings, if you truly act justly one with another,

6. if you do not oppress the alien, the orphan, and the widow, or shed innocent blood in this place, and if you do not go after other gods to your own hurt,

7. then I will dwell with you in this place, in the land that I gave of old to your ancestors forever and ever.

8. Here you are, trusting in deceptive words to no avail.

9. Will you steal, murder, commit adultery, swear falsely, make offerings to Baal, and go after other gods that you have not known,

10. and then come and stand before me in this house, which is called by my name, and say, "We are safe!" - only to go on doing all these abominations?

11. Has this house, which is called by my name, become a den of robbers in your sight? You know, I too am watching, says the Lord'.

There was a long tradition of friction between priest and prophet, the professional and the amateur, the insider and the outsider, the upholder of the *status quo* and its challenger, between those who say, 'The temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord.... We are safe!', and those who see the heart of religion as being about relationships, especially human relationships based on justice and compassion. (In our time, this is often expressed in tension, or even conflict, between church and Kingdom.) Jesus, who was not a Jewish priest but stood in the prophetic tradition, preached a message like Isaiah's, and said to the Pharisees and lawyers, 'Woe to you! For you build the tombs of the prophets whom your ancestors killed. So you are witnesses and approve of the deeds of your ancestors; for they killed them, and you build their tombs'. (Luke 11.47-48; see also Matthew 23.29-31.)

Jesus must have been well aware of the realities of politics - religious and civil - must have known that anyone who rocked the boat as he did was not going to be allowed get away with it. He had disturbed interests, made enemies. The religious establishment had come to identify the symbol (itself) with the symbolized (God), to see itself as self-justified, an end in itself, the necessary mediator between people and God, not to be questioned or challenged. By legalistic observances and ritual prescriptions it had come to insulate people from authentic religious experience; it made religion a substitute for God. Essentially, it had lost sight of the first Commandment: 'I am the Lord your God... you shall have no other gods before me'. (Deuteronomy 5.6)

Jesus undermined that view of religion, and its leaders responded by deciding to destroy him, if necessary by killing him. That is what powerful people do when they are threatened. From their viewpoint, the destruction of Jesus' name by a false charge, and his removal from the scene, were requirements of practical politics.

A further way in which Jesus undermined the religion of his time and place was through his universalist perspective. The Jews saw themselves as a people especially chosen by God and bound to him by covenant. This was what gave them their identity and unity. It often led to

the conclusion that other people were not God's people. Jesus reached beyond this, visiting, teaching and healing people of other nations. By doing so, he was challenging his people's identity. If anyone anywhere could call God 'Our Father', where there did that leave the uniqueness of the Jewish people? It dissolved it. It is no wonder they wanted to get rid of him. The moment you challenge people's identity, their sense of what makes them to be what they are, of what sets them apart from others, you undermine their security - and you draw down trouble on your head. Jesus was not a fool; he knew the reactions his actions would evoke. But the truth required that he do them, so he did them.

The request of James and John: Mark 10.35-45

35. 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'.

36. And he said to them, 'What is it you want me to do for you?'

37. And they said to him, 'Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory'.

38. 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?'

39. 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;

40. 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’.

41. When the ten heard this, they began to be angry with James and John.

42. 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.

43. But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant,

44. and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all.

45. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many’.

James and John - with Peter the especially favoured among the disciples - come across as idiots, embarrassing in the childishness of their behaviour. What did they think of Jesus – someone there just to do their bidding? ‘We want you to do for us whatever we ask of you’ – a child’s view of a fairy godmother. Neither were they shy about looking for the best for themselves: ‘Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory’. When asked ‘Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?’ whether, that is, they were

prepared to be immersed in the suffering their destiny might entail, their self-confidence was as large as their self-ignorance. They replied, 'We are able'. No problem. Yet, what happened when they came to that test? 'All of them deserted him and fled'. (Mark 14.50) Were they really so childish, or has Mark "spun" the story for a teaching purpose, such as to underline the contrast between their attitudes and behaviour before and after Jesus' resurrection?

Here as elsewhere, Jesus answered a question with a question. It was his way of getting people to think. He gave questions to answer as well as answers to questions. (The four gospels record some one hundred and twenty questions of his. See my *The Questions of Jesus*, Columba Press, Dublin, 2003)

Jesus was his own master: he declined to have a role imposed on him. Although he had promised his followers thrones, 'you who have followed me will... sit on twelve thrones...' (Matthew 19.28), the allocation remains with God his Father, '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'. (v.40) Similarly, in Luke 12.13-14, he refused to accept the role of arbitrator which someone sought to impose on him.

Here, Jesus acknowledges his subordination to the Father, as he does again in speaking about the

day of judgment, ‘About that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father’. (13.32) John puts it more strongly, ‘The Father is greater than I’. (14.28) Theologians, perhaps more than scripture scholars, sometimes adopt an “amphibian” approach to this matter. In my African days, I remember people saying of themselves that they were like frogs. When there’s trouble on land, the frog hops into the water; when there’s trouble in the water, the frog hops onto land. The amphibian is at home in both worlds. Sometimes theologians, when presented with a difficulty about the knowledge of Jesus, say, ‘That was his human knowledge’, while, in another situation, they say, ‘That was his divine knowledge’. It reminds me of the frog, but the gospel writers don’t seem to share their difficulty. For John, especially, everything Jesus thought, said, and did, was in reference to God his Father, motivated by the desire to do his will.

The ten - the twelve accompanied Jesus on his journeys - began to be angry with James and John. Were they angry because *they* wanted to be in the top slots that the brothers had preemptively sought? ‘Why should those fellows get them? What about me?’ – was that it?

Jesus saw this squabble as an opportunity to teach about power and authority. Power is might; authority is right. Authority has a moral basis,

power not necessarily so. The late German moral theologian, the Redemptorist priest, Bernard Häring, when asked what lesson his country should learn from the experience of World War II, said it was that power - as exercised, in law and government, for instance - must have a moral basis; Germany should forego the tradition of unquestioning obedience to the leader, whether the Kaiser (the self-styled All-Highest), the Führer, or anyone else.

Not only in Germany, but also in other societies, traditions and cultures, are those in positions of power often seen as entitled to unquestioning obedience and loyalty. 'The king can do no wrong'; 'Parliament is supreme', are examples. Another is Ignatius Loyola writing, 'We should always be ready to accept this principle: I will believe that the white that I see is black, if the hierarchical Church so defines it'. (Rules for Thinking with the Church, n.13, in *The Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius*, translated by Anthony Mottola, introduction by Robert W. Gleason SJ, Image Books, Doubleday, New York, 1964, p.141.) Or, this from nineteenth-century Japan: -

'Know ye, Our Subjects: ...guard and maintain the prosperity of Our Imperial Throne coeval with heaven and earth....'

'The Way here set forth is indeed bequeathed by Our Imperial Ancestors, to be observed alike by Their Descendants and the subjects, infallible for

all ages and true in all places'. (From the Imperial Rescript on Education of 30 October 1890, from Ninian Smart and Richard D. Hecht, (eds.), *Sacred Texts of the World: A Universal Anthology*, Herder and Herder/Crossroad, New York, 2002, p.326)

Jesus goes on, in vv.42-45, to contrast the view of authority as the power to dominate with his view of it as the power to serve. (This parallels his statement about the child, in 9.36-37, after the second foretelling of his death and resurrection.) The goals authority serves must be moral, as also the manner in which it exercises power. Otherwise, it has no moral claim on a person's obedience. Does it respect and build up the person, or does it not? Is it exercised in dialogue, or in dictation? The difference is large, and, for Jesus, significant.

His use of the expression 'great ones', in v.42, is probably ironic, perhaps a reference to a title bestowed on himself by a local potentate. Jesus points to himself and his future fate: 'the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many'.

The use of the phrase 'for many' does not imply that some are excluded; it was a Semitic expression equivalent to 'for all'. 'There is not, there never has been, and there never will be a single person for whom Jesus Christ did not die.'

(Council of Quiercy, 853 AD, drawing on 2 Corinthians 5.15 and 1 John 2.2)

Jesus consciously and deliberately chooses the way of renunciation of self. V.42 is surely an echo of Isaiah: -

10. 'It was the will of the Lord to crush him with pain.

When you make his life an offering for sin,
he shall see his offspring and prolong his days;
through him the will of the Lord shall prosper.

11. Out of his anguish he shall see light;
he shall find satisfaction through his knowledge.
The righteous one, my servant, shall make many righteous,
and he shall bear their iniquities.

12. Therefore I will allot him a portion with the great,
and he shall divide the spoil with the strong;
because he poured out himself to death,
and was numbered with the transgressors;
yet he bore the sin of many,
and made intercession for the transgressors'.
(53.10-12)

Jesus' death is to serve the atonement of humanity, its at-one-ment with God. But "ransom" is not a kind of debt-repayment offered to soothe an angry God who might otherwise lash out and strike people down. To see it in that way – and it has many times been presented as such – is a travesty of the picture Jesus paints of God.

The healing of the blind beggar, Bartimaeus

Mark 10.46-52

46. '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.

47. When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to shout out and say, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!"

48. Many sternly ordered him to be quiet, but he cried out even more loudly, "Son of David, have mercy on me!"

49. 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."

50. So throwing off his cloak, he sprang up and came to Jesus.

51. 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."

52. Jesus said to him, "Go; your faith has made you well." Immediately he regained his sight and followed him on the way'.

A blind beggar, Bartimaeus – unusually we have his name - sits by the side of the road between Jericho and Jerusalem. He's on the margins, having a hard life, at dust level and kicking level. Not everyone is sympathetic: you're a nuisance, in the way; why don't you go

somewhere else? Not in my backyard. And not all of those who are sympathetic can help; they don't have money to give away. Maybe some say, 'Something should be done about this. Why doesn't someone look after him?' But they do nothing. Someone is someone else.

Bartimaeus has learned to listen. It's a survival skill. He has also learned to wait - what else can he do? And he's not ashamed to ask for help. That's a survival skill, too. Listening, waiting, and asking from a heart that is alive - three characteristics of prayer.

He hears a clamour of excitement; what's it about? A crowd coming, an air of animation, a thrill of expectancy. He asks what's happening, and is told that it's Jesus of Nazareth. Bartimaeus has heard about him, and the effect is electric. It's like a light coming on in his mind. Perhaps he has a chance. Dare he hope? Is there a possibility that Jesus might see him, have compassion on him, do something for him, even heal him? The man who has learned how to wait knows when to wait no longer. 'Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!' The crowd are annoyed: trust this scruffy nuisance to spoil the occasion. A VIP has come to town, and the beggar messes up everything by screaming and yelling; he has no idea how to behave himself.

Bartimaeus ignores them. He “sees”, and seizes, the opportunity of a lifetime: ‘Son of David, have mercy on me!’ Jesus stood, and called him. The mood of the crowd changes: ‘Take heart; get up, he is calling you’. Bartimaeus’ cloak is in the way, awkward. He throws it aside; nothing is going to stop him. He runs, a risky thing for a blind man to do, but he is beyond caution or calculation. Hope impels him.

Jesus asks, ‘What do you want me to do for you?’ the same question he had put to James and John. (10.36) While their request for thrones of honour was silly and pretentious, Bartimaeus speaks out of real necessity. Once again, someone on the margins understands Jesus, while his disciples do not.

Bartimaeus comes straight to the point; he has no need of a prepared speech. He knows what he wants: ‘My teacher, let me see again’. Jesus said to him, ‘Go; your faith has made you well’. Immediately Bartimaeus regained his sight and followed Jesus on the way, perhaps the way of discipleship.

In this account, there is no secrecy, no injunction to silence. It was the crowd who wanted silence; Jesus and Bartimaeus ignore them. Jericho is only twenty-five kilometres from Jerusalem, and Jesus is heading there. Mark (and Luke even more) often refers to Jesus being ‘on the way’, i.e. on the way to Jerusalem. He sees

Jerusalem as the significant centre, the place of destiny. Here the time for caution is gone. Jesus will soon be in Jerusalem. Bartimaeus began to shout, and then ‘cried out even more loudly’. In Mark, this type of phrase is usually associated with the demons’ acknowledgement of Jesus’ divine mission.

Bartimaeus twice uses the messianic title, “Son of David”, appropriate to the direction Jesus is taking towards the city of David; appropriate, too, to Isaiah’s vision of the day of the Messiah: ‘On that day... out of their gloom and darkness the eyes of the blind shall see’. (29.18) Samuel has God say about his covenant with David, ‘I will be a father to him, and he a son to me.... I will not take my steadfast love from him.... Your house and your kingdom shall be made sure for ever before me; your throne shall be established for ever’. (2 Samuel 7. 14, 15, 16; and 1 Chronicles 17.11-14; Psalm 89.19-37)

This is the first time in Mark’s gospel that a messianic title is used by a person; previously it was only demons who used it. The Messiah was to be of the line of David; assigning the title to Jesus puts him, so to speak, in the line of succession. Jesus neither approves nor rejects it. But, in 12.35-37, he clearly implies that it is inadequate.

Together with the good thief crucified beside Jesus (Luke 23.42), and the ten lepers (Luke 17.13), Bartimaeus is alone in calling Jesus by name - a measure, perhaps, of his desperation, his heartfelt and trusting sincerity in making known his need - in a word, of his faith. Mark makes no mention of a healing gesture by Jesus, or any reaction from the crowd; his focus is on Bartimaeus' faith. That is sufficient: his faith has made him well.

The cure of the blind man at Bethsaida (8.22-26), and this cure of Bartimaeus, are like brackets around a teaching section of Mark's Gospel. They serve to emphasize Jesus' authority; 'he taught them as one having authority'. (1.22, 27)

It has been suggested that something is missing from the text of v.46. As it stands, it reads strangely, 'They came to Jericho. As he and his disciples and a large crowd were leaving Jericho...'

To 'see' Jesus means to believe in him.

Jesus' entry into Jerusalem: Mark 11.1-11

1. When they were approaching Jerusalem, at Bethphage and Bethany, near the Mount of Olives, he sent two of his disciples
2. 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.

3. If anyone says to you, "Why are you doing this?" just say this, "The Lord needs it and will send it back here immediately".

4. They went away and found a colt tied near a door, outside in the street. As they were untying it,

5. some of the bystanders said to them, "What are you doing, untying the colt?"

6. They told them what Jesus had said; and they allowed them to take it.

7. Then they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks on it; and he sat on it.

8. Many people spread their cloaks on the road, and others spread leafy branches that they had cut in the fields.

9. Then those who went ahead and those who followed were shouting, 'Hosanna!

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

10. Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David! Hosanna in the highest heaven!'

11. 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.

The incidents recorded in chapter 11 - Jesus' entry into Jerusalem, vv.1-11; his cursing the fig tree, vv.12-14 and 20-25; and his cleansing of the temple (vv.15-19) - are parables in action. Vv.1-

11 begins a new phase marking the climax of Jesus' ministry: his entry into Jerusalem, his last days, his passion, death and resurrection. Mark's interest in the biographical or chronological data is minimal. The text is loaded with contrived allusions, such as to the Mount of Olives, the colt, and the 'coming kingdom of our ancestor David'. Mark means to convey a message about Jesus and his mission. He has him consciously make a messianic gesture, saying in effect, 'Yes, I am the Messiah, but not the kind you are expecting. I come in lowliness, not in power'. Since the time of his suffering was not far off, the risk of this being misunderstood may have been seen as lessened.

Accurate timing of chapter 11 is not possible, neither the sequence of events, nor the idea that they took place in a week, from a "Palm Sunday" to an "Easter Sunday". It may have been very much longer: in 14.49, Jesus says, 'Day after day I was with you in the temple teaching, and you did not arrest me'.

v.1. Bethany is six kilometres from the centre of old Jerusalem; Bethphage is on the road from Jericho to Jerusalem, the last village before the descent into the Kedron valley, on the Mount of Olives, close to the city. The Mount of Olives, was the Mount of Oil, of anointing, and Messiah means Anointed.

v.2. The colt was seen as a symbol of humility for a king. An animal used for sacred purposes should not have been previously used.

vv.2-6 on the finding of the colt is meant to show Jesus' foreknowledge. In essence, it is similar to 14.12-16: -

12. On the first day of Unleavened Bread, when the Passover lamb is sacrificed, his disciples said to him, 'Where do you want us to go and make the preparations for you to eat the Passover?'

13. So he sent two of his disciples, saying to them, 'Go into the city, and a man carrying a jar of water will meet you; follow him,

14. and wherever he enters, say to the owner of the house, "The Teacher asks, Where is my guest room where I may eat the Passover with my disciples?"

15. He will show you a large room upstairs, furnished and ready. Make preparations for us there'.

16. So the disciples set out and went to the city, and found everything as he had told them; and they prepared the Passover meal.

v.3. Lord is a divine title; only here does Mark apply it to Jesus.

v.7. In 1 Kings 1.38, Solomon rode on King David's mule. Mark sees Jesus as Son of David: 'Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout loud, O daughter of Jerusalem! Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and

riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey'. (Zechariah 9.9)

v.8. Unlike Matthew or Luke, Mark does not make much of the physical details of the procession. For instance, he plays down the numbers involved, using 'many', where Matthew has 'a very large crowd'. (21.8) In reality, the procession of Jesus and his disciples may have been a small-scale matter - even routine on the feast of Dedication - which came to be inflated by memory because of the significance later attached to it.

Spreading cloaks was an honour given to a king. In 2 Kings 9.13, 'they all took off their cloaks and spread them for him... and proclaimed, 'Jehu is king''. Mark sees Jesus as king. In Psalm 118.27, the people waved branches in a festal procession celebrating God's victory.

vv. 9-10 are from Psalm 118. 25-26: 'Save us, we beseech you, O lord! O Lord, we beseech you, give us success! (v.25) Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. We bless you from the house of the Lord. (v.26) "Hosanna" was originally a cry for help in distress - literally, 'save us, we pray' - but it became a liturgical formula of homage to God, a shout of acclamation.

The use of branches, and the context of Psalm 118, are from the Jewish feasts of the Dedication of the Temple, or of Tabernacles, which were held, respectively, in December or October.

The significance of that is less about timing than about its messianic and royal flavour. They are religious feasts rather than political ones, and that is how Marks means Jesus' entry to be understood. This is underlined by the addition of the words, 'in the highest heaven' in v.10.

v.10. David is a messianic figure. The shouts of acclamation are directed not to Jesus, but to the kingdom of David. In this context, however, they amount to calling Jesus king in the line of David, though it could be an assertion that the kingdom of God was at hand.

Jesus curses the fig tree: Mark 11.12-14, 20-21

12. On the following day, when they came from Bethany, he was hungry.

13. 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.

14. He said to it, "May no one ever eat fruit from you again". And his disciples heard it.

20. In the morning as they passed by, they saw the fig tree withered away to its roots.

21. Then Peter remembered and said to him, "Rabbi, look! The fig tree that you cursed has withered".

This is another example of Mark's "sandwich" technique. As in 3.20-35, 5.21-43, 6.16-29, it is designed to focus attention, to provide a setting, to create a link. In this instance, Jesus' cleansing of the temple comes between the above two texts, and they are linked in their character and purpose. But all the gospel writers felt free to move incidents around to suit their purpose, so it does not necessarily follow that we have in chapter 11 a faithful eye-witness account. John, for instance, places Jesus' cleansing of the temple at the start of his ministry, not the end.

Is this an invented story, as is clearly the case with the parable of the barren fig tree in Luke 13.6-9?

13.6. 'Then Jesus told this parable: "A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it and found none.

7. So he said to the gardener, 'See here! For three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree, and still I find none. Cut it down! Why should it be wasting the soil?'

8. He replied, 'Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it.

9. If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.””

Mark is writing theology, not history or biography. It seems likely that the story is a creation of Mark's imagination, designed to “fulfil” earlier prophetic writings, and to make a point about Jesus.

In this parable in action, the tree represents Israel. Jeremiah has God lamenting Israel's blindness, saying, ‘When I wanted to gather them... there are no grapes on the vine, nor figs on the fig tree...’ (8.12, and Hosea 9.10.) The fruitless tree is seen as symbolic of the fruitlessness of the temple and what it represented, a religion of law and observances which blinded people to the nature of God.

