

The Gospel According to Saint Mark



Bible Notes
January-March 2019

50p

The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

Today, the eighth day of Christmas, is the day that Jesus would have formally been given His Name, the Name given to Joseph by the angel. Jesus means something like the LORD is our Saviour. Emmanuel means God with us. Jesus is Good News, good news for the world, good news for all believers, good news for you and me. If we had a new year's resolution, might it not be to share Jesus the Good News with our families, our friends and our neighbours?

To the name of our
salvation,
Laud and honour let us pay,
Which for many a generation
Hid in God's foreknowledge
lay;
But with holy exultation
We may sing aloud today.

Speaks like music to the ear;
Who in prayer this name
beseecheth
Sweetest comfort findeth
near;
Who its perfect wisdom
reacheth,
Heavenly joy possesseth
here.

Jesus is the name we
treasure;
Name beyond what words
can tell;
Name of gladness, name of
pleasure,
Ear and heart delighting
well;
Name of sweetness, passing
measure,
Saving us from sin and hell.

Jesus is the name exalted
Over every other name;
In this name, whene'er
assaulted,
we can put our foes to
shame;
Strength to them who else
had halted,
Eyes to blind, and feet to
lame.

'Tis the name for adoration,
Name for songs of victory,
Name for holy meditation
In this vale of misery,
Name for joyful veneration
By the citizens on high.

Therefore we in love adoring
This most blessed Name
revere,
Holy Jesu, Thee imploring
So to write it in us here,
That hereafter, heavenward
soaring,
We may sing with angels
there.

'Tis the name that whoso
preacheth

January 2nd

Mark 1 vv 2&3

This is the 32nd anniversary of my institution and induction as Rector of Cuxton & Halling. Intrinsic to that service is the belief that I was called by God to this ministry. All Christians have a calling. God has prepared us for a purpose, just as He prepared John the Baptist to prepare the way for Jesus. We all have different gifts and different opportunities. That is because we each have our own part to play. Whatever our part, however, we are all called to proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom of God – by what we say, by what we do, and, above all by what we are.

It may well be that nowadays, for various reasons, we feel as if we are crying in the wilderness, but, as a wise man said, what God requires of us is that we are faithful, not that we are successful. Success is down to Him. Faith is what He requires of us.

January 3rd

Mark 1 vv vv 4&5

There went out unto him all the land.

I wish. Mostly, I feel that we only get the chance to preach to the faithful few. I'm writing this just after Remembrance Sunday when our churches were full. It is said that Remembrance has overtaken Easter as the 2nd highest church attendance after Christmas at number 1. There is a hunger for what only God can supply. Our task, as Christians in Britain, is to be conduits of His grace. We need to proclaim Jesus in such a way as to assist genuine seekers after God to find Him despite the difficulties they may have with the way Christianity is often perceived and has been presented, without in any way detracting from the counsel of God.

January 4th

Mark 1 vv 6-8

John's attire and mode of life don't look very attractive. Maybe, they did make people take notice of him as a holy man. People may or may not find you and me attractive. But, like John, we don't seek to point people to ourselves. We seek to point people to Jesus. He gives what is infinitely greater than anything we have to offer, and, of course, it is His gift of the Spirit which enables us to preach the Gospel.

January 5th

Mark 1 vv 9-11

One of the points about the Baptism of Jesus is that He is baptized in solidarity with us. Jesus is God with us, the Word made flesh. God gives Him the Spirit and acknowledges Him as His Son. Baptized into His Body, the Church, we are both filled with the Spirit and adopted as the children of God. That is why, with Jesus, we pray, *Our Father, which art in heaven.*

January 6th (Epiphany)

Mark 1 vv 12 & 13

The urgent task is to proclaim the Kingdom of God and yet Jesus disappears into the wilderness for forty days – driven by the Holy Spirit, tempted of Satan. Matthew and Luke tell us more about the actual temptations He endured. We need to receive if we are to give. We need to spend time with God if we are to be effective Christians in our every day lives. Batteries need to be recharged. Time is not wasted in private prayer and contemplation. Reading God's Word is intrinsic to our lives as Christians. The fellowship of the Church, including her public worship, is essential to our thriving as spiritual beings capable of fulfilling our own calling proclaiming the Kingdom of God. Time with the Lord is not an optional extra for those who are not too busy with other things! Note that resisting Satan's temptations is part of the way Jesus prepares for ministry. God uses our trials and tribulations to make us better people. (See Romans 5).