But ‘it was not the season for figs’ (v.13); the tree couldn't have produced anything. Is that saying that Israel's failure to recognize Jesus was predetermined by God? Peter says so in Acts: ‘Jesus of Nazareth..., (who was) handed over to you [Jews] according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed...’ (2.23) Mark implies this elsewhere in his gospel. And yet, ‘the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable’ (Romans 11.29), so it does not mean that the Jews are rejected, are no longer God's chosen people. Is v.13 linked thematically to 4.11-12: ‘for those outside, everything comes

in parables; in order that they may indeed look, but not perceive, and may indeed listen, but not understand; so that they may not turn again and be forgiven’?

Is Mark saying that, while the tree looks healthy, since it was ‘in leaf’, it was actually barren, and that this was analogous to the temple of the day, which seemed to flourish but was, in fact, fruitless? That interpretation is reinforced by the tearing in two of the temple veil from top to bottom. (15.38) In short, the two texts would appear to say, “The temple is finished”. For Jesus, the “temple” that counted was the community of his disciples - people, not institutions or structures: ‘Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother’. (3.35) John has Jesus say to the woman at Jacob’s well in Samaria, ‘Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem.... But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth’. (4.21, 23-24)

Jesus cleanses the temple: Mark 11.15-19

15. 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;

16. and he would not allow anyone to carry anything through the temple.

17. 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”.

18. 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.

19. And when evening came, Jesus and his disciples went out of the city.

v. 15: Mark has Jesus begin to drive out the traders. John has him drive them all out, and with greater violence. (2.15)

V. 16 sounds like something a Pharisee, rather than Jesus, might have been concerned about. Was it that people were using the temple as a handy short-cut, a mere convenience?

v.17. The quotation is drawn from Isaiah 56.7: ‘foreigners... I will... make... joyful... for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples’, and Jeremiah 7.11: ‘Has this house, which is called by my name, become a den of robbers?’ It shows Mark’s characteristic interest in the ‘foreigners’, the Gentiles.

Other passages come to mind, ‘the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple. The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight - indeed, he is coming, says the Lord of hosts’. (Malachi 3.1) Similarly, the prophecy in Zechariah, ‘there shall no longer be traders in the house of the Lord of hosts on that day’ (14.21), the day when, according to Zechariah, the Messiah conquers his enemies.

V. 18. Mark feels bound to account for the desire of the chief priests and scribes to kill Jesus. He finds it here. Jesus had drawn a following away from them, and so they were afraid of him. In 3.6, he has the Pharisees conspiring with the Herodians how to destroy him because he healed people on the Sabbath.

The story of the temple cleansing, as it stands, has much about it that is improbable. The temple was a large group of buildings, situated in a larger area of ground, and the crowds at Passover were great. Jesus had previously shown no particular concern for buildings of any kind; (Jews, unlike Christians, don’t have “holy places”.) Had it happened as described, the temple police would surely have intervened, but there is no mention of them. And Jesus’ use of violence is sharply at variance with his actions in the rest of the gospel.

Where the gospel writers present a prophecy that has been “fulfilled” for an apologetic purpose, as in v.17, there are usually good grounds for doubting the historical character of the story.

What seems more likely is that Jesus engaged in some kind of prophetic action in the messianic tradition, intended as a last effort on his final visit to the temple to challenge the complacency of the religious attitudes of his people, as a sign of God’s judgment on formalistic religion. He failed: ‘Nothing so masks the face of God as [such] religion.’ (Attributed to Reinhold Niebuhr and also Martin Buber)

The stories of the fig tree and the temple cleansing have a polemical character; they seem designed to underline the break between Jesus and Judaism. They may have been a response by the gospel writers to the expulsion of the disciples of Jesus from the synagogue in later decades. It is likely that it is Mark’s voice, not that of Jesus, which we hear in these texts. This is reinforced by the different ways in which the other gospel writers treat the same stories. (See Matthew 21.12-17; Luke 19.45-48; John 2.13-22.)

The temple, understood in the widest sense, had become corrupt. While there is some (ambiguous) evidence that the high priestly

families of the day had cornered the market in religious goods such as sacrificial animals, and in the money exchanges set up for Jews coming from abroad, the problem, for the Jesus of Mark, went deeper than that. Later generations of Christians understood Jesus as inaugurating a new kingdom, made up of Jews and Gentiles, in which all are priests: 'Jesus Christ.... made us to be a kingdom, priests serving his God and Father'. (Revelation 1.5-6) They saw the temple of God's kingdom in a way very different from the temple that Jesus cleansed: 'You are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built together in the Spirit into a dwelling place for God'. (Ephesians 2.19-22) God's people are the temple. 'Like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood...' (1 Peter 2.5) The faith-community is a kingdom of priests that constitutes God's temple.

The stories of the fig tree and the temple cleansing may be a way of saying that all religions - the Jewish in this particular instance - since they are largely creations of the human mind, are ultimately destined to fail to

communicate the reality of God, and that such failure is God's will. Could it, indeed, be otherwise? If they did more, would we not mistake the symbol for the symbolized, the messenger for the message, the icon for the reality? Maybe God wills it so, in order to make it clear that it is God alone, and no other, who saves, and has a claim on our allegiance.

Formal, or institutionalized, religion always runs the risk of turning inwards on itself. It easily becomes self-centred, self-justifying, self-preserving, self-promoting - an end in itself, rather than a means to an end. The risk is not always recognized; indeed, there are times when the condition is welcomed. If the first disciples were slow learners, as Mark underlines so emphatically and constantly, what does that make of those who followed them? It could be said that Christians, in every sense but the literal, have been re-building the temple for the last two thousand years: religion as a system of power and control held in place by fear and guilt; law above love; the institution above the person; a self-validating teaching authority elbowing aside scripture, tradition and human experience; the closed organization, the clerical caste system. Such religion is an institutional ego trip; it gives satisfaction to the group through the power of its rituals and symbols while exchanging authentic religious experience for a shallow imitation which voids or even negates communion with

God. Such religion worships itself, relegating to the margins the commandment, 'I am the Lord your God... you shall have no other gods before me'. (Deuteronomy 6.6-7) It is what Jesus cursed in the fig tree, which 'withered away to its roots'. (v.20) The incidents of the fig tree and the temple cleansing are the only gospel examples of Jesus using power punitively, something that is surely significant. Is Jesus saying – powerfully - that there is nothing more dead, or more deadly, than dead religion and that it has to die because it is an obstacle to a real relationship with God?

Three sayings: Mark 11.22-26

22. Jesus answered them, 'If you have faith in God

23. 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.

24. So I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours.

25. Whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone; so that your Father in heaven may also forgive you your trespasses.

26. But if you do not forgive, neither will your Father in heaven forgive your trespasses'.

These three sayings have come from a different context from the preceding, and appear to have been inserted here as an appendix, as if Mark did not know what was their original setting, but did not want them to be forgotten.

Vv.22-23: Jesus answers a question, but we don't know what the question was, or who the questioners were. It would have helped if Mark had included that information.

Jesus used hyperbole; he exaggerated. He says that, if people believe strongly enough, then what they believe will happen.

V.24 repeats the point of vv.22-23 in different language, though it is perhaps stronger, since it says, 'believe that you have received it', not 'believe that you will receive it'. That requires stronger faith still.

The question is inescapable: is this saying true? Is it borne out by the experience of life? What can one say in reply except: yes and no? But perhaps more no than yes. If it really were as simple and direct as vv.22-24 suggest, prayer of petition would not be the problem that it is for so many people. Many have quietly given up because it seems ineffective, and Jesus' promise of its effectiveness does not seem validated by experience.

And if we say to a person who has prayed for something and not received it, that this must have been because they doubted in their heart and their faith was weak, that's a great way of making them feel guilty, when they may have been quite guiltless, or it may even be a bully's way of silencing potential objections arising from disappointment or hurt.

'More things are wrought by prayer than this world dreams of', said Wordsworth, the poet. And Saint Thomas Aquinas wrote, 'We do not pray in order to change a divine decree, but only to obtain what God has decided will be obtained through prayer', (*Summa Theologica*, II, II, question 83, article 2) though that sounds a little too clever, like someone shooting off an arrow, watching its flight, drawing a circle round its point of impact, and then declaring, "Bull's eye!" 'If our prayers are granted at all they are granted from the foundation of the world.... Our prayers are heard... not only before we make them but before we are made ourselves'. (C. S. Lewis, *Prayer: Letters to Malcolm*, Fontana, London, 1964, pp.50-51)

It may be significant that perhaps the only prayer of petition in the gospel to which God gave the answer no was the prayer of Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane, 'Father, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me; yet, not

what I want, but what you want'. (14.36) God's answer to Jesus was given by silence.

Treated as an intellectual proposition, vv.22-24 constitutes an insoluble problem. Treated as an image, a hint, a suggestion, it harmonizes with (some) faith-experience.

All of reality is inter-connected, and it seems impossible that any prayer should simply be in vain. God does not make fools of us, or laugh at us. Perhaps we should simply pray, and leave everything in God's hands. God, who is reality, the foundation and source of Being, is more than able to take account of all.

Vv. 25-26 sound like tit for tat, operating within a framework of conditionality. But, in fact, giving and receiving are reciprocal. It may sound as if it defies the rules of logic, but there is a sense in which those who refuse to give are unable to receive, those who refuse to forgive are unable to be forgiven. The saying is close to the 'Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us' of the Our Father, (the Lord's Prayer) and may be based on it, or drawn from a common source. It is close in spirit to the prayer that says, 'It is in giving that we receive... It is in pardoning that we are pardoned....'

Six controversies follow, involving priests, scribes and elders, Pharisees and Herodians, and

Sadducees – representative groups within the Jewish community. The controversies are about authority, 11.27-33; the parable of the wicked tenants, 12.1-12; taxation, 12.13-17; the resurrection, 12.18-27; the first commandment, 12.28-34; and David's son, 12.35-37. Only in the last does Jesus take the initiative; in the others, he is responding to challenges from his critics. In them, Jesus faces (mostly) hostile questioning from his opponents, but turns the tables on them.

Jesus' authority is questioned: Mark 11.27-33

27. Again they came to Jerusalem. As he was walking in the temple, the chief priests, the scribes, and the elders came to him

28. and said, 'By what authority are you doing these things? Who gave you this authority to do them?'

29. Jesus said to them, 'I will ask you one question; answer me, and I will tell you by what authority I do these things.

30. Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin? Answer me'.

31. They argued with one another, 'If we say, "From heaven", he will say, "Why then did you not believe him?"'

32. But shall we say, "Of human origin?" - they were afraid of the crowd, for all regarded John as truly a prophet.

33. 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".

This passage is reminiscent of 3.22-30. The religious authorities are preparing for a showdown; they sense that a crisis is coming, when the people will choose between them and Jesus, and they want to secure their position.

Jesus refuses to engage with the chief priests, the scribes and the elders on their terms, because they were not in good faith. His question to them exposes their unwillingness to seek the truth, he rejects the arrogance of their proprietorial attitude to the truth, and he tells them to be off.

But how true to life was their attitude! Religious leaders are often concerned about their authority, though sometimes that is as silly as a bald man's concern about his comb. They see and judge issues in terms of authority – their authority as they see it – rather than on its merits. And their view of their authority is as far-reaching as public opinion will allow them: 'Bishops are the authentic teachers of faith and morals in their own diocese, and their authority includes the right to determine the boundaries of their jurisdiction', declared an Irish archbishop in 1951. (See Patrick Murray, *Oracles of God: the Roman Catholic Church and Irish Politics, 1922-37*, University College Dublin Press, Dublin,

2000, p.14) In response to Jesus' question, the leaders calculate the politics of the situation: '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'. Religious leaders sometimes act similarly. In discussing doctrinal issues, they sometimes recognize that their predecessors have painted them into a corner, and that there is no way out other than to admit that the church got it wrong. That is something they cannot bring themselves to do - they see the very notion as unthinkable - so instead of facing an issue, they fudge it, just as the Jewish leaders did in this episode. They end up with the worst of both worlds, their authority diminished and the issue muddled. That is what happens when issues of truth are politicized.

In contrast, Jesus' authority was founded on his actions, and they spoke for themselves. In effect, he said, 'I do such and such; as to the source of my power to do those things, draw the obvious conclusion'.

The parable of the wicked tenants: Mark 12.1-12

1. 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

watchtower; then he leased it to tenants and went to another country.

2. When the season came, he sent a slave to the tenants to collect from them his share of the produce of the vineyard.

3. But they seized him, and beat him, and sent him away empty-handed.

4. And again he sent another slave to them; this one they beat over the head and insulted.

5. Then he sent another, and that one they killed. And so it was with many others; some they beat, and others they killed.

6. He had still one other, a beloved son. Finally he sent him to them, saying, "They will respect my son".

7. But those tenants said to one another, "This is the heir; come, let us kill him, and the inheritance will be ours".

8. So they seized him, killed him, and threw him out of the vineyard.

9. What then will the owner of the vineyard do? He will come and destroy the tenants and give the vineyard to others.

10. Have you not read this scripture: "The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone;

11. this was the Lord's doing, and it is amazing in our eyes"?"

12. 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.

Jesus uses an allegory to make a point. The vineyard represents Israel; his hearers would have been familiar with Isaiah's song of the unfruitful vineyard: -

1. 'Let me sing for my beloved, my love-song concerning his vineyard:

my beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill.

2. He dug it and cleared it of stones, and planted it with choice vines;

he built a watchtower in the midst of it, and hewed out a wine vat in it;

he expected it to yield grapes, but it yielded wild grapes.

3. And now, inhabitants of Jerusalem and people of Judah, judge between me and my vineyard.

4. What more was there to do for my vineyard that I have not done in it?

When I expected it to yield grapes, why did it yield wild grapes?

5. And now I will tell you what I will do to my vineyard. I will remove its hedge, and it shall be devoured; I will break down its wall, and it shall be trampled down.

6. I will make it a waste; it shall not be pruned or hoed, and it shall be overgrown with briars and thorns; I will also command the clouds that they rain no rain upon it.

7. For the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel, and the people of Judah are his pleasant planting; he expected justice, but saw

bloodshed; righteousness, but heard a cry!’ (5.1-7)

In Jesus’ allegory, the vineyard represents Israel; the tenants represent its religious leadership, “them” (v.1) suggesting the chief priests, the scribes, and the elders of the previous episode; the slaves represent the prophets; the beloved son of v.6 (and of 1.11 and 9.7), Jesus himself; the owner of the vineyard, God. God looks for a harvest from his vineyard, but the tenants refuse it. They reject the prophets, maltreating, and even killing them. Then he sends his son and heir, thinking the tenants will respect him. But they kill him also, hoping to take his place, and throw him out of the vineyard, denying him even a decent burial. (Jesus was killed at Golgotha - see 15.22, 46 – an abandoned quarry outside Jerusalem, used as a rubbish dump.)

The religious leadership understood the parable clearly: ‘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’. (v.12) Jesus is referring to his rejection and execution at the hands of his people, and of the consequence of that for them: ‘the stone which the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord’s doing, and it is amazing in our eyes’. (Psalm 118.22-23) For Mark, this represents the displacement of the

Jews by the Gentiles in God's plan. (But for Paul, there is no displacement, because, 'the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable.' Romans 11.29)

The question about paying taxes: Mark 12.13-17

13. Then they sent to him some Pharisees and some Herodians to trap him in what he said.

14. 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?

15. 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'.

16. And they brought one. Then he said to them, 'Whose head is this, and whose title?' They answered, 'The emperor's'.

17. 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.

A tax was levied on Palestine by the Roman Empire from 6 to 70 A.D., paid in coins bearing the emperor's image. Using them implicitly recognized his sovereignty. By asking them to

bring him such a coin, Jesus is reminding them that they do, in fact, already pay the tax.

Their question, of course, was a trap. If Jesus answered, 'No, don't pay the tax', he would be delated to Rome for sedition and probably executed. If he said, 'Yes, do pay the tax', they would stir up popular feeling against him, portraying him as a collaborator with the occupying power. Either way he would be caught. The dishonesty of their pretended innocence is heightened by the flattering – but true – introduction to the question: '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'.

Jesus' answer, 'Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's', is the punch-line, the climax of the story; everything leads up to it. It is an answer that is open to different interpretations. One is that, since, in the view prevailing in Mark's time, the end of the world and the second coming of Christ was imminent, the insignificance of Rome's power by contrast to that of God's would be revealed. It was like saying, 'Let the emperor have what's his; it's nothing in the sight of God'. Another interpretation is that Jesus was here teaching that there need not necessarily be a conflict between loyalty to God and to the state.

This was to be a matter of considerable importance to Christians during the later persecutions by the empire.

It is not without significance, perhaps that, just a little later, Mark has Jesus quoting the Shema, the daily prayer of the Jews, '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'. (12.29-30) Loyalty to God always takes the first place. This was to be remembered especially in times of persecution, something Jesus also warns, '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'. (13.9)

The question about the resurrection: Mark 12.18-27

18. Some Sadducees, who say there is no resurrection, came to him and asked him a question, saying,

19. '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.

20. There were seven brothers; the first married and, when he died, left no children;

21. and the second married the widow and died, leaving no children; and the third likewise;

22. none of the seven left children. Last of all the woman herself died.

23. In the resurrection hose wife will she be? For the seven had married her’.

24. Jesus said to them, ‘Is not this the reason you are wrong, that you know neither the scriptures nor the power of God?

25. For when they rise from the dead, they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven.

26. 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”?

27. He is God not of the dead, but of the living; you are quite wrong’.

v.19: the reference here is to Deuteronomy 25.5-6: -

5. ‘When brothers reside together, and one of them dies and has no son, the wife of the deceased shall not be married outside the family to a stranger. Her husband’s brother shall go in to her, taking her in marriage, and performing the duty of a husband’s brother to her,

6. and the first born whom she bears shall succeed to the name of the deceased brother, so that his name may not be blotted out from Israel’.

This far-fetched tale, obviously fabricated by the Sadducees for the purpose of reducing to

absurdity the idea of resurrection, Jesus ignores; it did not deserve a serious response. Instead, he shifted the ground of the discussion by pointing out that the Sadducees' idea of resurrection rested on a false premise, namely, that life after resurrection would be substantially the same as before it. For Jesus, life after resurrection was qualitatively different from anything earthly; it was essentially life with God, who transcends human limitations. (For Paul on this see, 1 Corinthians 15.35-50) The Sadducees showed that they did not know 'the power of God'. They saw God in human terms, as an extension of themselves.

It is an almost inescapable human tendency to make God in our own image and likeness - returning the compliment of Genesis 1.27! Whatever ideas, or images, we have of God inevitably break down, and the one who - mercifully - breaks them down is God, because they are all idols in one form or another. Idolatry is bringing God down to the level of the creature as much as it is bringing a creature up to the level of God. 'God is in some measure to a man as that man is to God'. (C. S. Lewis, *The Four Loves*, Fontana, London, 1976, p.23)

Doing this means that we see reality (including God) in terms of ourselves, as if we were its focus and source of meaning. That is only a step away from wanting to dominate it, including

manipulating the idea of God to control others. History saw many examples of this, such as the early Hebrew view of Yahweh as a tribal war-god fighting for them against their enemies. (There is also a powerful prophetic counter-view to this in 1 Samuel 4.1b-11.) We thus become like Galileo's critics who thought the sun revolved around the earth. This narcissistic outlook moves us from the other-centred world of the adult to the self-centred world of the child. We need a Copernican revolution of the soul to shift us out of self-centredness into God-centredness. 'They measure God by themselves and not themselves by God', said the Christian mystic, John of the Cross. (The Dark Night of the Soul, in *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross*, translated by Kieran Kavanaugh OCD and Otilio Rodriguez OCD, revised edition, ICS Publications, Institute of Carmelite Studies, Washington, DC, 1991, Book 1, chapter 7, section 3, p.374) This is at the root of much of the atheism and agnosticism of recent centuries, where people (rightly) reject images of God which are simply projections of human fears, ambitions etc.

What brings about this misunderstanding is seeing ideas as defining capsules, images as real descriptions, symbols as the thing signified - for instance, thinking, when we speak of God as personal, this means that God is personal as humans are, a bigger and better version of

ourselves, or thinking of God as Father in terms of human fatherhood, without acknowledging that this may have the (probably unforeseen) consequence of conjuring up an image of God in terms of male self-sufficiency on a cosmic scale, with a resultant belittling of the ordinary male, not to mention the female.

But it is impossible for humans to escape the limitations of humanity and its thought processes. What have we got except human ideas, images, parable, paradox and language? And all are equally limited. 'Never... let us think that while... images are a concession to our weakness, the abstractions are the literal truth. Both are equally concessions; each single misleading, and the two together mutually corrective'. (C. S. Lewis, *The Four Loves*, Fontana, London, 1976, p.23) What can be done, except to be aware of the way our thought processes work and to acknowledge the limitations of the human mind? An appropriate response is in humility, not skepticism, in grateful wonder and in silence - the silence, not of despair, but of reverence. It is good to say with Isaiah, 'Truly, you are a God who hides himself'. (45.15) Let God be God.

The first commandment: Mark 12.28-34

28. 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?’

29. Jesus answered, ‘The first is, "Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one;

30. 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”.

31. The second is this, "You shall love your neighbour as yourself”. There is no other commandment greater than these’.

32. 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”;

33. 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’.

34. 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.

V.28: in contrast to previous episodes, a scribe comes forward, clearly acting in good faith, posing an honest - and important – question. Jesus treats him and his question with respect.

V.29: Jesus here quotes the Shema (*Hear*), the daily prayer of Jews from Deuteronomy 6.5.

V.30: this is the most fundamental of all the commandments.

Vv. 29-31: Jesus was asked about one commandment, but answered about two, because, for him, the two were inseparable. Love is indivisible. This conjunction of the two in one seems to have been unique to Jesus. It signals the freeing of the followers of Jesus from the multitude of laws and rules of Jewish tradition. It focuses on the basics, emphasizes priorities, and, by implication, relegates other regulations to history. And love is about invitation, not obligation.

Vv.32-33: the scribe's summary of the law in two commandments was not a novel idea at the time; the rabbi, Hillel, leader of one of the two principal rabbinical schools in the decades before Jesus, had taught it.

v. 34a: this is like 10.21, where Jesus says, in effect, to the rich man, 'You're almost there.' As with him, one more step remains to the scribe, and that is to accept Jesus and follow him. Whoever accepts Jesus is "in" the kingdom of God.

v.34b: This is strange; it doesn't appear to fit the context. Why would no one dare to ask him any question, when Jesus had just commended the wisdom of the scribe who had asked one? Perhaps it refers to the hostile questioning of the

four previous episodes, and signals a change in which it is Jesus who begins to ask them.

The teaching in this passage is surely one of the easiest of all in the gospel to understand - and one of the most challenging to follow. And yet, perhaps, it requires more reflection. It raises the question: what is love?

Here is a selection of what writers from various traditions have said about love: -

‘Everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love.’ (1 John 4.7-8)

‘Perfect love casts out fear.’ (1 John 4.18)

‘To love is to will the good of another.’ (Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I. II. ques.26, art. 4 corp. art.)

‘If you love a thing for its beauty, you love none other than God, for he is the Beautiful Being. Thus, in all its aspects, the object of love is God alone.’ (Muid ad-Din al-Arabi, *The Meccan Revelations*, 2.326)

‘Love does the job of destroying the ego, not in a binge of self-hatred or contempt, but by leaving its limitations behind for the sake of the other. In gentleness it transcends the ego. But you cannot decide to love another in order to achieve this, or

to bring about its good effects for oneself.’
(Karen Armstrong, *A History of God. From Abraham to the Present: the 4000-year Quest for God*, Heinemann, London, 1993, pp.260-261)

‘Love is God's Holy of Holies.
Love alone is salvation.
Only in the Temple of Love do I worship God.
Love alone introduces God to us.
Where love is, there God is.’
(Toyohiko Kagawa, Japanese Christian trade unionist and pacifist, 1888-1960)

‘There is a land of the living and a land of the dead and the bridge is love, the only survival, the only meaning.’ (Thornton Wilder, *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*, Albert & Charles Boni, USA, 1927, last words of the book.)

‘Do you know what makes the prison of loneliness and suspicion disappear? Every deep, genuine affection. Being friends, being brothers, loving, that is what opens the prison, by some magic force. Without these one stays dead. But wherever affection is revived, there life revives.’
(Vincent van Gogh)

‘Love is... an active hope for what others can become with the help of our support.’ (Pope Paul VI, *Evangelica Testificatio*, n.39)

‘Love - the fundamental and innate vocation of every human being.’ (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n.1604)

‘If you give your heart to no one, it will become unbreakable, impenetrable and unredeemable.’ (C. S. Lewis)

‘Self-giving affection is the only authentically human way to live.’ (Andrew M. Greeley)

‘Love is the one means that ensures true happiness both in this world and in the next. Love is the light that guides in darkness, the living link that unites God with humanity, that assures the progress of every illuminated soul.’ (From Abdu’l-Bahá in *The Divine Art of Living: Selections from Writings of Bahá’u’lláh*, and ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, compiled by Mabel Hyde Paine, Bahá’í Publishing Trust, Wilmette, Illinois, 1960, p.108)

‘Not by the Vedas or grim ascetic practice, not by the giving of alms or sacrifice can I be seen in such a form as you saw Me. But by worship of love addressed to Me alone can I be known and seen in such a form as I really am: so can my lovers enter into Me. Do works for Me, make Me your highest goal, be loyal in love to Me, cast off all other attachments, have no hatred for any being at all: for all who do so shall come to Me.’ (*Bhagavad-Gita*, 11.53-55)

‘With regard to love, there is no means of getting it, unless we give it.’ (Archbishop Anthony Bloom, *Living Prayer*, DLT, London, 1975, p.14)

‘There is but one thing which can bring about unity inside us, as also in our lives... and action, and that is love.’ (René Voillaume, *Seeds of the Desert: the legacy of Charles de Foucauld*, Anthony Clarke Books, 1973, p.108)

‘The first step in personhood then is to allow ourselves to be loved.’ (John Main, *Inner Christ*, DLT, London, 1994, p.49)

‘Love makes everything lovely; hate concentrates itself on the one thing hated.’ (*George MacDonald: an anthology, 365 readings*, selected and edited by C. S. Lewis, Harper, San Francisco, 2001, no.263)

‘Love, in its own nature, demands the perfecting of the beloved; the mere “kindness” which tolerates anything except suffering in its object is, in that respect, at the opposite pole from Love.’ (C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, Fontana, London, 1957, p.34)

‘God does not love Himself as Himself but as Goodness; and if there were anything better than God, He would love that and not Himself.’ (*Theologica Germanica*, 32)

‘Love constantly rejoices because the more it grows the more generously it gives itself away. Consequently, while those who desire evil are impoverished by their getting, lovers are enriched by their giving. The takers are troubled even as they seek revenge for injuries done to them; lovers are at peace as they delight in giving to others the love that has been given to them. The takers avoid the works of mercy, while lovers do them cheerfully.’ (Fulgentius of Ruspe, *Sermon* 5.6; CCL 91A)

‘Love is the one thing God asks for; without this he cannot give the kingdom. Give love, then, and receive the kingdom: love, and it is yours.’ (Saint Anselm of Canterbury, Letter 112, *Opera Omnia*, 3.246)

‘Love in action is a harsh and dreadful thing compared with love in dreams.’ (Father Zossima in Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*)

‘Don't try to reach God with your understanding; that is impossible. Reach him in love; that is possible.’ (Carlo Carretto, *Letters from the Desert*)

‘The longest way to God, the indirect, lies through the intellect. The shortest way lies through the heart.’ (Angelus Silesius, *The Enlightened Heart*)

‘In a very true sense we cannot decide to love God, any more than we can decide to breathe or to be alive.... We must not try to love God; we must become the kind of people who will discover that we do love God, and then accept it and let it come to its full flowering.’ (Simon Tugwell O.P., *Prayer*, Veritas Publications, Dublin, 1974, Volume 1, p.104)

‘The thing that most separates us from God is self-dislike.’ (Seán Ó Conaill, *Scattering the Proud*, The Columba Press, Dublin, 1999, p.38)

‘Happy is the man who loves you, my God, and his friend in you, and his enemy because of you.’ Saint Augustine, *The Confessions*, 4.9. ‘Ama, et fac quod vis.’

‘Jesus’ insight into the indiscriminate love of God provides the ultimate key to practically every word the gospels record.’ (Donald Senior C.P., *Jesus: A Gospel Portrait*, Paulist Press, Mahwah, New Jersey, 1992, p.88)

‘the true nature of charity: not a sterile fear of doing wrong but a vigorous determination that all of us together shall break open the doors of life.’ (Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *Hymn of the Universe*, translated from the French by Gerald Vann OP, Fontana, London, 1970, p.34)

‘When the evening of life comes, you will be examined in love.’ (Saint John of Cross, *The Sayings of Light and Love*, no. 60)

‘The ultimate reason for everything is love.’ (Saint John of Cross, *Spiritual Canticle*, 38.5.620)

‘Where there is no love, put in love, and you will draw out love...’ (Saint John of the Cross, *Letter* 26, 6 July 1591, on p.760)

‘In love, every getting is a form of giving; this other attitude is a sort of lust, where every giving is only a form of, or a means to, getting.’ (Gerald Vann, *The Divine Pity: a study in the social implications of the Beatitudes*, Collins, Fontana, London, 1971, p.72)

‘Someone asked me, “What is love?” God answered, “You will know when you lose yourself in Me.”’ (Rumi, *Masnavi II*, Prologue)

‘Whether love is from earth or heaven, it leads to God.’ (Rumi, *Masnavi I*.110-111)

‘God is not only love, God is friendship.’ (Aelred of Rievaulx)

‘Life is love, and love is sacrifice.’ (Blessed Antoni Gaudí, architect of the *Sagrada Familia* cathedral in Barcelona)

The question about David's son: Mark 12.35-37

35. While Jesus was teaching in the temple, he said, ‘How can the scribes say that the Messiah is the son of David?

36. 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’”.

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

In contrast to the previous episodes, Jesus here takes the initiative with a question. Having seen off his critics, he now appears to have some fun at their expense. He asks why it is the scribes say that the Messiah is the son (or descendant) of David, when David himself, in Psalm 110.1 (which Jesus quotes in v.36), calls him Lord. Surely, Jesus’ argument runs, a man does not call his son Lord. So the scribes have got it wrong. ‘And the large crowd was listening to him with delight’. Jesus seems to be playing to a gallery and winning them to his side by a playful, if questionable, interpretation of scripture.

In any event, physical descent from David is not important, as Jesus had pointed out in 3.31-35, and likewise in relation to Abraham in John 8.39-59, because the kingdom of God is not a continuation of the kingdom of David. By citing Psalm 110.1, where God (the Lord’) directs the Messiah (‘my Lord’) to sit at his right hand, Jesus is perhaps pointing to the Messiah having a

closer relationship to God than was generally supposed by his hearers. (See also notes under 10.46-52 on pp.235-6.)

The six controversies, from 11.27 to 12.37, though gathered together by Mark in one place, almost certainly came from different places, times and circumstances. Their significance appears to be that they point towards a definitive break between the disciples of Jesus and the Jewish community. From being, and seeing itself as, a group within Judaism, the community of the disciples of Jesus began to develop into a distinct body standing apart from Judaism, and with its own identity.

Jesus denounces the scribes: Mark 12.38-40

38. 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 marketplaces,

39. and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honour at banquets!

40. They devour widows' houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation'.

vv.38-39: Religions, in particular, seem to have a special liking for the 'long robes' Jesus refers to. Whether those of the mullahs, hojatoleslams and ayatollahs of Shia Islam, or those of Buddhist monks, or the soutanes, habits, and *cappa magna*

of Catholic church personnel, the evidence is striking. Hierarchies of all kinds - royal houses, armies, as well as religious personnel – have a particular liking for distinctive forms of dress. Along with titles, these are adopted seemingly for the purpose of creating an alternative identity to that of the self, of ranking, of staking a claim to esteem, and of setting members apart from the general public. The same might also have been said, at least in the past, of prisoners: they wore a distinctive dress, were identified by a number, and had their hierarchical pecking order.

There is a strange psychology at work here, and Jesus challenges it, perhaps because of the often spurious authority attached to “the uniform”. He was probably well aware that the other side of the coin of hierarchy is infantilism and passivity, for example, in armies, where the rank and file soldier is not asked to take responsibility for his actions – ‘You’re not paid to think, you’re paid to do as you’re told’, and its inevitable corollary, ‘I was only carrying out orders’.

Matthew’s gospel quotes Jesus saying, ‘You are not to be called rabbi, for you have only one teacher, and you are all students. And call no one your father on earth, for you have only one father – the one in heaven. Nor are you to be called instructors, for you have only one instructor – the Messiah. The greatest among you will be your servant’. (Matthew 23.8-11.) Is it not remarkable

that the church so obviously, indeed enthusiastically, does other than Jesus did?

To whom are religious institutions accountable? To God? Without being flippant, and with all respect, one can say that, for this purpose, God is safely out of the way. To the sacred scriptures, or the tradition? But who determines what is sacred scripture or merely human writing; who determines what is “in” the deposit of faith? Who interprets the scriptures and the tradition? The religious institution. It determines the limits of its authority, and becomes the judge in its own case.

Religious institutions are among the most conservative in resisting democratic accountability, in moving from a disabling to an enabling hierarchy. How political institutions would love to have the kind of unaccountable authority religious institutions have! (The authority of the former works from without, of the latter from within.) The leadership of religious institutions is accountable only to itself. Such ‘accountability’ inevitably becomes self-serving. If an institution claims for itself the right to determine the limits of its own authority, then it has inbuilt untruth and abuse into its life; it cannot be otherwise. An example is in the gospel of John, where the High Priest, in answer to a question from the Roman prefect, Pontius Pilate, as to why he had brought Jesus for trial, replied,

‘If this man were not a criminal, we would not have handed him over to you’. (John 18.30) In other words, ‘If we say something is so, then it is so - because it is we who say it’.

In general, too, the larger and more complex the hierarchy, the more self-protective it becomes, the less flexible, the less open to reform, often using the language of service to disguise the reality of control. The priority of any hierarchy is self-preservation, not the preservation of the goals it professes to serve, but its institutional preservation. The vertical, pyramid model of authority characteristic of many religious hierarchies is not people-serving; it is self-serving.

Hierarchies operate by fear, and it is contagious and corrupting. Those who control by fear themselves become afraid. Afraid of what? That “we” will lose control, and “they” will get out of hand, or see the truth about the emperor’s new clothes and walk away. Above all, they are afraid to trust people.

Hierarchies see themselves as indispensable, as being at the centre of things, and having a global view. They become an end in themselves, they make ends into means and means into ends. Thus faith exists to maintain the institution rather than *vice versa*. The institutional swallows up the

charismatic and the prophetic, subsuming them to its interest. They are sacrificed to ecclesiolatry.

People can best deal with this, not by fighting it from without, which usually succeeds only in hardening attitudes, and in a gradual adoption of the others' priorities, methods and values – for we become like those we hate. Nor need people beat their heads in futility off a wall of resistance, trying to reform such institutions from within. They can walk away, leaving the hierarchies talking to themselves, and create new models of authority and leadership. People can do what Jesus said, 'Do not resist an evildoer...' (Matthew 5.38) Those who belittle and disempower people, as hierarchies do, are evildoers, if not in a personal sense, then in a collective. Jesus invited people to do otherwise, to create new patterns of relationships in which power-seeking is not a priority.

A strange effect of the hierarchical process is that its practitioners become, of all people, the most controlled by it. Internalizing its values, failing to see through the bluff, they are hoist on its own petard. Clericalism creates the myth of the spiritual superman, a heavy burden to carry. (The fact that some manage to maintain their humanity in it is an example of grace triumphing over adversity.) Instead of being a source of personal liberation for greater service, hierarchical structures stifle the gospel and those

who serve it. Such structures are, almost everywhere, male and patriarchal, itself a major limitation. Celibate institutions in particular, already semi-emasculated, tenaciously uphold hierarchy out of the will to power. This may explain the resistance of clergy in some hierarchical religious structures to church councils. The will to power exists, and needs to find expression somehow. Diminish that power by having to share it, and clergy would feel fully emasculated, reduced to ciphers.

v.40: Jesus' condemnation evokes memories of Charles Dickens' 1853 novel, *Bleak House*, about lawyers – another closed and introverted hierarchy - devouring an estate in pointless litigation until the money is exhausted. Lawyers operate a closed shop, self-centred, and self-perpetuating. They draft the laws, enact them into legislation, argue and interpret them in the courts, amend them - and earn a good living from them. The alternative is not to have no law, but to have a system which is open, transparent and accountable, responsive to public need. Otherwise, truth and justice become casualties, and the verdict goes to the person with the “best” lawyer, which, in practice, means the rich.

Hierarchies may be disabling or enabling: the former works through dictation, pretended dialogue with conclusions and decisions arrived at beforehand, communication from the top

down, priority of status, invocation of an over-arching external power as authority, (e.g. God, the nation, the ideology, the flag, etc.) It is self-serving, self-centred, self-justifying, and ready to sacrifice truth and justice to institutional interests.

In contrast, Jesus presents God in the Trinity as relational by nature, without domination or subordination. He presents his teaching as a call to community, whenever and wherever possible. He looks to a community where the person is the priority, where authority is exercised in service without privilege, decision-making is based on dialogue from the grass-roots up, power is exercised more in the service of relationships than in the performance of tasks, the common good is an over-riding concern, and which is open to encountering God 'outside the camp'. (See Exodus 19.17; 33.7-11)

The widow's offering: Mark 12.41-44

41. He sat down opposite the treasury, and watched the crowd putting money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums.

42. A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which are worth a penny.

43. 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.'

44. 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’.

In a writer as careful as Mark, it is hardly a coincidence that this story of a widow follows immediately on a remark about widows. He dramatizes the contrast between the scribes who ‘devour widows’ houses’ (v.40), and the generosity of the widow who put into the temple treasury ‘everything she had, all she had to live on’. (v.44) The coins in question were *lepta* – the word *lepton* (sing.) means tiny – and two of them made up a *quadrans*, which amounted to one-hundredth of the price of a meal. Her gift, insignificant in monetary terms, is seen by Jesus as an outstanding example of self-giving generosity; she gave out of her poverty, while the rich gave out of their abundance. She contrasts with the rich man of 10.17-31; she let go of all her security; he clung to his.

At a time when Mark has been stressing the failure of Israel to respond to God in Jesus, he also underlines the fidelity of one of the lesser ones in society, a widow. Her generosity “redeems” her people from failure, an action that foreshadows Jesus’ redeeming of his people through his self-giving in his death on the cross.

The destruction of the temple foretold: Mark 13.1-8

1. As he came out of the temple, one of his disciples said to him, ‘Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!’
2. Then Jesus asked him, ‘Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down’.
3. When he was sitting on the Mount of Olives opposite the temple, Peter, James, John, and Andrew asked him privately,
4. ‘Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign that all these things are about to be accomplished?’
5. Then Jesus began to say to them, ‘Beware that no one leads you astray.
6. Many will come in my name and say, “I am he!”, and they will lead many astray.
7. When you hear of wars and rumours of wars, do not be alarmed; this must take place, but the end is still to come.
8. 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’.

Chapter 13 is a farewell discourse, a type of literature popular among Jews at the time. Later generations also set considerable store by “famous last words”. Sometimes, as here, the

discourse had a semi-apocalyptic character, the ultimate purpose of which was to strengthen hearers in the face of persecution to come, by assuring them that God had not forgotten them, and those who are faithful to God will triumph in the end. (See vv. 7, 11, 13, 20, 27, 31) Mark sees Jesus as central to this. (vv.26-27.) Indeed, chapter 13 has sometimes been called the Little Apocalypse.

To what extent this chapter comes directly from Jesus, or from interpretation by others of his sayings, or simply from sayings of others, is disputed among scholars.

Chapter 13, like 4.1-34 on parables, is a block of teaching by Jesus, among the few in Mark. Throughout, it addresses both the existing situation in Palestine, and the larger horizon of humanity in general and the coming of the Son of Man.

Vv.1-4: may have been composed by Mark with a view to creating an appropriate setting for what follows. He situates it on the Mount of Olives, a place of messianic significance. He includes Peter, James, John and Andrew. They (without Andrew) are described as present at key moments in Jesus' ministry (see 1.29; 5.37; 9.2; 14.33), a way of drawing attention to the importance of the matter in question.