O worship the Lord in the beauty of
holiness
Bow down before Him His glory
proclaim
With gold of obedience and incense of
lowliness
Kneel and adore Him the Lord is His
name

Low at His feet lay thy burden of
carefulness
High on His heart He will bear it for
thee
Comfort thy sorrows and answer thy
prayerfulness
Guiding thy steps as may best for thee
be

Fear not to enter His courts in the
slenderness
Of the poor wealth thou wouldst reckon
as thine

Truth in its beauty and love in its
tenderness
These are the offerings to lay on His
shrine

These though we bring them in
Trembling and fearfulness
He will accept for the name that is dear
Mornings of joy give for evenings of
tearfulness
Trust for our trembling and hope for
our fear

O worship the Lord in the beauty of
holiness
Bow down before Him His glory
proclaim
With gold of obedience and incense of
lowliness
Kneel and adore Him the Lord is His
name

January 7th

Mark 1 v 14

We sometimes gloss over the fact that John was put in prison at around the beginning of the preaching of Jesus. Later, he would be beheaded in the prison at the instigation of Herodias' daughter Salome. It is important to remember that many Christians in the world today are persecuted for their faith. They risk prosecution if they meet for worship. They may not possess a bible. They are not allowed to share their faith with others. In some countries, people converting to Christ face death or imprisonment. Milder sanctions in some places include excluding Christians from education or job opportunities. There are two lessons for us here. The first is to support our persecuted brothers and sisters in prayer and in whatever other ways we can. The other is not to treat our own faith lightly. We are very privileged and ought to be very thankful that we can practise our faith freely in this country. Churches are open. The Holy Communion is celebrated openly. Bibles are freely on sale in many different versions and editions. The worst that is likely to happen to us is that we might be laughed at. These are opportunities to be grasped, not reasons to take it all for granted.

January 8th

Mark 1 v15

The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand.

The coming of Jesus and the proclamation of God's Kingdom are all God's plan. The way for Jesus had been prepared in the Law and the Prophets – what we call the Old Testament – and latterly by John the Baptist. Some people think that it is significant that Jesus came when the Romans had enforced a kind of peace and built all those roads which missionaries would use to travel all over the Mediterranean world. God's Kingdom is imminent. It is always imminent in that we are called to live as though the Day of the LORD were today, which, in one sense, it always is. We have eternal life. We are now citizens of heaven. And yet we await the consummation.

Your part and mine is to work with Jesus in God's plan for the redemption of the cosmos. We don't have to be successful. God is inevitably successful. What we have to be is faithful. *Hallowed be thy Name.*

January 9th

Mark 1 vv 16-18

Perhaps because it comes first and because it was a good story for our Sunday school teachers to tell us, the call of the fishermen seems to epitomise for us what it means to be called to follow Jesus and to become missionaries and evangelists. Andrew and Simon leave their nets, their every day lives and follow Him in a completely new way of living. Some people are called like that today. Indeed, we pray for vocations to ordained ministry and other particular and special callings within the Church. There's a lot to do if we're to bring in the Kingdom of God. There's plenty of work to do. God calls people to be faithful in their calling. For many of us, however, our calling is to be faithful where we are now. I don't say that as an excuse for people whom God is really calling to leave their homes and their existing careers to serve Him as priests or missionaries or whatever but who themselves would rather stay put and serve Him where they are comfortable. It is, however, the case that all Christians are called by Jesus to work for Him in the world and, for many, that does mean doing so as part of an ordinary, everyday life. Your calling might be prayer, the way you bring up your children, the service you offer in your local Church and/or the wider community in which you live, the way you do the work you're paid for, your witness to friends. We are all called by God. *Thy kingdom come.*