V.1: the temple was magnificent. It was said to have had a gold roof which shone in the sun and was visible from a great distance. The last stages of its construction were completed about 63 AD.

V.2: A Jewish historian describes the last days of the siege of Jerusalem: '[The Roman general] Titus attacked just after Passover in the year 70, battering the city with catapults which propelled a rain of stone, iron and fire onto the population. By then, the city defenders were weakened from hunger and, perhaps even more so, from internal strife. Even so, it took Titus two months of intense fighting before he was able to breach the city walls. The date was 17th of the Hebrew month of Tammuz. To this day, religious Jews fast on that date in commemoration of this event'.

'The Roman historian, Dio Cassius, reported, 'Though a breach was made in the wall by means of engines, nevertheless the capture of the place did not immediately follow even then. On the contrary, the defenders killed great numbers [of Romans] who tried to crowd through the opening, and also set fire to some of the buildings nearby, hoping thus to check the further progress of the Romans. Nevertheless, the soldiers, because of their superstition, did not immediately rush in, but, at last, under compulsion from Titus, made their way inside. The Jews defended themselves much more vigorously than before, as

if they had discovered a piece of rare good fortune in being able to fight near the temple and fall in its defence”’.

‘A horrific slaughter ensued with the Romans taking the city, literally house-by-house. One of the excavations that testifies to the destruction is the famous "Burnt House" which is open to visitors in Old City of Jerusalem today. Here the skeletal remains of a woman's arm were found, where she died on the doorstep of her house, a spear still in her death grip’.

‘It took him three weeks, but Titus slowly worked his way to the temple mount. A duel to the death ensued. Finally, four months after the Romans had begun this attack, Titus ordered the second temple razed to the ground. The day is the 9th of the month of Av, the same day on which the first temple was destroyed’.

‘Dio Cassius again, “The populace was stationed below in the court, and the elders on the steps, and the priests in the sanctuary itself. And though they were but a handful fighting against a far superior force, they were not conquered until part of the temple was set on fire. Then they met their death willingly, some throwing themselves on the swords of the Romans, some slaying one another, others taking their own lives, and still others leaping into the flames. And it seemed to everybody, and especially to them, that so far

from being destruction, it was victory and salvation and happiness to them that they perished along with the temple”’.

‘All of the neighbouring countryside was denuded of whatever trees remained from the siege to create the giant bonfire to burn the buildings of the temple to the ground. The intense heat from the fire caused the moisture in the limestone to expand and it exploded like popcorn, producing a chain reaction of destruction. In one day, the magnificent temple was nothing but rubble’. (Rabbi Ken Spiro)

‘Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down’ (v.2) is exaggeration. In fact, part of the foundations of the temple still stand today in the Western, or “Wailing”, wall, and Jews pray there. Some of the stones weigh as much as four hundred tons, and yet fit so closely, without mortar, that you could not slip a coin between one and the next.

Vv.3-4: are associated with vv.24-27 as question and answer. The disciples ask, ‘When?’ Jesus does not here give them a straight answer. Indeed, ‘He directly answers only three of the 183 questions that are asked of him in the four Gospels!’ (Richard Rohr, *Adam’s Return: the Five Promises of Male Initiation*, Crossroad Publishing, New York, 2004, p.112)

Vv.5-6: there was a false Jewish “messiah”, Simeon bar Kochba, who was acclaimed by Rabbi Akiva ben Yosef about 132 AD. He was killed by the Romans in 135, leading to the final dispersal of those Jews who had remained after 70 AD. Hitler was a pervert “messiah”; he did, at one point, say he had come on earth to complete the work of Jesus Christ. In effect, he said to the German people, ‘Give me total trust, total loyalty, total power, and I will create a better world’. Marxism-Leninism was a messianic political and economic system that raised hopes only to betray them: the workers’ paradise was like the crock of gold at the end of the rainbow: it kept slipping away no matter how much was sacrificed to attain it. Jesus warns against messiahs, whether individual or systemic. He has just foretold the end of the temple and what it represented, and does not want people to substitute another person, or system, for it.

Vv.7-8: such things have happened in all ages of history - the UN lists over 200 wars since 1945. It is likely that followers of Jesus saw the end of time as close. Perhaps Jesus warned against this with, ‘the end is still to come’.

The significance of 13.1-8 would appear to be that the old order of things - the temple, ritual sacrifice, and priesthood - is finally at an end. Following the loss of Jerusalem in 70 AD, many of the Jews were dispersed. About the middle of

the second century AD, when the revolt of Simeon bar Kochba was suppressed, the remaining remnants were scattered. In some countries of the Diaspora, Jews were forbidden even to have synagogues, but retained their identity through the family and the Torah (the teaching).

Mark may have seen the end of Jerusalem as prefiguring the end of the world.

Persecution foretold: Mark 13.9-13

9. 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.

10. And the good news must first be proclaimed to all nations.

11. 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.

12. Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death;

13. and you will be hated by all because of my name. But the one who endures to the end will be saved.

Jesus' warning is clear enough: his disciples will be persecuted for following him, but 'the one who perseveres to the end will be saved'. (v.13)

'Historians estimate that... half of the 260,000 priests, and 250 of the 300 bishops belonging to Russia's Orthodox Moscow Patriarchate alone... died at Communist hands'. (Jonathan Luxmore, "The Quiet Saints of the Gulag", *The Tablet*, 27 May 2000, p.708) In the Spanish civil war, from 1936 to 1939, 13 bishops, 4184 diocesan priests, 2365 male, and 283 female, members of religious orders died for the faith. (See *The Tablet*, 17 March 2001, p.389) About 2,000 Catholic priests died in Dachau concentration camp in Germany during World War II. The organization, Christian Solidarity Worldwide, estimated that in 2001, Christians were being persecuted for their faith in seventeen countries in Europe, Asia, Africa and Latin America. More people died for the Christian faith in the twentieth century than in any other. (See Robert Royal, *The Catholic Martyrs of the Twentieth Century: a comprehensive world history*, Crossroad Publishing Company, USA, 2000.)

V.9: the phrase "hand you over" is repeated in v. 11. It was used of Jesus himself in 10.33, suggesting that master and disciple share the same fate.

V.10 scripture scholars agree that this was added by Mark as part of his concern for the gentiles. It is like his addition in 10.29 of the phrase ‘and for the sake of the good news’.

V.11: where Mark and Luke (12.12) in this context refer to ‘the Holy Spirit’, Matthew uses the phrase, ‘the Spirit of your Father’ (10.20).

V.12: where v.9 spoke of persecution by fellow-Jews, and then by gentiles, this speaks of persecution by family members. Perhaps Jesus had in mind the unaccepting attitude towards him of his family and village: see 3.19-21 and 6.1-6a.

V.13: as in vv.7, 11, 20, 27, 31, the passage contains a word of encouragement.

The desolating sacrilege: Mark 13.14-23

14. ‘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;

15. the one on the housetop must not go down or enter the house to take anything away;

16. the one in the field must not turn back to get a coat.

17. Woe to those who are pregnant and to those who are nursing infants in those days!

18. Pray that it may not be in winter.

19. 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.

20. 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.

21. And if anyone says to you at that time, 'Look! Here is the Messiah!' or 'Look! There he is!' - do not believe it.

22. False messiahs and false prophets will appear and produce signs and omens, to lead astray, if possible, the elect.

23. But be alert; I have already told you everything.

V.14: In 39, the Roman emperor, Caligula, who had pretensions to divinity, ordered that his statue be erected in the temple, but Herod Agrippa and others managed to stall him, and nothing came of it, as Caligula was assassinated in 41 AD. (In 167 BC, the Seleucid ruler, Antiochus IV Epiphanes had a statue of Zeus Olympus set up on the altar of sacrifice in the temple.) Perhaps more likely, it refers to the action of the Roman general, Titus, in setting up the Roman standards and offering sacrifice to them, in front of the temple in Jerusalem after the capture of the city in August-September 70 AD, and bringing Jewish worship there to an end. This was seen as a fulfilment of Daniel, 'the troops of the prince who is to come

shall destroy the city and the sanctuary.... he shall make sacrifice and offering cease; and in their place shall be an abomination that desolates'. (9.26-27, and similar texts in 11.31 and 12.11)

There is a powerful sense here of the outrage felt by Jews at the installation of symbols of Roman power, and presumably also of Roman divinities, in the very temple itself. They must have experienced a sense of desecration, of catastrophic loss, a feeling that their world was coming to an end, as indeed it was.

Did Jesus foresee this? Or was it written after the event and put into his mouth? If Mark was writing in Rome in the late sixties, he might well have been aware of the tense political situation in Palestine and had it in mind as he wrote.

The phrase 'let the reader understand' obviously did not come from the lips of Jesus. It sounds like saying, 'Can you take a hint?' We'd love to, Mark, but what is the hint?

15-16: The message is 'Run! Escape while you have the chance! Don't delay!' How many Jews heard such a message in Germany in the 1930's, failed to heed it, and paid for that with their lives. 17-18: It is always the weak and vulnerable who suffer most in war, and increasingly so. In World War One, about eighty per cent of casualties

were military and twenty per cent civilian; in World War Two, the converse was the case. After the conquest of Jerusalem, the population was put to the sword, sold into slavery, condemned to hard labour, or killed in the gladiatorial games in Syria.

21-22: These verses are like a refrain, echoing vv.5-6: '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'. It is another example of Mark's sandwich technique, bracketing a section dealing with a particular issue, in this, instance, persecution.

23: Is somewhat like v.7: 'do not be alarmed; this must take place, but the end is still to come', and appears to be meant as re-assurance.

This powerful image of the suffering of warfare could apply to many places. Perhaps it was written to re-assure Christians experiencing persecution under the Roman Empire that Jesus had foreseen it and would see them through the time of trial. In his *Lives of the Caesars*, the Roman historian, Suetonius, wrote that, in 49 AD, the Emperor Claudius 'drove from Rome the Jewish agitators stirred up by Chrestos'. Much more was to come.

The coming of the Son of Man, and the lesson of the fig tree: Mark 13.24-31

24. But in those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light,

25. and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken.

26. Then they will see 'the Son of Man coming in clouds' with great power and glory.

27. 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.

28. From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near.

29. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates.

30. Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place.

31. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

This passage, in conjunction with 13.3-8, brackets stories of localized suffering and persecution. It is about something on a greater scale than simply the destruction of Jerusalem (though perhaps prompted by it), or indeed any of the events of the time or the place.

Vv.24-25: 'in those days' is a generalized expression without any particular time reference. Mark is not teaching meteorology, astronomy, or cosmology, though he uses their language. The

passage is reminiscent of the book of Daniel, 'There shall be a time of anguish, such as has never occurred since nations first came into existence'. (12.1) But hope is always present, even in the worst of times: 'your people shall be delivered'. (12.2)

V.26 evokes memories of Daniel, 'As I watched in the night visions,
I saw one like a son of man coming with the clouds of heaven.
And he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him.
To him was given dominion and glory and kingship, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him.
His dominion is an everlasting dominion that shall not pass away, and his kingship is one that shall never be destroyed'. (7.13-14)

Who is 'the Son of Man' in Mark's image? He clearly associates him with the 'son of man' in Daniel, a messianic figure whose relationship to 'the Ancient of Days' (God) is – at least – very close.

V.27. This apocalyptic imagery expresses God's judgment, culminating in the gathering of the elect, 'from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven'. Mark's universalist outlook is present. The message is not one of

fear, but of hope, indeed a celebration of vindication.

Vv.28-29: if people can learn from the signs of nature, then they should be able to perceive what is imminent in the world around them.

‘He is near’ could also be ‘it is near’.

V.30 clearly implies that the events foretold are imminent, and it was seen as such by early Christians. Is it meant as the answer to the question in v.4, ‘when will this be, and what will be the sign that all these things are about to be accomplished?’ But, if so, how does it harmonize with v.32: ‘about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father’?

V.31. ‘Heaven’ here presumably means ‘the heavens’. It is like, ‘The grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God endures forever’ (Isaiah 40.8)

Is it possible to say to what the passage refers? Is it the *Shoah*, the Holocaust, of the Jewish people in World War Two? Unlikely; it has an entirely different character. Is that passed over in silence, unknown to Jesus in any sense? It seems so.

Is the passage simply about a local event, such as the destruction of Jerusalem, but given a larger significance because of the impact that

destruction had on the Jewish people? (Sometimes people caught up, for example, in a powerfully destructive, yet localized, earthquake, say afterwards they felt it was the end of the world.) We don't know. It is not possible to give an answer. Perhaps the passage will be clearer to a later generation.

But Mark is here consistent with the rest of his gospel: suffering is part of the following of Jesus; those who persevere through persecution will be rewarded, in this case with the full vision of the Son of Man when he comes in his fulness. The passage expresses positively what was expressed negatively in Mark 8.38, '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'.

The necessity for watchfulness: Mark 13.32-37

32. 'But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.

33. Beware, keep alert; and pray, for you do not know when the time will come.

34. It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his slaves in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to be on the watch.

35. Therefore, keep awake - for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn,

36. or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly.

37. And what I say to you I say to all: "Keep awake".

V.32: No one, not even Jesus himself, knows when the coming in glory of the Son of Man will be. Jesus here declares that his knowledge is not equal to that of God the Father. This is all the more remarkable in that this is the only text in Mark where Jesus speaks of himself as the Son of God.

Since we do not know when the end will be, watchfulness is necessary. If we had advance warning, we might relax our vigilance.

V.33: summarizes vv.28-37.

Vv.34-36: a self-explanatory parable of the need for alertness. The 'man' of v.34 has become the 'master of the house' in v.35. This latter may refer to the return of Christ in judgment.

V.37: The message of v.33 repeats that of v.23, 'Be alert'. It is a message for all.

Up to a limited point, this passage evokes the Hebrew bible's imagery of 'the Day of the Lord':

‘the Lord of hosts has a day against all that is proud and lofty, against all that is lifted up and high’. (Isaiah 2.12) ‘That day is the day of the Lord God of hosts, a day of retribution, to gain vindication from his foes’. (Jeremiah 46.10) It is a day of menace: ‘Alas for you who desire the day of the Lord! Why do you want the day of the Lord? It is darkness, not light; as if someone fled from a lion, and was met by a bear; or went into the house and rested a hand against the wall, and was bitten by a snake. Is not the day of the Lord darkness, not light, and gloom with no brightness in it?’ (Amos 5.18-20) Zechariah presents a different picture, ‘Then the Lord my God will come, and all the holy ones with him.... And there shall be continuous day (it is known to the Lord), not day and not night, for at evening time there shall be light’. (14.5c, 7)

For these prophets, the day of the Lord is a day of judgment and retribution, a terrible day, one known to the Lord.

The warning implicit in 13.32-37 is puzzling: there is a tone of menace about it which is out of keeping with the sense of joyful expectation in v.27, with its gathering of the elect from the four corners of the universe. To what does the passage refer? To the death of each individual? To the end of the world? To the coming of God in judgment?

On this latter point there are conflicting voices: 'The Father judges no one but has given all judgment to the Son' (John 5.22), and 'the Father... has granted the Son... authority to execute judgment, because he is the Son of Man'. (John 5.26-27) Jesus appears to confirm this, saying, 'I came into this world for judgment'. (John 9.39)

On the other hand, he also said, 'I come not to judge the world but to save the world' (John 12.47), and 'God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him'. (3.17) But he also said, 'it is not I alone who judge, but I and the Father who sent me' (John 8.16). He also implies that it is the Advocate, the Spirit, who will be the judge, 'when he comes he will prove the world wrong about sin and righteousness and judgment'. (John 16.8) These are sayings taken from different contexts, and they cannot be reconciled with each other.

One view is that judgment is a permanent factor in life, and that it is people themselves who make it, by deciding on a daily basis for or against God. Judgment is, then, not a sentence imposed by a Divine Judge, but the revelation of what is in the human heart. This is a serious point of view, and it finds some support in John 3.19: 'This is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than

light because their deeds were evil'. This could be taken as saying that virtue is its own reward, and vice its own punishment, but it hardly does justice to the texts, confused and confusing though they are.

One central point remains clear: the follower of Jesus must be vigilant.

The plot to kill Jesus: Mark 14. 1-2

1. It was two days before the Passover and the festival of Unleavened Bread. The chief priests and the scribes were looking for a way to arrest Jesus by stealth and kill him;
2. for they said, 'Not during the festival, or there may be a riot among the people'.

Mark's passion narrative, which begins here and ends at 16.8, is probably among the earliest, the simplest, and the least edited accounts of the last days of Jesus' life. He connects these events to the Jewish Passover; that is the context in which he situates them. What happens to Jesus is, for Mark, the fulfilment of God's plan, not the result of crooked dealing by the Jewish authorities, or craven submission by Pontius Pilate to their pressure, but the fulfilment, in accordance with God's will, of the prophecies of the Hebrew bible.

What begins in mysticism often ends in politics. Vv.1-2 is an example. Jesus had undermined the foundations of religion as it was understood and accepted in Palestine in his time. The religious establishment was not going to let him to get away with that. If he had allowed himself to be co-opted into their system, to become part of it, he would probably have been welcomed as a valuable asset – and then neutered. If he had led a nationalist campaign against Roman rule, others would have welcomed that, too. But he was his own man, not a puppet on anyone's string.

How did they see him – a loose cannon on the deck? A maverick? Too individualistic for the common good? One whose over-optimistic anthropology undermined dependence on the religious system? Not deferential to competent authority? Not malleable?

One thing was clear: he was not under any person's control. He constantly referred everything to God whom, in a unique way, he called his Father. God, with whom he claimed a distinctive and single-minded relationship, was his constant reference point. Jesus wasn't "doing his own thing" – that would have been arbitrary and egotistical. In everything he was guided by his Father: 'My food is to do the will of him who sent me.... I always do what is pleasing to him.... the Father and I are one; not what I want,

but what you want....' (John. 4.34; 8.29; 10.30; Mark.14.36)

The chief priests and scribes show good political judgment; their PR was not to be faulted, 'for they said, "Not during the festival, or there may be a riot among the people"'. There's dirty work to be done, but now is not the time to do it. As every politician knows, timing matters; indeed, it may be crucial.

The anointing at Bethany: Mark 14.3-9

3. While he was at Bethany in the house of Simon the leper, as he sat at the table, a woman came with an alabaster jar of very costly ointment of nard, and she broke open the jar and poured the ointment on his head.

4. But some were there who said to one another in anger, 'Why was the ointment wasted in this way?

5. For this ointment could have been sold for more than three hundred *denarii*, and the money given to the poor'. And they scolded her.

6. But Jesus said, 'Let her alone; why do you trouble her? She has performed a good service for me.

7. For you always have the poor with you, and you can show kindness to them whenever you wish; but you will not always have me.

8. She has done what she could; she has anointed my body beforehand for its burial.

9. Truly I tell you, wherever the gospel is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her’.

V.3: Jesus was a Jew, and meals were important to him, as they were to his people. More than a mere intake of food, they were social, family, cultural, and religious occasions.

Would Jesus have been rendered ritually unclean by eating a meal in a leper’s house? Though it is possible that Simon’s “leprosy” was a fairly ordinary skin problem such as ringworm, rather than Hansen’s disease, or even that he had already recovered from the illness, it is possible that Jesus would have incurred defilement by eating with him. That would not have deterred him. He showed great freedom in ignoring religious conventions when they clashed with the fundamentals.

By breaking open the jar of ointment the woman made it impossible to save any of it for future use. It was a glorious, generous, spend-it-all gesture.

Vv.4-5: But it evoked a reaction. Generosity was denounced as wastefulness, penny-pinching upheld as stewardship. They probably wanted to “save it up”. For what? For the dead? They knew the price of everything but the value of nothing.

They were living in the future rather than the present.

By contrast, the poor know how to celebrate. I have seen this in Madagascar, one of the world's poorest countries. The same is true of the village fiestas in Latin America. There, people have to be careful with money, because they have so little of it, but they also know when to let go and to spend generously, such as at weddings.

Did Jesus think of the psalm, 'How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity! It is like the precious oil on the head, running down upon the beard, on the beard of Aaron, running down over the collar of his robes'. (Psalm 133.2) That sounds like a sticky mess, which is what human occasions sometimes are. People who don't know how to celebrate don't know how to live; they inhabit the cautious, careful, calculating, risk-free world of half-living. If someone looks for a place where people are safe, take no risks, never waste anything, where everything is neat and orderly, they will find it – in a cemetery! 'Where'er the Catholic sun doth shine, there's music and laughter, and good red wine'. (Gilbert Keith Chesterton)

Three hundred *denarii* was three hundred days' wages. The woman's critics adopted the moral high ground which fortuitously coincided with an opportunity for bullying: 'they scolded her'.

Vv.6-7: What Jesus says sounds dismissive towards the poor, though he surely knew better than most that poverty is not divinely ordained, or part of a supposed natural order of things, but is the product of human inequity and mismanagement. Gandhi once said, 'There's enough in this world for everyone's need; there's not enough for everyone's greed'. The criticism made of the woman resonates with the mentality of the First World of today, that part of the world that allocates, and arrogates, to itself much more than its fair share of the world's resources. To take just one example: 'If every person alive today consumed natural resources, and emitted carbon dioxide, at the same rate as the average American, German, or Frenchman, we would need at least another two planet Earths to survive'. (The *Living Planet Report 2000*, World Wide Fund for Nature, Brussels, 2000)

Someone once said, 'I'd like to ask God why he allows poverty, famine and injustice when he could do something about it'. Another responded, 'Why don't you?' Shame-faced, the first acknowledged, 'Because I'm afraid God might ask me the same question'.

'You always have the poor with you' could also be taken to mean, 'The world and everything in it will always be a limited, imperfect, conditional situation; don't be misled by the bogus messiahs that promise paradise on earth -

Communism and Nazism are examples – that sacrifice people to ideas, the present to the future, that suggest that if only you do X or Y then everything will come right. There will always be a need for a saviour’.

V.8: ‘she has done what she could’. That was great praise. If you can’t do the best, then do the best you can. ‘She has performed a good service for me.... she has anointed my body beforehand for its burial’. (vv.6, 8) Perhaps this was a hint of his forthcoming death. Jesus did not need supernatural foreknowledge to sense that it was coming. He needed ordinary perceptiveness, and he had that in abundance. Was the woman’s action more than simple kindness, but an affectionate farewell which suggests the discharge of a debt of gratitude? Mark tells us later that the dead body of Jesus was not anointed: ‘Then Joseph bought a linen cloth, and taking down the body, wrapped it in the linen cloth, and laid it in a tomb that had been hewn out of the rock’ (15.46), and, ‘When the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices, so that they might go and anoint him’. But he was not there; he had risen. (16.1) It was now or never.

V.9: the phrase ‘wherever the gospel is proclaimed’ suggests an addition to the text, dating from the time when the gospel was being proclaimed by the early Christians.

This passage is another example of Mark's "sandwich" technique. He places the anointing between two texts that deal with the plot against Jesus, vv.1-2 and 10-11.

Judas agrees to betray Jesus: Mark 14.10-11

10. Then Judas Iscariot, who was one of the twelve, went to the chief priests in order to betray him to them.

11. When they heard it, they were greatly pleased, and promised to give him money. So he began to look for an opportunity to betray him.

This short text is linked to vv.1-2. There the religious leadership was looking for an opportunity to kill Jesus; now it is served up to them. Judas went to work: he plotted against Jesus, seemingly for a sum of money not disclosed here. People who betray their country, such as by selling state secrets to a hostile country, usually do it for money, while pretending it was for a lofty and disinterested ideological purpose.

Why did Judas do it? Greed is blind and knows no rational boundaries; there is evidence of that all round us. Yet it seems inadequate as an explanation. Was he, as some have suggested, angry that Jesus refused to use his power in a nationalist campaign against Roman rule? Mark seems both to blame Judas and to excuse him: in

v.21, he has Jesus say, ‘woe to that one by whom the Son of Man is betrayed’ but also that ‘it is written’. Is he saying that God knew it would happen, without causing it to happen?

Why did the religious leadership want Jesus to die? Was it that they, better than his disciples, recognized the universalist appeal of his message, and the implications of that for the Jewish people, who would, - should Jesus be accepted - no longer be the chosen people of God in an exclusive sense, because now everyone who followed Jesus was part of the kingdom of God? Without that sense of exclusiveness, what would give them their identity? Challenge the sense of identity in a people, and you can expect a powerful reaction: he’s trouble; get rid of him.

Interestingly, the Christian church, despite Judas being the man everyone loves to hate, has never stated that he is damned. It is good that it is so: ‘Judgment is God’s’. (Deuteronomy 1.17)

The last supper: Mark 14.12-21

12. On the first day of Unleavened Bread, when the Passover lamb is sacrificed, his disciples said to him, ‘Where do you want us to go and make the preparations for you to eat the Passover?’

13. So he sent two of his disciples, saying to them, ‘Go into the city, and a man carrying a jar of water will meet you; follow him,

14. and wherever he enters, say to the owner of the house, "The Teacher asks, Where is my guest room where I may eat the Passover with my disciples?"

15. He will show you a large room upstairs, furnished and ready. Make preparations for us there'.

16. So the disciples set out and went to the city, and found everything as he had told them; and they prepared the Passover meal.

17. When it was evening, he came with the twelve.

18. And when they had taken their places and were eating, Jesus said, 'Truly I tell you, one of you will betray me, one who is eating with me'.

19. They began to be distressed and to say to him one after another, 'Surely, not I?'

20. He said to them, 'It is one of the twelve, one who is dipping bread into the same bowl with me.

21. For the Son of Man goes as it is written of him, but woe to that one by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It would have been better for that one not to have been born'.

There are two parts in this passage: the first, in vv.12-16, is about the preparations for the meal; the second, in vv.17-21, about the meal and the betrayal of Jesus.

There is uncertainty about the timing and the nature of the last supper; the differences between Mark and John on these points seem irreconcilable.

In the account of the preparations for the meal (vv.12-16), Mark, by means of the story of the man carrying a jar of water, wants to show Jesus' foreknowledge. It is similar to the story in 11.1-7 of finding the colt. They are "parallel stories"; another example is in 7.31-37 and 8.22-26, involving a deaf and a blind man. This present story of foreknowledge is similar to that in 1 Samuel where the prophet Samuel tells Saul: -

‘When you depart from me today you will meet two men by Rachel’s tomb in the territory of Benjamin at Zelzah; they will say to you, “The donkeys that you went to seek are found, and now your father has stopped worrying about them and is worrying about you, saying, ‘What shall I do about my son?’” Then you shall go on from there further and come to the oak of Tabor; three men going up to God at Bethel will meet you there, one carrying three kids, another carrying three loaves of bread, and another carrying a skin of wine. They will greet you and give you two loaves of bread, which you shall accept from them. After that you shall come to Gibeathelohim, at the place where the Philistine garrison is; there, as you come to the town, you will meet a band of prophets coming down from the shrine, with harp, tambourine, flute and lyre

playing in front of them; they will be in a prophetic frenzy. Then the spirit of the Lord will possess you, and you will be in a prophetic frenzy along with them and be turned into a different person. Now when these signs meet you, do whatever you see fit to do, for God is with you'. (10.2-7)

These sound like examples of “foreknowledge constructed after the event” (Latin: *vaticinium ex eventu*) with a pre-ordained purpose in view.

A number of features are worth noting: it would have been unusual for a man to have carried a jar of water; it was normally women who did this, while men carried the heavier supplies in skins. Was the owner of the house a disciple? Had Jesus made advance arrangements with him?

The ‘disciples’ of vv. 12, 13, 16 become ‘the twelve’ in vv.17, 20. Jesus says that one of them will betray him, citing Psalm 41, ‘Even my bosom friend in whom I trusted, who ate of my bread, has lifted the heel against me’. (v.9) There is here a deep sense of betrayal, a violation of a basic code of human behaviour: you do not betray your host, accepting his hospitality while having previously begun arrangements for his capture. Judas is not mentioned by name, though Jesus says that ‘it is one of the twelve, one who is dipping bread into the same bowl with me’,

making the deceit all the more hurtful, the betrayal all the more perfidious.

V.21: 'the Son of Man goes...' Jesus 'accomplished' his death (Luke 9.31); it was not imposed on him unwillingly.

The phrase 'as it is written of him' creates a difficulty: scripture scholars have diligently sifted the bible, but failed to find where it is written.

The institution of the Lord's Supper: Mark 14.22-25

22. While they were eating, he took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it, he broke it, gave it to them, and said, 'Take; this is my body'.

23. Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them, and all of them drank from it.

24. He said to them, 'This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many.

25. Truly I tell you, I will never again drink of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God'.

The vocabulary and style of this passage suggest that it comes from an early Christian Eucharistic liturgy, probably in a Palestinian community. The incident at the Last Supper which gave rise to it likely has its background in

the Jewish Passover, but the Passover is now in the background of the life of the Christian community.

v.22: as the leader of the group, Jesus blessed the (unleavened) bread, and explained its meaning in the words, 'This is my body', a phrase found in identical form in all four New Testament accounts - Matthew 26.26; Luke 22.19; 1 Corinthians 11.24. To say, 'This is my body' is equivalent to saying, 'This is myself'.

The word used for 'is' – *estin* – may mean 'is really', or 'is figuratively'.

It is used in a realistic sense in 'I am gentle and humble in heart' (Matthew 11.29); 'I am Gabriel' (Luke 1.19); and 'I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right but I cannot do it'. (Romans 7.18)

It is used figuratively in 'I am the light of the world' (John 8.12); 'I am the gate for the sheep' (John 10.7); 'I am the good shepherd' (John 10.11); 'I am the true vine' (John 15.1); and 'we are the temple of the living God'. (2 Corinthians 6.16)

The tradition of the Catholic faith-community, supported by such sayings as, 'The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a sharing in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not

a sharing in the body of Christ?’ (1 Corinthians 10. 16); and ‘Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be answerable for the body and blood of the Lord’ (1 Corinthians 11.27) has understood the phrase in a realistic sense. Using the term “real presence”, it sees an identity between the risen Lord and the Eucharistic species.

V.23: this may have been the ‘cup of blessing’, which followed the main course of the meal.

V.24: This ‘blood of the covenant’ echoes Exodus 24.3-8: -

3. ‘Moses came and told the people all the words of the Lord and all the ordinances; and all the people answered with one voice, and said, "All the words that the Lord has spoken we will do”.

4. And Moses wrote down all the words of the Lord. He rose early in the morning, and built an altar at the foot of the mountain, and set up twelve pillars, corresponding to the twelve tribes of Israel.

5. He sent young men of the people of Israel, who offered burnt offerings and sacrificed oxen as offerings of well-being to the Lord.

6. Moses took half of the blood and put it in basins, and half of the blood he dashed against the altar.

7. Then he took the book of the covenant, and read it in the hearing of the people; and they said,

"All that the Lord has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient".

8. Moses took the blood and dashed it on the people, and said, "See the blood of the covenant that the Lord has made with you in accordance with all these words".

In Zechariah 9.11, in the context of the coming messianic ruler, the word of the Lord says, 'because of the blood of my covenant with you, I will set your prisoners free'.

Blood was seen as symbolic of life: 'the life of the flesh is in its blood' and, 'the life of every creature – its blood is its life'. (Leviticus 17.11, 14) To share in the blood of Jesus means to share in his life.

The use of the phrase 'for many' does not imply that some are excluded; it was a Semitic expression equivalent to 'for all'. Words do not exist in an abstract, rarefied, state of objectivity. On one occasion, the great English architect Christopher Wren was showing the king of England through Saint Paul's Cathedral in London as it was under construction. The king commented that the building was 'amusing, artful, and awful'. Wren was delighted by this, since what the king meant was 'amazing, artistic, and awe-inspiring'. The meaning words have is the meaning the user-community assigns to them.

The significance of v.24 is that God's covenant is not only with, and for, the Jewish people, but for all humanity. It does not depend on the fidelity to it of a people – whether the Jewish people or any other – but is underpinned by the fidelity of God who is always faithful, whether humanity is, or not.

A covenant is a pact, agreement, or treaty of friendship. It is wider than a contract, which is a legal term. For example, a marriage is a covenant, and includes elements of a contract. In biblical usage, a covenant starts with God's initiative, and is commonly celebrated in a ritual action. The covenants of the Hebrew bible take in a steadily widening embrace: -

The covenant of God through Adam involves a couple: 'God blessed them, and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the face of the earth"' (Genesis 1.28)

The covenant of God through Noah involves a family and their descendants: 'Then God said to Noah and his sons with him, "As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you, and with every living creature that is with you.... Never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood.... This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me

and you... I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth...” (Genesis 9.8-17)

The covenant of God through Abraham involves a people: ‘God said to Abraham... “This is my covenant, which you shall keep, between me and you and your offspring after you: Every male among you shall be circumcised.... It shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you.... Any uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin shall be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant”’. (Genesis 17.9, 10, 11, 14)

The covenant of God through Moses is described in Exodus 12.1-8, 11-14. It involves a wider people: -

1. The Lord said to Moses and Aaron in the land of Egypt:
2. This month shall mark for you the beginning of months; it shall be the first month of the year for you.
3. Tell the whole congregation of Israel that on the tenth of this month they are to take a lamb for each family, a lamb for each household.
4. If a household is too small for a whole lamb, it shall join its closest neighbour in obtaining one; the lamb shall be divided in proportion to the number of people who eat of it.

5. Your lamb shall be without blemish, a year-old male; you may take it from the sheep or from the goats.

6. You shall keep it until the fourteenth day of this month; then the whole assembled congregation of Israel shall slaughter it at twilight.

7. They shall take some of the blood and put it on the two doorposts and the lintel of the houses in which they eat it.

8. They shall eat the lamb that same night; they shall eat it roasted over the fire with unleavened bread and bitter herbs.

11. This is how you shall eat it: your loins girded, your sandals on your feet, and your staff in your hand; and you shall eat it hurriedly. It is the Passover of the Lord.

12. For I will pass through the land of Egypt that night, and I will strike down every firstborn in the land of Egypt, both human beings and animals; on all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgments: I am the Lord.

13. The blood shall be a sign for you on the houses where you live: when I see the blood, I will pass over you, and no plague shall destroy you when I strike the land of Egypt.

14. This day shall be a day of remembrance for you. You shall celebrate it as a festival to the Lord; throughout your generations you shall observe it as a perpetual ordinance’.

The covenant of God through Jesus involves all humanity; the Eucharist is its celebration in ritual form.

V.25: This looks forward to the culmination of Jesus' life and work. The Eucharist was celebrated by Christians in the joyful hope of the expected imminent coming of God's kingdom in its fullness, a hope expressed poetically in Revelation 21.1-5: -

1. Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more.

2. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.

3. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying,

"See, the home of God is among mortals.

He will dwell with them;

they will be his peoples,

and God himself will be with them;

4. he will wipe every tear from their eyes.

Death will be no more;

mourning and crying and pain will be no more,

for the first things have passed away".

5. And the one who was seated on the throne said, "See, I am making all things new. Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true".

Jesus and his disciples walk to the Mount of Olives: Mark 14.26-31

26. When they had sung the hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives.

27. And Jesus said to them, ‘You will all become deserters; for it is written, "I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered”’.

28. But after I am raised up, I will go before you to Galilee’.

29. Peter said to him, ‘Even though all become deserters, I will not’.

30. Jesus said to him, ‘Truly I tell you, this day, this very night, before the cock crows twice, you will deny me three times’.

31. But he said vehemently, ‘Even though I must die with you, I will not deny you’. And all of them said the same.

v.26: If the supper was a Passover meal, then the hymn was probably the *Hallel* - Psalms 114, and 155-118.

The prophet Zechariah had written, ‘his feet [the Lord God’s] shall stand on the Mount of Olives’. (14.4) The mount was a place of Messianic significance.

V.27: Jesus here cites Zechariah: ‘Strike the shepherd that the sheep may be scattered’. (13.7) Is he suggesting that Peter’s denial was fore-ordained by God? Where does that leave his free will? Was the same implied in Judas’ case, since

his betrayal, too, was seen as fore-ordained? (See 14.21) Was this a way of letting the disciples off lightly, so that they would have some credibility and authority left to them in the early Christian community?

An important point is that implicit in Jesus' seeming foreknowledge is his free acceptance of his coming suffering and death.

V.28: Jesus is again represented as foreseeing his resurrection. The disciples show no reaction to this.

Galilee is more than just a rendezvous, or a geographical area. It is the place where people gather from all Israel (see 3.7-8), and from which disciples are sent on a mission, as in 6.6b-13. Its wider significance is clearer in Matthew 28: -

16. The eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them.

17. When they saw him, they worshipped him; but some doubted.

18. And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.

19. Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit,

20. and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age".

V.29: Peter was, as always, strong, and self-assured. He seems to have had a protective attitude towards Jesus, as if to say, 'I'll look after you, whatever about the rest of them'.

V.30: Jesus brings him down to earth with a crash, saying that his three denials will come so fast on each other the cock will not have time even to get his wind back after crowing before Peter makes them! The verse echoes 8.31-33, where Jesus rebukes Peter for misunderstanding him and distorting the nature of his mission.

V.31: Despite the rebuke, Peter's self-confidence is unshaken, and he vehemently re-affirms his commitment. So do the others. 'All of them said the same' has an ironic echo in: 'All of them deserted him and fled'. (14.50)

Jesus prays in Gethsemane: Mark 14.32-42

32. They went to a place called Gethsemane; and he said to his disciples, 'Sit here while I pray'.

33. He took with him Peter and James and John, and began to be distressed and agitated.

34. And he said to them, 'I am deeply grieved, even to death; remain here, and keep awake'.

35. And going a little farther, he threw himself on the ground and prayed that, if it were possible, the hour might pass from him.

36. He said, ‘Abba, Father, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me; yet, not what I want, but what you want’.

37. He came and found them sleeping; and he said to Peter, ‘Simon, are you asleep? Could you not keep awake one hour?’

38. Keep awake and pray that you may not come into the time of trial; the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak’.

39. And again he went away and prayed, saying the same words.

40. And once more he came and found them sleeping, for their eyes were very heavy; and they did not know what to say to him.

41. He came a third time and said to them, ‘Are you still sleeping and taking your rest? Enough! The hour has come; the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners.

42. Get up, let us be going. See, my betrayer is at hand’.

V.32: Jesus had a liking for deserted places, or mountains, for private prayer; for instance: ‘In the morning, when it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed’ (1.35); and, ‘he went up on the mountain to pray’. (6.46) In fact, very few of the bible’s significant religious experiences – especially where men are concerned - take place in a synagogue or temple; they are mostly in mountains or deserts. This is true of Abraham, Moses, Jacob, Job, Jonah, Elijah, and Jesus. And

Jesus recommended the desert to his disciples: 'Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while'. (6.31) Prophets come from the desert, not from the sanctuary.

V.33: The significant three, Peter, James and John are here, as they were when Jesus raised the dead girl to life in 5.21-24, 35-43, on the mountain of his transfiguration in 9.2-8, and as he anticipated the destruction of the temple and what it represented. (13.3) The contrast between the situations is great: in those instances, the disciples saw Jesus exercising power in the service of the distressed, being drawn mysteriously into the embrace of God, and seemingly foreseeing great and historic events. Here, Jesus is distressed and agitated. He is far removed from the cold and capricious gods of the Roman or Greek pantheon. He is a warm, emotional person who feels fear in the face of impending death. Jesus was a man. He may have experienced not only fear, but puzzlement and uncertainty. God, whom he called Father in a most loving and trusting manner, did not seem to be with him in this time of trial when he most needed him. Fear, more than doubt, undermines faith. Did Jesus ask himself, 'Was I mistaken? Did I get it all wrong? Have I fallen into the sin of pride, in the end succumbing to the temptation in the desert?' Who knows the answers to those questions? But Jesus was truly a man, not acting out a part, or fulfilling a rôle as if in a play.

Gethsemane was the real thing, not a dress rehearsal. Jesus was not like a teacher asking questions in the classroom, having previously looked up the answers in the teacher's handbook.