January 10th

Mark 1 vv 19&20

They left their father Zebedee in the ship. This is very challenging for Christians. The Bible values family life very highly. Adam and Eve are one flesh. One of the commandments is *Honour your father and your mother.* On the other hand, Jesus demands that we offer Him greater love even than we offer our families. Where our apparent duty to family conflicts with our duty to God, it is God Who must come first. I should say that the two most powerful loves in our lives are to God and to our families. I'm not comfortable with the notion that devotion to one's country or to some cause or to one's own career should be greater than that to one's family, though plenty of people would disagree with me on that, but our loyalty to God must be infinitely greater than any other loyalty we may have. Indeed all our other duties are in the context of our duty to God. *Thy will be done in earth as it is in heaven.*

January 11th

Mark 1 vv 21&22

How do you preach with authority? It's easy to imagine the prevarications of the scribes. How often can you get a straight answer from a lawyer? They study the texts ever so thoroughly, but it's all *ifs* and *buts* when you ask them what they mean. Jesus speaks with authority because He is the Son of God. He has the Spirit of God and not by measure. The fulness of the Godhead dwells in Him bodily. The words of Jesus are the Word of God. His whole life is God's Word in action. But what of Christian preachers? What authority do we have? How can we claim to speak in the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost? There is the matter of our calling. The Church seeks to ordain only those whom she believes to be called by God. We study the Word of God. We pray for the grace of the Holy Spirit in our preaching and teaching. Our lives (as Christians, all Christians not only preachers) ought to be God's Word in action. So we do speak with authority and all of us ought to be cautious and humble in criticising other people's sermons (or acts of worship or any kind of Christian service). On the other hand, only Jesus is without sin. All other preachers are fallible. Responsibility for the authenticity of preaching is shared by the hearers, who also are required to be prayerfully attentive to the Spirit and to search the Scriptures as to whether these things be so. Come to Church prepared to receive Jesus in Word & Sacrament.

January 12th

Mark 1 vv 23-28

Synagogue worship has quite a lot in common with our worship – especially Mattins and Evensong. There are bible readings from the Law & the Prophets. Psalms are sung. There are prayers. There is often a sermon. The synagogue is really the gathered congregation rather than the building, just as the Church is the people, not merely the place where we meet. Desperate people might well come to synagogue or Church and, coming, they ought to be able to expect welcome and succour, because that is the nature of God, whose people we, by his grace, are. Jesus met this man's need. This man's problem is one we might not expect to encounter, but we may well encounter coming to our churches difficult people in great need. Jesus is the model for our response.

January 13th (Epiphany 1)

Mark 1 vv 29-31

O LORD, we beseech thee mercifully to receive the prayers of thy people which call upon thee; and grant that they may both perceive and know what things they ought to do, and also may have grace and power faithfully to fulfil the same; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

As soon as Peter's mother in law was cured, she got up and served Jesus. That is the reason for our being made whole; so that we can serve Him. It is not always clear to us how we should serve Him. This collect was a favourite of a friend of mine as she sought for His kindness as to how she conduct her life as His servant.

January 14th

Mark 1 vv 32-34

1 At even, ere the sun was set,
the sick, O Lord, around thee
lay;
O in what divers pains they
met!
O with what joy they went
away!
2 Once more 'tis eventide, and
we
oppressed with various ills
draw near;
what if thy form we cannot see?
we know and feel that thou art
here.
3 O Saviour Christ, our woes
dispel;
for some are sick, and some are
sad,
and some have never loved thee
well,
and some have lost the love
they had;
4 And some have found the
world is vain,
yet from the world they break
not free;
and some have friends who give

them pain,
yet have not sought a friend in
thee;
5 And none, O Lord, have
perfect rest,
for none are wholly free from
sin;
and they who fain would serve
thee best
are conscious most of wrong
within.
6 O Saviour Christ, thou too
art man;
thou hast been troubled,
tempted, tried;
thy kind but searching glance
can scan
the very wounds that shame
would hide.
7 Thy touch has still its ancient
power;
no word from thee can fruitless
fall:
Hear, in this solemn evening
hour,
and in thy mercy heal us all.