V.34: Maybe Jesus had in mind the prayer from the book of psalms, the prayer-book of the Jews, 'Why are you cast down, my soul, why are you disquieted within me? Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my help and my God'. (Psalm 42.5-6)

The chosen disciples had a problem in staying awake. Mark mentions this five times, here, and in vv.37, 38, 40 and 41. (In Luke's account of the transfiguration, 'Peter and his companions were weighed down with sleep' 9.32) Jesus' repeated calls to them to stay awake bring to mind his warning in 13.33-37: -

'Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come. It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his slaves in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to be on the watch. Therefore, keep awake - for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn, or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake'.

Jesus, it seems, does not believe in letting sleeping dogs – or disciples – lie, does not want

us to sleep-walk our way through life. And there is more than one way of being asleep: there is the daydream state of being unaware of what's going on, or simply not thinking, or failing to look beneath the surface of events, such as, for example, by mistaking symptoms for causes. A poet illustrates: -

'Earth is crammed with Heaven
and every common bush
on fire with God.

But only he who sees
takes off his shoes.

The rest sit around
and pluck blackberries'.

(Elizabeth Barrett Browning: *Poetical Works*)

V.35: This suggests a powerful intensity in Jesus' prayer, a cry from the heart.

The reference to the 'hour' – repeated in vv.37 and 41 – is not about time in the sense of the measurement of duration (*chronos*). It means the significant moment (*kairos*), the time of crisis, the day of reckoning. Jesus wished that 'the hour' might pass from him, that it could be otherwise.

V.36: But, above all, Jesus wants to do his Father's will. The word *abba* really means not just 'Father' but 'my Father'; it expresses intimacy.

This is the only time in Mark's gospel where Jesus uses it, and it was not used before Jesus' time. For Jesus, his Father's will is his constant reference point, the compass of his life. For him, this prayer expressed not a wish, but a commitment. It was also an act of trust, as it seems improbable that Jesus understood why his Father wanted this.

Vv. 35-36 involve repetition as, in a similar sense, does 'Thy kingdom come, thy will be done' in the prayer Jesus gave his disciples as the pattern of prayer. If someone sees ambiguity between asking God to 'remove this cup from me' and, 'not what I want, but what you want' it is clarified elsewhere: 'What should I say, "Father, save me from this hour"? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour' (John 12.27), and 'Am I not to drink the cup that the Father has given me?' (John 18.11)

The 'cup' was a symbol of one's lot: there was to be no 'cup of consolation' (Jeremiah 16.7) for Jesus.

V.37: Jesus reverts to using the name that Peter had when he first called him. (See 3.16) Was it by using Peter's childhood name of Simon that Jesus hoped to penetrate the fog of sleep and reach him? If so, he failed.

V.38: This is to be a time of crisis, not only for Jesus, but for the disciples, too. Their faith in him is tested as never before. The task for them is to recognize the test for what it is. Did they say later, 'I never thought.... I didn't notice.... I didn't know what was happening'? That's what we say. Awareness is half the battle, so Jesus says, 'Keep awake'. He urges us to pray, 'lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil'; we may not say that if it is our intention to continue sinning.

'The spirit is willing but the flesh is weak'; the disciples mean well but lack the single-mindedness Jesus calls purity of heart. (See Matthew 5.8)

V.39: 'In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him out of death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission'. (Hebrews 5.7) But he was not heard on this occasion. Perhaps this is the only prayer in the gospels which received the answer 'No', and it was given in silence.

V.40: 'They did not know what to say to him'. This is similar to Peter at the transfiguration: 'He did not know what to say, for they were terrified'. (9.6) Peter is like Homer Simpson, forever walking and talking himself into trouble, and clueless as to how to get out of it!

V.41: The hour has come! The disciple has betrayed the master, though loyalty is the foundation of discipleship.

V.42: Jesus faces hard reality. He is not dragged unwillingly, but freely goes to accomplish his death. Choice and commitment are two sides of one coin.

One biblical commentary says of this passage that 'it is unlikely to be a complete fabrication' (!), adding that 'some of the details are undoubtedly an imaginative reconstruction'. (Edward J. Mally, in *The Jerome Biblical Commentary*, Geoffrey Chapman, London, 1970, nn.42.88-89) There are problems about the text. If the disciples were asleep, as it emphasizes so strongly, who was the witness to these events? Who told Mark what happened? But clearly also it was not written by a spin doctor; he would have given a different picture to this one of human weakness in Jesus, abandonment by his chosen friends, and betrayal by one whom he had hand-picked. There must be a solid core of truth in it, even if there was also later elaboration. Some of the phrases Jesus uses are found elsewhere in the gospels, especially John.

The basic message appears to be: at whatever cost to himself, Jesus does what God his Father wants.

Mark likes things in threes: three miracle stories (4.35-5.43); three traditions of the elders criticized (7.1-23); the crowd follows Jesus for three days (8.2); three men were suffused by the light of the transfiguration (9.4); three sayings of Jesus (11.22-25); three prophecies of the passion (8.31-32a; 9.30-32; 10.32-34); three special disciples – Peter, James and John - with Jesus on three special occasions (5.37; 9.2; 14.33); three hundred denarii (14.5); Jesus goes to the disciples three times (14.37, 40, 41); three denials by Peter (14.66-72); three attempts by Pilate to free Jesus (15.9, 12, 14); Jesus died at three o'clock (15.33-34); was mocked three times on the cross (15. 29-30, 31, 32); and spent three days in the tomb (15.42-16.1); three women were involved in the three stages of his death, burial and resurrection (15.40; 15.47; 16.1); three statements of the disciples' post-resurrection unbelief. (16. 11, 13, 14) Were these coincidences? Were they imaginary on Mark's part? Or were they the creative work of an imaginative writer?

The betrayal and arrest of Jesus: Mark 14.43-52

43. Immediately, while he was still speaking, Judas, one of the twelve, arrived; and with him there was a crowd with swords and clubs, from the chief priests, the scribes, and the elders.

44. Now the betrayer had given them a sign, saying, 'The one I will kiss is the man; arrest him and lead him away under guard'.

45. So when he came, he went up to him at once and said, 'Rabbi!' and kissed him.

46. Then they laid hands on him and arrested him.

47. But one of those who stood near drew his sword and struck the slave of the high priest, cutting off his ear.

48. Then Jesus said to them, 'Have you come out with swords and clubs to arrest me as though I were a bandit?

49. Day after day I was with you in the temple teaching, and you did not arrest me. But let the scriptures be fulfilled'.

50. All of them deserted him and fled.

51. A certain young man was following him, wearing nothing but a linen cloth. They caught hold of him,

52. but he left the linen cloth and ran off naked.

V.43: A posse has arrived; one has the sense of a bunch of thugs armed with the bogus bravery of the bully, the spurious authority of those given the nod from the top; they have the backing of the chief priests, the scribes, and the elders – that makes it alright, then, doesn't it? (Notably, the Pharisees are absent from this and subsequent related matters.)

Judas is identified as ‘one of the twelve’, underlining his treachery.

Vv.44-45: A cruel betrayal, and all the more cynical for using a sign of affection as the signal for capture. While it was normal for a disciple to greet his master with a kiss, it is difficult, in the circumstances described here, to see Judas’ action as anything other than malicious and contemptuous. Did it make Jesus think of the saying, ‘From one who hates, kisses are ominous’? (Proverbs 27.6, *Jerusalem Bible* edition.)

Those who have been betrayed by a kiss, whether the mocking kiss of a two-timing lover, the ominous kiss of a Mafia godfather, the mercenary kiss of a prostitute, or the honey-trap kiss-and-tell of a mistress who has a contract with a tabloid will understand something of Jesus’ feelings.

Vv.46-47: John, the gospel writer, says it was Peter who did this, and that the slave’s name was Malchus. (18.10) It is in keeping with Peter’s impulsiveness. Here the verses read like a later addition, disrupting the flow from 45 to 48.

V.48: Jesus was not a bandit who might have offered violent resistance. The word used for ‘bandit’ is the same as that for members of the

violent nationalist group called the Zealots; theirs was a role Jesus had repeatedly renounced.

V.49: This suggests that Jesus spent a longer time in Jerusalem than chapters 11-14 intimate. Mark does not identify the scriptures he means.

V. 50: This is a big change from the time when Jesus had asked James and John, 'Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?', and they had replied with calm and unreflecting confidence, 'We can'. (10.35-45) The 'sons of thunder' (3.17) were quiet now.

Collegiality among the apostles! Their heart was in the right place, but they panicked when the crisis came, suddenly, and (perhaps) unexpectedly. It is easy to condemn, or even mock them, but think it through and it becomes more understandable.

Vv.51-51: there is something comic about this, a Keystone Cops touch. Who looks more foolish – the panting pursuers left holding an empty cloth, or the young man running away naked? Who was he? A local resident who came to investigate the commotion, and retreated when he saw a crowd with swords and clubs? Or one of those who had come to Jerusalem for the Passover, and camped on the Mount of Olives? Or was it Mark himself, and he had been an eye-witness to Jesus' prayer

in Gethsemane, then followed him and was therefore able to write his account? Why were the posse interested in the young man, since they appear not to have tried to arrest any of the disciples? What was the linen cloth? A sheet? Night clothing of some kind? Is there any possible link – even a symbolic one - between this young man and the ‘young man, dressed in a white robe’ who was in the tomb on the morning of the resurrection? (16.5) What is the significance of the incident? Why is it mentioned at all? It is a puzzle. Perhaps, in some way, his hasty exit emphasizes that Jesus was now alone, except for his captors.

Jesus before his judges: Mark 14.53-65

53. They took Jesus to the high priest; and all the chief priests, the elders, and the scribes were assembled.

54. Peter had followed him at a distance, right into the courtyard of the high priest; and he was sitting with the guards, warming himself at the fire.

55. Now the chief priests and the whole council were looking for testimony against Jesus to put him to death; but they found none.

56. For many gave false testimony against him, and their testimony did not agree.

57. Some stood up and gave false testimony against him, saying,

58. 'We heard him say, "I will destroy this temple that is made with hands, and in three days I will build another, not made with hands"'.

59. But even on this point their testimony did not agree.

60. Then the high priest stood up before them and asked Jesus, 'Have you no answer? What is it that they testify against you?'

61. But he was silent and did not answer. Again the high priest asked him, 'Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One?'

62. Jesus said, 'I am; and "you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of the Power", and "coming with the clouds of heaven"'.

63. Then the high priest tore his clothes and said, 'Why do we still need witnesses?'

64. You have heard his blasphemy! What is your decision?' All of them condemned him as deserving death.

65. Some began to spit on him, to blindfold him, and to strike him, saying to him, 'Prophecy!' The guards also took him over and beat him.

There are discrepancies between Mark's account and those of Matthew, Luke and John. If Peter, as has been suggested, was Mark's main source for his writing, he was not an eye-witness, being 'at a distance' (v.54), or 'below in the court-yard'. (v.66) It seems that Mark may have combined elements of two hearings, a preliminary one at night in the high priest's house, and a full one the following morning. (See

15.1: ‘As soon as it was morning, the chief priests held a consultation with the elders and scribes and the whole council’.)

v.53: Caiaphas was high priest; his father-in-law, Annas, had been high priest from 6 to 15 AD, and five of his sons had been high priest. Only one person at a time had the right to hold the title. They met at the high priest’s house, so it may not have been a meeting of the full Sanhedrin, the supreme religious council and court with seventy-one members, which had its meeting-place in the temple. On the other hand, perhaps it was, as v.55 states, ‘the whole council’, and, the temple gates being closed at night, they met at Caiaphas’ house, so as to conclude matters speedily.

As Mark sees it, the verdict in Jesus’ trial was decided before the case was heard: -

‘The Pharisees went out and immediately conspired with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him’ (3.6);

‘When the chief priests and scribes heard it [about Jesus’ cleansing of the temple], they kept looking for a way to kill him’ (11.18);

‘When they realized that he had told this parable against them, they wanted to arrest him’ (12.12);

‘The chief priests and the scribes were looking for a way to arrest Jesus’. (14.1)

In reflecting on an event, many years after it has taken place, it is easy to interpret actions, and attribute motives, in the light of subsequent developments. For instance, when a marriage breaks down, it is easy to be wise after the event, and to speak of the breakdown as inevitable, or to claim that one saw it coming. Is this what happened here? Or is the story as Mark tells it the simple truth of the matter? *Chacun à son goût*.

Vv.58-62: the use of these scripture references creates difficulties; the *Catholic Commentary on Holy Scripture* describes them as ‘manifestly unhistorical’. (n.761v)

Vv.55-59: Mark clearly regards the trial of Jesus as deeply unjust; he repeatedly emphasizes defects in the evidence: its absence (v.55); its falsity (vv.56, 57); its contradictory nature (vv.56, 59.) This may have been seen by early Christians as fulfilment of prophecies, such as, ‘False witnesses have risen against me, and they are breathing out violence’ (Psalm 27.12), and, ‘Malicious witnesses rise up; They repay me evil for good; my soul is forlorn’. (Psalm 35.11-12)

The reference to Jesus destroying the temple may be a misunderstanding, or a misrepresentation (see 13.2) of the claim which Jesus doubtless made that the temple and its attached cult would become redundant.

V.60: The high priest's 'What is it that they testify against you?' was a strange question for a judge to put to an accused; perhaps it reflects exasperation at conflicting testimony.

Vv.61-62: The silence of Jesus is accentuated by repetition: 'he was silent and did not answer'. Yet in the next verse he breaks his silence and answers. His silence has been seen as fulfilment of Isaiah speaking of the Suffering Servant: 'He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; like a lamb that was led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth'. (53.7) Perhaps he was silent because he felt his judges had already made up their minds, and to answer their questions would give credibility to a charade. Silence would refuse to play their game and throw his questioners back on themselves, while, at the same time, enabling him to speak, when he chose, on his own terms.

The high priest then asks two questions in one: 'Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One?' To claim to be the Messiah was not to claim divine status, and therefore not blasphemy. To claim to be the Son of the Blessed One (God) was. Jesus had not previously made such a claim for himself; only the evil spirits had done so. The sole title Jesus had claimed for himself was Son of Man, which, essentially, meant 'a man'.

Rarely had Jesus given a straight answer to a straight question; here he does. 'I am' is as clear an answer as can be given. He answers the question in his own way. He loosely quotes Daniel 7.13-14, and Psalm 110.1, which read in full: -

13. 'I saw one like a son of man coming on the clouds of heaven. And he came to the Ancient One and was presented before him.

14. To him was given dominion and glory and kinship, so that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that shall not pass away, and his kingship is one that shall never be destroyed'.

Psalm 110.1: The Lord said to my lord, "Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies your footstool"

In Daniel 7.13-14, the Son of Man comes to the Ancient One (God) and receives honour from him. Psalm 110.1 suggests vindication by God.

Jesus' application of these quotations to himself says, in effect, 'and you will see God give me honour and vindicate me' - which may be taken as a reference to his resurrection. Jesus could give a straight answer here, since there was now no risk, in his condition as prisoner, of his disciples mistaking him for a political messiah or nationalist liberator.

Mark's gospel opens with the words, 'The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God'. (1.1) The word Christ means Messiah. This affirmation by Jesus before his judges reiterates that declaration, and would be understood by them as such. But the phrase 'I am' was a loaded one: it could scarcely not have evoked in his judges memories of a key part of Exodus, 'Moses said to God, "If I come to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your ancestors has sent me to you', and they ask me, 'What is his name?', what shall I say to them?" God said to Moses, "I am who I am"'. (3.13-14) Similarly, God had said, 'I, even I, am he; there is no god beside me'. (Deuteronomy 32.39: Isaiah 43.10) The phrase carried a heavy burden of significance in John also, where Jesus responds to a challenge about Abraham by saying, 'Before Abraham was, I am', and his response was seen as blasphemous. (See 8.58-59) His 'I am' at his hearing was understood by those present as blasphemy, and it evoked their condemnation.

V.63: This was ritual action, described as "judicial horror", was something of a performance. It seems that, on such occasions, the clothing was previously cut, then basted for easy tearing and subsequent mending.

V.64: The reply of the judges sounds like a chorus of yes-men. Were there any among them,

such as Nicodemus (prominent in John's gospel), who asked himself, 'Could it be that what Jesus claims is true?' Was the religious leadership capable of entertaining the possibility that it might be wrong, or was that *a priori* unthinkable?

V.65: the spitting, blindfolding, striking, and mockery by the anonymous 'some' has been seen as fulfilling Isaiah, 'I gave my back to those who struck me, and my cheeks to those who pulled out the beard; I did not hide my face from insult and spitting' (50.6), and, in a wider sense, 53.3-5: 3. 'He was despised and rejected by others; a man of sufferings and acquainted with infirmity; and as one from whom others hide their faces he was despised, and we held him of no account. 4. Surely he has borne our infirmities and carried our diseases; yet we accounted him stricken, struck down by God, and afflicted. 5. But he was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed'.

Taking their cue from the others, copy-cat style, the guards join in the fun, beating him. Perhaps it was what they were trained to do: no questioning or thinking, just mindless following of orders. While they were mocking Jesus as a false prophet, his prophecy of Peter's triple denial was being shown to be true.

Among Jews, a trial at night would have been illegal, especially on the night of the Passover, if that is when it was; so also would have been the beating in v.65. But the morning meeting, in 15.1, suggests a confirmation of the night's findings, and it would have been legal. But would any of those points have mattered, if the judges were already determined on a conviction?

At that time a local court under Roman rule had no power to pass a death sentence; only a Roman court could do that. Crucifixion was a Roman punishment, not a Jewish one; the Jewish punishment for blasphemy was stoning.

But that is irrelevant if the Jewish leadership, having issued a death sentence on Jesus for his supposed blasphemy, presented the matter to Pilate differently - as indeed they had to - if they wanted to secure Jesus' execution. It was pointless to go to Pilate with a complaint about blasphemy; he would have dismissed it. The Roman attitude to religious questions is well exemplified in the *Acts of the Apostles* where it says of Gallio, proconsul of Achaia that, when confronted in court with a religious question, he replied, 'since it is a matter of questions about words and names and of your own law, see to it yourselves; I do not wish to be a judge of these matters', and 'he dismissed them from the tribunal..... Gallio paid no attention to any of these things'. (Acts 18.15-16, 17) So the religious

leadership presented the case of Jesus to Pilate as a challenge to Roman authority; they were (rightly) confident that he would not, indeed could not, ignore that.

Peter denies Jesus: Mark 14.66-72

66. While Peter was below in the courtyard, one of the servant-girls of the high priest came by.

67. When she saw Peter warming himself, she stared at him and said, 'You also were with Jesus, the man from Nazareth'.

68. But he denied it, saying, 'I do not know or understand what you are talking about'. And he went out into the forecourt. Then the cock crowed.

69. And the servant-girl, on seeing him, began again to say to the bystanders, 'This man is one of them'.

70. But again he denied it. Then after a little while the bystanders again said to Peter, 'Certainly you are one of them; for you are a Galilean'.

71. But he began to curse, and he swore an oath, 'I do not know this man you are talking about'.

72. At that moment the cock crowed for the second time. Then Peter remembered that Jesus had said to him, 'Before the cock crows twice, you will deny me three times'. And he broke down and wept.

Peter had been with Jesus from the beginning when Jesus called him. Like the other disciples, he had heard his teaching and seen his works of power. Usually listed first among the twelve, he receives special mention on occasions, when, in unique ways, he goes through highs and lows: -

- He was with Jesus when he raised to life the daughter of Jairus (5.37).
- It was he who had said to Jesus, 'You are the Messiah' (8.29), only, soon after, to receive the harshest rebuke in the gospel, 'Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things'. (8.33)
- Then came the transfiguration, when, speaking from a full heart he was able to say, 'It is good for us to be here'. (9.5)
- He had a sense of practicalities, asking, 'Look, we have left everything and followed you' (10.28), with its clear implication, 'What's in it for us?'
- There is something boyish, even childish, in his feeling that he had to comment on the fig tree, 'Rabbi, look! The fig tree that you cursed has withered'. (11.21)

Like the cock, Peter was to do some crowing of his own when he said, 'Even though all become deserters, I will not.... 'Even though I must die with you, I will not deny you'. (14.29, 31) Yet, frightened though he was, he had followed Jesus

into the high priest's courtyard, even if it was at a distance. (14.54)

Peter had personally been an eye-witness to many great events, with the result that he became convinced Jesus was the messiah, the one Israel had awaited for centuries. How could he not have been powerfully impressed by all he had seen and heard? For him, with his simple, good and generous heart, Jesus was a dream come true.

But now, what was he facing? The collapse of his dream. Jesus, the one who raised the daughter of Jairus to life, was now helpless, a prisoner, bound like a criminal, seemingly unable to do anything for himself. And God did not lift a finger to help him. Jesus, who had spoken of God as his Father and been on intimate terms with him, was now left to his fate.

Peter - and the other disciples also - was caught between two powerful, and seemingly contradictory, bodies of evidence. On the one hand, Jesus was the messiah, close to God; on the other, he was a prisoner, abandoned by God. How could both be true? Is it any wonder that Peter fell into confusion, had no idea what to think or do, and experienced a collapse of morale. Peter - strong, confident, impulsive, and unthinking - was distraught. Who could blame him? So, when put to the test, he panicked, lied,

and denied everything – three times. (vv.68, 70, 71)

But how different was the fate of Peter from that of Judas, the other betrayer! Both had done wrong and knew it; both broke down and repented. Peter wept, (v.72); Judas said, ‘I have sinned by betraying innocent blood’. (Matthew 27.4) But whereas ‘the Lord turned and looked at Peter’ (Luke 22.61) - and one can only assume it was with compassion - Judas met with indifference from the chief priests and the elders, ‘What is that to us? See to it yourself’. (Matthew 27.3-4) Was it that cold, uncaring retort, saying in effect - ‘It’s your problem; get out!’ - that pushed him to the edge, so that ‘he went and hanged himself’. (Matthew 27.5)

Jesus before Pilate: Mark 15.1-5

1. As soon as it was morning, the chief priests held a consultation with the elders and scribes and the whole council. They bound Jesus, led him away, and handed him over to Pilate.
2. Pilate asked him, ‘Are you the King of the Jews?’ He answered him, ‘You say so’.
3. Then the chief priests accused him of many things.
4. Pilate asked him again, ‘Have you no answer? See how many charges they bring against you’.
5. But Jesus made no further reply, so that Pilate was amazed.

V.1: Some scholars see the words ‘the chief priests, elders and scribes’ as an all-inclusive polemical phrase from a later period when relations had soured between the early Christians and the Jewish community from which they had sprung. As in 14.43, there is no mention of Pharisees.

V.2: Undoubtedly, Pontius Pilate, the Roman prefect, asked his question in a political sense. If Jesus had or did claim to be King of the Jews, that was a challenge to the authority of the Roman Empire which ruled Palestine. Rome would not for a moment tolerate such a claim by one of its subjects. If Jesus had answered, ‘Yes’, that would have been his death warrant.

Why did Jesus not answer ‘No’? He had rejected efforts at making him king. Seemingly because of its political overtones and the problems they could cause, he had avoided a claim to messiahship, and enjoined silence on his followers about it.

Pilate had not called Jesus king; it was the chief priests and elders who had said it. So why did Jesus reply, ‘You say so’, and what did it mean? Was it just an off-hand retort? That does not sound like Jesus’ way of speaking. Did Jesus in fact say it? Who provided the evidence that he did? Was it a projection back from the inscription

on the cross - 'the King of the Jews'? (15.26) Or did it mean, 'Yes, but not as you understand it'? Jesus, of course, was king, not just of the Jews but of all humanity, but not as kingship is ordinarily understood. This is clear from his answer in 14.61b-62 to the question of the high priest.

Vv.3-4: This vagueness sounds like a shotgun blast fired in the dark in the hope of hitting something. Clearly, it did not persuade Pilate.

For Jesus to have engaged in an argument with the chief priests might have created an impression of defensiveness, as if he had been caught out and was trying to escape from a self-made difficulty. By being silent, he implicitly said to his accusers, 'Just listen to yourselves; do you really believe what you are saying?' No one could say of Jesus, he 'doth protest too much, methinks'. (*Hamlet*, 3.2)

V.5: Pilate must indeed have been amazed at seeing someone accept death apparently so passively. Did Jesus feel that argument was futile, his condemnation pre-ordained, and therefore it was better to bring matters to a conclusion than to prolong the agony?

At this point, one might feel that Pilate, a Gentile, had more respect for the truth, and for

the person before him, than did Jesus' accusers. Perhaps Jesus' quiet dignity won his respect.

Pilate hands Jesus over to be crucified: Mark 15.6-15

6. Now at the festival he used to release a prisoner for them, anyone for whom they asked.

7. Now a man called Barabbas was in prison with the rebels who had committed murder during the insurrection.

8. So the crowd came and began to ask Pilate to do for them according to his custom.

9. Then he answered them, 'Do you want me to release for you the King of the Jews?'

10. For he realized that it was out of jealousy that the chief priests had handed him over.

11. But the chief priests stirred up the crowd to have him release Barabbas for them instead.

12. Pilate spoke to them again, 'Then what do you wish me to do with the man you call the King of the Jews?'

13. They shouted back, 'Crucify him!'

14. Pilate asked them, 'Why, what evil has he done?' But they shouted all the more, 'Crucify him!'

15. So Pilate, wishing to satisfy the crowd, released Barabbas for them; and after flogging Jesus, he handed him over to be crucified.

V.6: Roman penal law did not apply in the provinces, where governors usually followed

local custom. There is no evidence, outside of Mark and John (18.39), that such a custom existed in Palestine.

Vv.7-10: Mark shows Pilate as trying to find a way out of a dilemma: he believed that Jesus was innocent, and did not want to condemn him; but neither did he want to alienate the chief priests and elders; so, if the people could be persuaded to opt for the release of Jesus instead of Barabbas - which, on the face of it, should be easy - then Pilate would be off the hook. If the locals opted to release Jesus, that would make the chief priests and elders look foolish, and none would enjoy their discomfiture more than Pilate, who could say he was honouring the people's choice. But his plan backfired when the people opted for Barabbas' release instead.

It has been strongly suggested that Mark has contrived this incident, wanting to represent Pilate as a decent man pushed into doing something shameful by powerful and influential priests jealous of Jesus. (See vv. 10, 12, 13) Mark might have considered it politic to do that, at a time when Christians were growing in influence in the Roman Empire and probably wanted to be on good terms with it. The gospels do in fact show Rome in a good light.

V.11: The chief priests are again the villains of the piece; there is more than a hint of demonization in this.

V.12: Pilate tries again to persuade the crowd to release Jesus.

V.13: Jesus loses a “referendum” to Barabbas. This is the fickleness of a mob: ‘Hosanna!’ on Sunday, ‘Crucify’ on Friday.

V.14: The people don’t answer Pilate’s question, but reply in mob-speak. A mob does not care about truth or justice; it revels in its power and will have its way, regardless. When people surrender their individuality to a mob, decency, reason and humanity go out the window. And it does not take much to do that: the fiery speech of a demagogue, an electric power cut, the prospect of loot, the availability of a scapegoat, etc. In psychological terms, the movement may be from curiosity to irresponsibility, to the mass self-absolution of thinking, ‘They’re all at it’, to exultation in unexpected power, to a spurious copy-cat solidarity, and finally, to unthinking hatred.

V.15: Pilate takes the line of least resistance, and capitulates: give the crowd what they want.

Why the scourging? Some hold that it was done to hasten a condemned man’s death. Under Jewish law, it was limited to a maximum of forty lashes. (Deuteronomy 25.2-3) Roman law banned the scourging of its citizens, but recognized no limits in its use on non-citizens. The scourge was

made of leather strips tipped with metal, bone or glass. Scourging was sometimes fatal.

In Mark's view, the primary blame for Jesus' execution rests with the chief priests and elders. But that came to be seen differently by later Christians. Peter was to say, 'Jesus of Nazareth... this man, handed over to you according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of those outside the law'. (Acts 2.22-23)

And in the temple not long after Pentecost, he said, 'I know that you acted in ignorance, as did also your rulers. In this way God fulfilled what he had foretold through all the prophets that his Messiah would suffer'. (Acts 3.17-18) Likewise Paul, 'I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures'. (1 Corinthians 15.3) That phrase, 'the definite plan and foreknowledge of God' does not take from the responsibility of Judas, the Jewish leadership, or Pilate, but it sees them as being in some way agents of God's saving will. The death of Jesus, seen in terms both of the Father's will, and of Jesus' acceptance of that will, cannot be explained in terms of political wheeling and dealing among the power groups of the time; it was nothing less than an act of absolute love – love that gives, and love that accepts.

The soldiers mock Jesus: Mark 15.16-20

16. Then the soldiers led him into the courtyard of the palace (that is, the governor's headquarters and they called together the whole cohort.

17. And they clothed him in a purple cloak; and after twisting some thorns into a crown, they put it on him.

18. And they began saluting him, 'Hail, King of the Jews!'

19. They struck his head with a reed, spat upon him, and knelt down in homage to him.

20. After mocking him, they stripped him of the purple cloak and put his own clothes on him. Then they led him out to crucify him.

It has been suggested that this may have taken place before the events described in 15.6-15, the idea being that Pilate, convinced both of Jesus' innocence and of the dishonesty of his accusers, wanted to display him publicly in a humiliated condition, a mockery of kingship, thus making it obvious that he did not take seriously the notion that Jesus was in any sense a king.

Philo has an account, from a few years later, of how a crowd in Alexandria, Egypt, mocked Herod Agrippa I, who claimed the title of King of the Jews, by parading through the city, during a visit by Agrippa, an imbecile named Karabas dressed in pseudo-royal robes, to whom they

offered mock homage and acclamation. (In *Flaccus*, 6.35-40)

Mark is consciously tapping into words associated with royalty: palace, purple, crown, king, homage. He uses them to underline his point: Jesus is a king, but not as earthly kingship goes; he is the suffering servant of the Lord, the anointed one who, in his person, inaugurates the Reign (Kingdom) of God.

The passage is seen as fulfilling the prophecies about the Suffering Servant in Isaiah. (50.6; 53.3-5; see above under 14.65) Mark would have been aware of Isaiah 50.7-8, 'The Lord God helps me; therefore I have not been disgraced.... he who vindicates me is near'. The contemptuous treatment of Jesus is a prelude to his vindication.

The crucifixion of Jesus: Mark 15.21-32

21. They compelled a passer-by, who was coming in from the country, to carry his cross; it was Simon of Cyrene, the father of Alexander and Rufus.

22. Then they brought Jesus to the place called Golgotha (which means the place of a skull).

23. And they offered him wine mixed with myrrh; but he did not take it.

24. And they crucified him, and divided his clothes among them, casting lots to decide what each should take.

25. It was nine o'clock in the morning when they crucified him.

26. The inscription of the charge against him read, "The King of the Jews."

27. And with him they crucified two bandits, one on his right and one on his left.

28. And the scripture was fulfilled that says, 'And he was counted among the lawless'.

29. Those who passed by derided him, shaking their heads and saying, 'Aha! You who would destroy the temple and build it in three days,

30. save yourself, and come down from the cross!'

31. In the same way the chief priests, along with the scribes, were also mocking him among themselves and saying, 'He saved others; he cannot save himself.

32. Let the Messiah, the King of Israel, come down from the cross now, so that we may see and believe'. Those who were crucified with him also taunted him.

The text reads like a second-hand, rather than eye-witness, account.

V. 21: Simon was from Cyrene, which roughly corresponds to modern Libya in north Africa; there had been a Jewish colony near Benghazi for four centuries. Probably Jewish, Simon may have settled near Jerusalem. 'Coming in from the country' could mean returning from work in the fields. Beyond this mention, nothing is known of

Alexander. Rufus may, or more likely may not, be Rufus, the Roman Christian, later described as 'chosen in the Lord'. (Romans 16.13) The name means "red-haired", which could be a real name, or a nick-name. Simon, if he was Jewish, would have been an unwilling participant in the execution, as involvement would make him ritually unclean, excluding him from sharing in the Passover. He was 'compelled'; perhaps Jesus had been weakened by the flogging, crowning with thorns and sleepless night, and was not moving fast enough for soldiers who just wanted to get the matter over and done with.

V.22: Golgotha was just outside the north wall of the city, beside the gate leading to the old road to Joppa. It was an abandoned quarry used as a rubbish dump. Crucifixions were usually done by a roadside so as to serve as a warning to others. The reference to the skull is said to come from a supposed similarity in appearance between the rocky knoll of Golgotha and a skull. (The word Calvary comes from the Latin, *calva*, meaning a skull.)

V.23: Alcohol dulls pain and was used as an anaesthetic. It was offered to criminals to ease their suffering, perhaps in fidelity to Proverbs, 'Give... wine to those in bitter distress'. (31.6) Jesus did not take it, maybe because he wanted to drink the cup of suffering to the full. (See 10.38-39; 14.36) He had also said, 'I will never again

drink of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God'. (14.25)

V.24: Crucifixion was originally a Persian mode of execution which the Romans adopted. It was carried out in various ways, from simply nailing a person to a convenient tree, to impalement on a sharpened pole, or on beams in the shape of an X, a T, or the image commonly seen today on crucifixes. In the latter case, the condemned man carried the horizontal beam, which was then laid on the ground and nailed to another at right angles to it; the victim was nailed to the conjoined beams which were then hoisted into a vertical position before dropping into a prepared slot which held it in place.

Crucifixion was among the most cruel of forms of execution. Often the condemned person took several days to die, the actual cause of death usually being suffocation, when the victim was no longer able to lift himself up to breathe; it could also be shock, loss of blood, or thirst. Sometimes a wooden block on which the victim sat astride was added to the beam to give him some upward leverage, but that probably prolonged the agony. The foot-rest common to crucifixes seen in churches was unknown in ancient times. Crucifixion was seen as not only cruel but degrading, as the victim was usually in full view of the public and naked, evoking images of an animal hide staked out to dry. A source of embarrassment to early Christians

because of its association with the worst forms of criminality - ‘anyone hung on a tree is under God’s curse’ (Deuteronomy 21.23) - they tended to play it down.

The division of Jesus’ clothes by the soldiers would be the normal sharing of spoils. Christians would later come to see it as fulfilling Psalm 22, ‘They stare and gloat over me; they divide my clothes among themselves, and for my clothing they cast lots’. (vv.17-18)

Mark’s restraint in describing the crucifixion is striking; he states simply: ‘they crucified him’. Had he wanted to, a writer of his ability could have hyped up the story, tabloid-style, with gore on the pages. But he didn’t; he is less concerned with *what* Jesus suffered than with *who* he is, and *why* he suffered.

V.25: Mark has an eye for details of time: see 14.72; 15.1, 33, 34, though, in them, the repetition of three, or its multiples, suggest another purpose - possibly liturgical - related to a commemoration of the Passion by a Christian community.

V.26: An inscription was customary; it bore the victim’s name, place of origin, and crime. It was meant to serve as a warning. Mark draws attention to Jesus being crucified as “King of the Jews”, that is, as Messiah. The inscription would have come from Pilate and was, most likely, a

gesture of contempt by him towards the Jews, who could not complain, since it was the accusation they had made against Jesus to Pilate. (15.2)

V.27: George MacLeod of the Iona community has a powerful saying, 'Jesus was not crucified on an altar in a church between two candles, but on a cross in a rubbish dump between two thieves'. The two 'bandits' may have been nationalist insurrectionists.

V.28: This verse is omitted from most texts. It is seen as a later addition inserted for the purpose of fulfilling Isaiah, 'he poured himself out to death, and was numbered with the transgressors; yet he bore the sins of many, and made intercession for the transgressors'. (53.12)

V.29: Psalm 22 reads, 'I am a worm, and not human; scorned by others, and despised by the people. All who see me mock at me; they shake their heads; 'Commit your cause to the Lord; let him deliver – let him rescue the one in whom he delights'. (vv.6-8; see also Mark 1.11)

The second part of the verse reflects the accusation made about Jesus to the chief priests and elders: 'We heard him say, "I will destroy this temple that is made with hands, and in three days I will build another, not made with hands"'. (14.58)

Vv.29-31: If it is true that everyone loves a winner, it is also cruelly true that people are often ready perversely to enjoy the suffering of a loser; it's called *Schadenfreude*. There is something particularly shameful in mocking a dying person, taunting him with insult, but it was, and is, common where there are public executions.

In Nigeria, in the 1960's, public executions by machine-gunning were frequent; they were attended by townspeople, and by expatriate teachers and nurses, the latter given reserved armchairs with a clear view of the power poles to which the condemned men were tied, and provided with cool beers while they watched the spectacle.

In Africa, cases of so-called "instant justice" (usually instant injustice) are not uncommon. Someone caught stealing may find himself quickly set upon by an angry crowd, and stoned or burned to death. The person might be innocent, a victim of misunderstanding, or mentally ill, but there is no thought of proportion between crime and punishment. I know of a case where a man was pounded to death with concrete blocks for stealing a tin of shoe polish. I saw a prostitute being publicly beaten by soldiers – her clients – for taking a blanket in lieu of unpaid-for services, while other women jeered, danced, and clapped at her humiliation.

Vv.31-32: The chief priests, scribes and elders join in mocking Jesus, saying, 'He saved others; he cannot save himself', and 'Let the Messiah, the King of Israel, come down from the cross now, so that we may see and believe'. This recalls what was written in *Wisdom*'s description of the ungodly, who say of the just man, in 2.17-20: -,

17. 'Let us see if his words are true, and let us test what will happen at the end of his life;

18. for if the righteous man is God's child, he will help him, and will deliver him from the hands of his adversaries.

19. Let us test him with insult and torture, so that we may find out how gentle he is, and make trial of his forbearance.

20. Let us condemn him to a shameful death, for, according to what he says, he will be protected'.

Even his fellow victims join in taunting Jesus: 'Those who were crucified with him also taunted him'. (v.32) Sadly, that, too, is true to form.

The death of Jesus: Mark 15.33-41

33. When it was noon, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon.

34. At three o'clock Jesus cried out with a loud voice, '*Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?*' which means, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?'

35. When some of the bystanders heard it, they said, 'Listen, he is calling for Elijah'.

36. And someone ran, filled a sponge with sour wine, put it on a stick, and gave it to him to drink, saying, 'Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to take him down'.

37. Then Jesus gave a loud cry and breathed his last.

38. And the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom.

39. Now when the centurion, who stood facing him, saw that in this way he cried out and breathed his last, he said, 'Truly this man was God's Son!'

40. There were also women looking on from a distance; among them were Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James the younger and of Joses, and Salome.

41. These used to follow him and provided for him when he was in Galilee; and there were many other women who had come up with him to Jerusalem.

V.33: The prophet Amos had written, 'On that day, says the Lord God, I will make the sun go down at noon, and darken the earth in broad daylight'. (8.9) The day in question is the Day of the Lord, the day of judgment, when he takes vengeance on the infidelity of Israel. Was there an eclipse, or a sandstorm? Hardly; the darkness and gloom are more likely in the hearts of the witnesses.

V.34: Jesus quotes the start of Psalm 22, and therefore, by implication, the whole psalm, just as Christians who speak of the “Our Father” mean the whole prayer, not just the first two words. It reads: -

1. My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?
Why are you so far from helping me, from the
words of my groaning?

2. O my God, I cry by day, but you do not
answer; and by night, but find no rest.

3. Yet you are holy, enthroned on the praises of
Israel.

4. In you our ancestors trusted; they trusted, and
you delivered them.

5. To you they cried, and were saved; in you
they trusted, and were not put to shame.

6. But I am a worm, and not human; scorned by
others, and despised by the people.

7. All who see me mock at me; they make
mouths at me, they shake their heads;

8. ‘Commit your cause to the Lord; let him
deliver - let him rescue the one in whom he
delights!’