I got caught once at Evening Prayer. I thought every knew this beautiful hymn which is based on today's verses and chose it to sing unaccompanied. People didn't know it. We've forgotten our evening hymns, coming to church only in the mornings and no longer singing hymns at home. It is a hymn which is really worth pondering and praying, however.

January 15th

Mark 1 vv 35-39

Simon and his friends thought that Jesus had made a mistake. There was obviously a lot to do at Capernaum, a tremendous opportunity to do God's work. Quite evidently, that was true and there were no doubt people in Capernaum who ought to have been doing it – teaching the faith, praying, taking part in public worship, caring for the sick and the poor. Simon was wrong, however, to press Jesus to stay in Capernaum and get on with it. For one thing, Jesus needed time to pray – time to be with His Father. No matter how important the things we are doing might be, we definitely need time to rest and pray – the Sabbath rest we'll come back to. Moreover, Christ's task was not to stay in Capernaum; it was to move on and proclaim the Kingdom of God in other towns and villages. We back to what should we be doing? What is God's work for us? Not what we think is good, but what His Will is for our lives.

January 16th

Mark 1 vv 40-45

One of the best known things about Jesus is that He touched the unclean. In the bible, the term "leprosy" covers human skin conditions and even various mouldy infestations of buildings. They made the subjects ritually unclean. They might also give rise to a sense of fear and disgust in ordinary, normal people. They were isolating conditions. Sufferers would suffer alone or with people like themselves, perhaps. Try to think of people we might find disgusting or be afraid of? Try to think of people who would be alone or only mix with people with problems similar to their own. How do we react to them when we meet them as we go about our normal business? What kind of a welcome would they receive in our churches or in our homes? What would Jesus do?

January 17th

Mark 2 vv 1-5

Back to Capernaum and there's still plenty to do. Crowds of people flock to Jesus. There isn't even room for the sick of the palsy's friends to bring him in. But they do. Jesus sees their faith. Did the man on the bed have faith? It isn't absolutely clear, but his friends certainly had faith and they brought him to Jesus. We can and should pray for our friends whether or not we think they have faith. We should seek to bring them to Jesus – whether in our prayers, by talking to them about the One in Whom we believe or bringing them to Church. Christ is present where people meet together in His Name. Assembling together as Christians for worship is not an optional extra for Christians who aren't too busy. It is an intrinsic part of our relationship with God – the relationship which we hope our friends and families will come to share. The sick man's friends took considerable trouble to get up on the roof and make a whole in it to bring him to Jesus. How much trouble are we prepared to take?

January 18th

Mark 2 vv 6-12

Relationships are not always easy even within a Christian fellowship. Ministers are subject to temptation just as lay people are. Christians may find their relationship with God and their relationship with one another tainted by sin. Imperfect relationships with God and with one another are unhealthy. Individuals are diseased by sin. The Body of Christ, the Church, is diseased by sin. Sin is lack of love. God is love. In Christ, through faith in Him, our sins are forgiven. Our relationship with God is healed. We are made whole. Our relationships with one another within the Church (and with the wider world) are modelled by our relationship with God. *Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive them that trespass against us.* One of the great privileges of being what I am is that it is my duty to pronounce on God's people both His blessing and His forgiveness of all those who truly repent. Such a responsibility makes me review my relationship with Him and with you. **ALMIGHTY** God, our heavenly Father, who of his great mercy hath promised forgiveness of sins to all them that with hearty repentance and true faith turn unto him; Have mercy upon you; pardon and deliver you from all your sins; confirm and strengthen you in all goodness; and bring you to everlasting life; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

January 19th

Mark 2 vv 13-17

We need more people in our churches. We need people to do God's work. We need people to pay for God's work. We need people because we need the fellowship of one another. So how can we recruit more people in order to build up our numbers? Actually, the bible doesn't say anything about recruitment. I guess that, if Jesus had wanted to recruit some supporters who would obviously be qualified to work for Him, He might well have signed on some Pharisees. They knew the Bible. They spent a lot of time praying. In the same way, we might think that the people most likely to join our Church would be people like us and we might be right about that. Our most likely recruits would be people like us.