9. Yet it was you who took me from the womb;
you kept me safe on my mother's breast.

10. On you I was cast from my birth, and since
my mother bore me you have been my God.

11. Do not be far from me, for trouble is near and
there is no one to help.

12. Many bulls encircle me, strong bulls of
Bashan surround me;

13. they open wide their mouths at me,
like a ravening and roaring lion.
14. I am poured out like water, and all my bones
are out of joint; my heart is like wax; it is melted
within my breast;
15. my mouth is dried up like a potsherd, and my
tongue sticks to my jaws; you lay me in the dust
of death.
16. For dogs are all around me; a company of
evildoers encircles me. My hands and feet have
shrivelled;
17. I can count all my bones. They stare and gloat
over me;
18. they divide my clothes among themselves,
and for my clothing they cast lots.
19. But you, O Lord, do not be far away! O my
help, come quickly to my aid!
20. Deliver my soul from the sword, my life from
the power of the dog!
21. Save me from the mouth of the lion! From
the horns of the wild oxen you have rescued me.
22. I will tell of your name to my brothers and
sisters; in the midst of the congregation I will
praise you:
23. You who fear the Lord, praise him! All you
offspring of Jacob, glorify him; stand in awe of
him, all you offspring of Israel!
24. For he did not despise or abhor the affliction
of the afflicted; he did not hide his face from me,
but heard when I cried to him.

25. From you comes my praise in the great congregation; my vows I will pay before those who fear him.

26. The poor shall eat and be satisfied; those who seek him shall praise the Lord. May your hearts live forever!

27. All the ends of the earth shall remember and turn to the Lord; and all the families of the nations shall worship before you.

28. For dominion belongs to the Lord, and he rules over the nations.

29. To him, indeed, shall all who sleep in the earth bow down; before him shall bow all who go down to the dust, and I shall live for him.

30. Posterity will serve him; future generations will be told about the Lord,

31. and proclaim his deliverance to a people yet unborn, saying that he has done it.

The psalm is a powerful, heartfelt plea for help from one in deep distress, and also a celebration of hope and trust in God who is faithful. It expresses the suffering and abandonment of Jesus, but also his unbroken belief that God would deliver him. It ends with the universalist vision of future generations, a people yet unborn, who will be told about the Lord and have his deliverance proclaimed to them.

V.35: Matthew gives Jesus' cry in v.34 as 'Eli, Eli', which could have been misinterpreted as an abbreviation of Eliyah (in English, Elijah). This

may have been nothing more than a misunderstanding on the part of the bystanders, who anticipated the coming of Elijah: 'I will send you the prophet Elijah before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes'. (Malachi 4.5)

V.36: As in v.23, this was probably meant as a gesture of compassion, but later Christians saw it as fulfilling Psalm 69, where it is meant to torment a suffering person, 'for my thirst they gave me vinegar to drink'. (v.21) Elijah was popularly believed to relieve those in need. (See Sirach 48.1-11)

V.37: 'a loud cry', seemingly without words, perhaps a last gasp of pain, or an involuntary exhalation.

V.38: A curtain hung before the Holy of Holies - the inner *sanctum* - of the temple which only the high priest entered, and that just once a year. It is probably this curtain which is meant. The tearing of the curtain symbolically marks the end of the temple, already foreshadowed by Jesus in his cursing the barren fig tree, and driving the money changers out of the temple (11.12-21); and in his foretelling of the destruction of the temple (13.1-8). Mark may be saying that access to God is now permanently available to all through the death of Jesus. It anticipates, 'God's temple in heaven was opened'. (Revelation 11.19) There are no admission gates around the cross.

V.39: The question of the high priest – ‘Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed one?’ (14.61) - is here answered by the centurion. What the supreme representatives of the Jewish religion failed to see, the Gentile soldier saw. This verse may be taken as a climax of Mark’s gospel; it is what he set out to write about, what he wanted to establish in the minds of his readers. The Gentile sees the significance of the cross.

V.40: Some Christians saw the first part of this verse as fulfilling the psalm, ‘My friends and companions stand aloof from my affliction, and my neighbours stand far off’. (38.11) Women were not allowed to stand near a place of execution, but they, and the ‘many other women who had come up with him to Jerusalem’ (v.41) had come as close as they could, faithful to the end. The contrast with Jesus’ male followers is sharp.

There has been a long-standing tradition that Mary Magdalene was a reformed prostitute. (Think of Magdalen homes, etc.) This may have had its origin in a homily on Luke 7.36-50, given by Pope Gregory the Great on 14 September 591. In it he said, ‘She whom Luke calls the sinful woman, whom John calls Mary, we believe to be the Mary from whom seven devils were ejected, according to Mark. And what did these seven devils signify, if not all the vices? ... It is clear,

brothers, that the woman previously used the ointment to perfume her flesh in forbidden acts.’ (*Homily 33*) But there is no basis for linking Mary of Magdala with the un-named woman of Luke 7.36-50 who anointed Jesus, nor with Mary, the sister of Martha and Lazarus, who anointed him in Bethany, nor that this latter Mary was a sinner. (John 12.1-3, 7)

Elaborate conclusions have been drawn from this misidentification, such as that it was orchestrated to discredit the apocryphal *Gospel of Mary Magdalene*. More likely, she was the Mary Magdalene ‘from whom he had cast out seven demons’. (16.9) Magdala is the name of a town on the western shore of Lake Galilee.

These women are present at the death and the burial (v.47) of Jesus; it is they also who go to the tomb on the morning of resurrection. (16.1)

V.41: They used to follow him, that is to say, they were disciples.

The burial of Jesus: Mark 15.42-47

42. When evening had come, and since it was the day of Preparation, that is, the day before the Sabbath,

43. Joseph of Arimathea, a respected member of the council, who was also himself waiting

expectantly for the kingdom of God, went boldly to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus.

44. Then Pilate wondered if he were already dead; and summoning the centurion, he asked him whether he had been dead for some time.

45. When he learned from the centurion that he was dead, he granted the body to Joseph.

46. Then Joseph bought a linen cloth, and taking down the body, wrapped it in the linen cloth, and laid it in a tomb that had been hewn out of the rock. He then rolled a stone against the door of the tomb.

47. Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Joseph saw where the body was laid.

Vv.42-43: Mark's chronology is uncertain; it is possible that the day of preparation for the Sabbath and the Passover coincided that year. It seems unlikely that an observant Jew like Joseph of Arimathea would have done any of the following actions on either of those days.

Jewish custom required the burial of criminals on the day of their execution, and Sabbath or Passover would add urgency to this: 'When someone is convicted of a crime punishable by death and is executed, and you hang him on a tree, his corpse must not remain all night upon the tree; you shall bury him that same day, for anyone hung on a tree is under God's curse. You must not defile the land that the Lord your God is

giving you for possession'. (Deuteronomy 21.22-23) Custom also prohibited their immediate burial in a family grave; instead they would be buried in a common grave under the authority of the courts, and re-interred a year later in the family grave. Perhaps, as a member of the council (the *Sanhedrin*), Joseph had responsibility for the criminals' grave, and therefore went to Pilate to ask for Jesus' body. The traditional site of Jesus' burial place – the Holy Sepulchre – is very close to Calvary.

Mark portrays Joseph as sympathetic to Jesus, but his descriptive phrase 'who was also himself waiting expectantly for the kingdom of God', could apply to any pious Jew.

Going to Pilate would involve entering his court-yard, and Joseph would thereby incur ritual defilement. Pilate had his residence (*praetorium*) in the Antonia fortress which adjoined the north-western wall of the temple.

Vv.44-45: It was important to the gospel writers to make it clear that Jesus was truly dead, not merely unconscious or comatose. The word translated here, and in v.45, as "body", is more accurately rendered as "carcase" or "cadaver", a brutal term probably chosen to underline Jesus' state. John, writing later than Mark, adds the medically significant detail that 'one of the soldiers pierced his [Jesus'] side with a spear,

and at once blood and water came out'. (19.34)
This would confirm Jesus' death.

V.46: There is no mention at this point of an anointing of the body. In fact, the disciples of Jesus have no part at all in his burial.

The stone rolled against the door of the tomb, was heavy, like a millstone; it rolled in a groove and dropped into a slot, effectively sealing the tomb. Examples of this may be seen in Ras Shamra, Syria, and in village walls in the central plateau of Madagascar.

V.47: The women note the place of burial, and it is they who later go to the tomb to anoint the corpse. Mark may have inserted this to ensure there would be no confusion between bodies in a common grave. Luke goes further, saying that they laid Jesus' body 'in a rock-hewn tomb where no one had ever been laid', (23.53), while Matthew describes it as Joseph's 'own new tomb'. (27.60)

Mark presents the burial as a rushed affair, done under the pressure of deadlines, with the minimum of ceremony or dignity.

Jesus' empty tomb: Mark 16.1-8

1. When the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome

bought spices, so that they might go and anoint him.

2. And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb.

3. They had been saying to one another, ‘Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?’

4. When they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had already been rolled back.

5. As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side; and they were alarmed.

6. But he said to them, ‘Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him.

7. But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you’.

8. So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.

No one actually saw Jesus rise from death; what they saw was the empty tomb. After his resurrection, Jesus was seen only by disciples.

Vv.1-4: The anointing of a corpse was allowed on the Sabbath, but buying was not. The three women intended to anoint Jesus’ body, but were unable to do so; in any event, it had already been

done by the woman at Bethany (14.8). One might ask why they bought spices and went to the tomb, believing they would be unable to do the anointing because of the stone. Was it that they believed that love finds a way?

V.5: The word employed here for ‘a young man’ is used for an angel in 2 Maccabees 3.26, 33. The ‘white robe’ suggests the ‘dazzling white’ clothing of Jesus at the transfiguration (9.3), and the ‘splendid dress’ in Maccabees. Mark is not concerned with sartorial elegance, but with trying to communicate something of the incommunicable. The mention of an angel is meant to emphasize God’s activity.

V.6: At many key moments throughout the bible, phrases equivalent to ‘Do not be alarmed’, or ‘Do not fear’ are employed; the latter is the most frequently used expression in the bible.

With stark simplicity, the angel states a fundamental of the Christian faith: Jesus was crucified; he is risen. Death was not the end, but a stage along the way. He has been raised by the power of God.

V.7: The women are given the mission of announcing the good news of Jesus’ resurrection, the primary proclamation of the Christian faith. They are sent to the disciples and Peter – a sign perhaps of the latter’s rehabilitation. They are

‘apostles to the apostles’, as one of the fathers of the church has it. To be a witness to the resurrection was a requirement in an apostle; and they were the first. But their role was later edited out: see 1 Corinthians 15, ‘he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, and... he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve...’ (vv.4-5)

Nikolai Ivanovich Bukharin was a leader in the Bolshevik coup of October 1917. He was editor of *Pravda*, the Communist Party newspaper, and a member of the Politburo. He wrote on economics and social science. One day in April 1930, he went to Kiev in the Ukraine to address a gathering on the topic of atheism. He spoke for an hour, throwing every argument he could find against belief in God, adding insults for good measure. At the end, he asked if there were any questions. There was silence. He looked from left to right and waited. Still silence. Then a man rose from the audience, walked forward to the platform, went to the microphone, and shouted into it, ‘*Christos voskres!*’ (Christ is risen!) This was the Easter greeting of the Russian Orthodox Church, and had been used for centuries. It was familiar to everyone in the hall. *En masse* the crowd rose as one and shouted out the response, ‘*Christos Voskres!*’ with a roar that sounded like the rumble of thunder. In 1938, Bukharin found himself on the wrong side of Stalin, and was executed for treason.

Jesus had said to them, ‘After I am raised up, I will go before you to Galilee’. (14.28) It is again the significant meeting place and starting point of mission. There the disciples’ faith will be confirmed, and from there they will be sent out. (16.15)

V.8: Mark three times describes the women’s terror. (vv.5, 6, 8) Christians have become so accustomed to Jesus’ resurrection that its impact has been diminished, and we are unable to grasp how amazing and terrifying it must have been. The women said nothing to anyone, perhaps afraid of being thought hysterical, if not mad, or simply immobilized by amazement.

Verse 8 constitutes the end of Mark’s gospel, perhaps because a portion of his original manuscript was lost. The shorter ending, given below without verse enumeration, is regarded by all scholars as having been written later, by another hand, and in a different style. It may have been written because the ending at v.8 was seen as strange, - ending with ‘they were afraid’ - and abrupt.

But, unlike Paul, Mark does not theologize; he is content to tell his story. Perhaps he did end at v.8, having there brought to a climax his account of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, the Son of God, letting it speak for itself.

The shorter ending of Mark, after 16.8: -

And all that had been commanded them they told briefly to those around Peter. And afterward Jesus himself sent out through them, from east to west, the sacred and imperishable proclamation of eternal salvation.

The longer ending, 16.9-20, is almost certainly not by Mark; it would not make sense for him to write 16.1-8 and follow it with vv.9-11. It is mostly written in a different style, lacking his vitality and attention to detail. Though probably written some time in the second century, it is accepted as canonical.

Jesus appears to Mary Magdalene: 16.9-11

9. Now after he rose early on the first day of the week, he appeared first to Mary Magdalene, from whom he had cast out seven demons.

10. She went out and told those who had been with him, while they were mourning and weeping.

11. But when they heard that he was alive and had been seen by her, they would not believe it.

V.11: 'They would not believe' - pointed out three times (vv.11, 13, 14) - is strange. Had the disciples not been told three times by Jesus that he would rise from the dead? (8.31-32a; 9.30-32; 10.32-34) Had they not seen Jesus raise to life the

daughter of Jairus? (5.21-24, 35-43) Had the three most privileged among them, Peter, James and John, not questioned among themselves what “rising from the dead” could mean? (See 9.9-10) Why then the disbelief? Perhaps it is a matter of which disciples are in question; some were present at some events, others not.

Jesus appears to two disciples: 16.12-13

12. After this he appeared in another form to two of them, as they were walking into the country.

13. And they went back and told the rest, but they did not believe them.

This story is reminiscent of the account in Luke of the walk by two disciples from Jerusalem to Emmaus. (24.13-35)

V.12: ‘he appeared in another form’ is a reminder that Jesus was resurrected, not resuscitated; his rising from death was not a matter of taking up where he left off, as if his passion and death were no more than an interruption. After dying and rising, Jesus Christ the Lord is qualitatively different from what he was before.

V.13: like vv.11 and 14, it expresses the disbelief of the disciples (or apostles). Reluctant witnesses are more reliable than enthusiasts; when they are convinced, their evidence is more persuasive.

Jesus commissions the disciples: 16.14-18

14. Later he appeared to the eleven themselves as they were sitting at the table; and he upbraided them for their lack of faith and stubbornness, because they had not believed those who saw him after he had risen.

15. And he said to them, ‘Go into all the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation.

16. The one who believes and is baptized will be saved; but the one who does not believe will be condemned.

17. And these signs will accompany those who believe: by using my name they will cast out demons; they will speak in new tongues;

18. they will pick up snakes in their hands, and if they drink any deadly thing, it will not hurt them; they will lay their hands on the sick, and they will recover’.

V.14: The twelve has become the eleven, since the departure of Judas. The meeting place, as often before, is a meal, a major element in Jewish life.

He upbraided them: the word used here is a powerful one, the same as that for the abuse heaped on Jesus on the cross by the two bandits, where it is translated as ‘taunted’.

V.15: The note of universalism is evident here, even where it comes from the pen of someone other than Mark. Maybe it is a direct quotation from Jesus. The gospel - the good news - is for 'all the world... the whole creation.' This command should have undermined racism, based as it is on the premise that all people have one divine origin and one destiny, namely, to be children of God. Peter seems to have got the message alright: 'Then Peter began to speak to them: "I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him."' (Acts 10.34-35) But Christians were slow to learn it and practise it.

The verse also suggests a step further than anything previously said: the gospel is for all creation, not just all people. Paul, in chapter 8 of his letter to the Romans, speaks lyrically of creation's hope of being set free: -

19. 'For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God;
20. for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope
21. that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God.
22. We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labour pains until now;

23. and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies’.

What a pity that people in the Judeo-Christian tradition have been so far behind many others in their respect for non-human life! A visitor to a Hindu or Buddhist country cannot but notice the different attitude to animal and insect life; it is treated with respect, and it responds with an abundance of diversity and numbers, and a noticeable absence of fear. We have often acted as if the Christian faith gave us a license to plunder and exploit nature at will. We took our cue from Genesis, where God said to Noah and his sons, ‘Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth. The fear and dread of you shall rest on every animal of the earth, and on every bird of the air, on everything that creeps on the ground, and on all the fish of the sea; into your hand they are delivered. Every moving thing that lives shall be food for you; and just as I gave you the green plants, I give you everything’. (9.1-3)

For much of our history, Christians have been bad news for creation. From the colonial era of the past to the economic neo-colonialism of today, it was, and is, the Western world, coming from a Judeo-Christian tradition, that is the great exploiter of the world’s resources. Where is the good news for creation in that? Is it enough to talk of stewardship, especially as we have been

such rapacious “stewards”? Perhaps we need to move beyond the notion of stewardship and acknowledge that humans are part of nature, not above and beyond it in a kind of control centre, such as, for example claiming a right to patent plant life, to control particular plant forms, and demand money for their use.

V.16: Faith and baptism are necessary to be saved, i.e., for salvation. Faith: What do you give your heart to? What do you believe in? Believe in nothing and you’ll have an empty life; if you don’t stand for something, you’ll fall for anything. What is it that motivates you, gets you up in the morning, holds your attention, is your life-long passion? The only goal or centre worthy of the person’s unconditional and total commitment is God. (Committed Nazis, as distinct from the opportunists and hangers-on, gave Hitler a degree of dedication which should have been given to none but God; the result for them and their country was destruction.)

Baptism: it is an “immersion” into the life of God, a gift from God that brings about a mutual indwelling. The gift given in baptism is the gift of God’s own life. Baptism is admission to a community of faith, to a tradition. Among other things, it says that life is not about ourselves; it is about something greater than us; it says that we are called to grow out of, and beyond, ourselves and into God’s life. (Citizenship is an analogy, as

long as we acknowledge that ‘Every analogy limps’, as the Scholastics used to say.)

Salvation: It is deliverance from anything that diminishes people’s humanity, that holds them back from living up to their full potential. Jesus, the unique mediator between God and humanity, is the working model of what a full human being is. ‘There is a God-shaped gap in the heart of humanity’, as Jean-Paul Sartre said - surprisingly, as he was an atheist.

The second part of the verse means not simply failure to believe, but positively refusing to believe, to shut the door of the heart against it, to refuse even to consider the possibility of faith being true. That act of wilful blindness is a self-induced condemnation. God invites; the person responds, one way or another; and not to respond is itself a response.

V.17-18: This is a problem; it is hard to find supporting evidence for these assertions.

The ascension of Jesus: 16.19-20

19. So then the Lord Jesus, after he had spoken to them, was taken up into heaven and sat down at the right hand of God.

20. And they went out and proclaimed the good news everywhere, while the Lord worked with

them and confirmed the message by the signs that accompanied it.

V.19: Verse 9 began with ‘now’, v.12 with ‘after’, v. 14 with ‘later’, and v.19 with ‘so then’, suggesting a progression to a climax in which Jesus, having completed his mission on earth, goes to God his Father in heaven.

This is in Mark’s style, where highly significant events are described in the simplest terms: ‘they crucified him’ in 15.25; ‘he has been raised’ in 16.6; and, he ‘was taken up into heaven’. (v.19) The writer does not say where, when, or how this latter happened. I don’t think the ascension was as if Jesus went up in an invisible elevator; it’s imagery. Jesus came from his Father, lived on earth in fulfilment of his mission; he suffered and died, rose from death and then returned to his Father. Where he has gone, we hope to follow, because he said, ‘I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself’. (John 12.32) There ‘he always lives to make intercession for us’ (Hebrews 7.25)

The phrase ‘sat down at the right hand of God’, later incorporated into Christian professions of faith, is a figure of speech: Jesus is God’s “right-hand man”.

V.20: The Christian faith did indeed spread remarkably quickly after this period. Helped by the dispersal of the Jews, and the presence of Jewish communities throughout the Middle East and the Mediterranean basin, the faith spread from Palestine which had a key position at the cross-roads of Asia, Africa and Europe. Despite later persecution, the Roman Empire helped, too, by its relatively peaceful condition, its systems of communication, law and government. The Christian faith moved into a spiritual vacuum where belief in the gods of Greece and Rome was terminal, and into a social situation where slaves were looking for new freedom. The Christian faith, in its early years, was an urban religion – the word “pagan” literally means a person who lives in the countryside – and was spread substantially by soldiers of the empire, by sailors and merchants. The early Christians experienced the faith as a source of meaning, purpose and liberation. Perhaps the most effective of ‘the signs that accompanied’ the good news was the enthusiasm of the early Christians.