But the Bible is quite dismissive about numbers. Read it. The LORD can save with few as with many. There is more joy over the return of one lost sheep than over ninety nine that never got lost. Jesus isn't recruiting people to maintain an institutional Church. Jesus calls people to Him because He alone can meet their needs, not because they can His needs. He loves them. He doesn't seek to exploit them. That people come to faith is to the glory of God, not to the glory of our evangelistic strategy or preaching. Those who come to know Him immerse themselves in working for Him, not grudgingly as desperately needed by God to keep His Church on the road, but because they are overflowing with the love of Christ. God requires us to be faithful, not necessarily successful.

So who are the Levis in our village, the people who aren't obviously one of us, but whom Jesus may be calling? One point of the story surely is that only Jesus can meet our needs. Levi knew that he needed something. That something turned out to be Jesus. The Pharisees didn't know that they needed anything. So they didn't welcome Jesus into their lives. Once Levi knew Jesus, he threw a party for his mates and introduced them to Jesus Who was happy to mix with them. So how would we introduce our mates to Jesus?

January 20th (Epiphany 2)

Mark 2 vv 18-22

Could you be wrong? A speaker on *Thought for the Day* the other day suggested that, in later life, we've got things sorted. We've made up our minds about things. To that extent, we are at peace with ourselves. I should have thought that it is also true that many young people are confident in their ideas. They won't listen. They know it all. I guess there is that tendency in all of us whatever our age. We think that the way we look at things is the right way. Even religious people are susceptible to holding fixed ideas about things. Indeed, a common abuse of religion is to use it as an excuse to close our minds to uncomfortable possibilities. And yet, Jesus. Jesus disrupts. Those who followed John the Baptist and those who followed the Pharisees were foolish to be complacent. It wasn't that they were necessarily wrong or bad people. They had a great deal going for them – preaching, teaching, fasting and prayer, a zeal for God. But Jesus is so much more. He is so much more than we can imagine. He is so much more than our churches can contain or even our bibles. Who He is and what He offers are beyond our understanding. There is no place for closed minds or fixed human conceptions in the life of faith.

January 21st

Mark 2 vv 23-28

The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath.

It is a vexed question what Christians should do about the Sabbath. A few Christians keep it on a Saturday along with the Jews. The Sabbath is originally the seventh day of the week. Most Christians changed it to the first day, Sunday, because that is the day when Jesus rose from the dead. Sunday was a working day in the Roman Empire and Christians got up early to share in the celebration of Holy Communion or the Eucharist before they went to work. It was only later, when the Roman Empire (and the European nations which succeeded it after its decline and fall) became nominally Christian that Sunday became a day of rest for most people and fully developed into a Christian Sabbath. As we've seen, rest and time to be with God are vital if human beings are to flourish. The Sabbath is a blessing. It is a foretaste of our eternal rest in contemplation of the Beatific Vision. On the other hand, as with all God's gifts, the Sabbath has been abused. Christians have refused any

enjoyment of the Sabbath and looked down on those who do have fun on Sundays.

The first day of the week,
His own in sad despair,
Could not believe for very
joy,
The risen Lord was there.

Now they obeyed his word,
Now shared what Jesus
gave,
And, one in him, in breaking
bread
Knew what it cost to save.

And each day of the week
And on the Lord's own day,
They walked in Christian
liberty
His new and living Way.

And on the Lord's own day,
From needless burdens
freed,
They kept a Sabbath made
for man,
To fit man's inmost need.

How soon men forge again
The fetters of their past!
As long as Jesus lives in us
So long our freedoms last.

This day his people meet,
This day his Word is sown,
Lord Jesus, show us how to
use~
This day we call your own.

How can we enjoy a day of rest and fellowship with God without exploiting the people who work to meet our needs – water, electricity & gas, transport, medical care, food, etc. – and preventing them from assembling together to break bread, to hear the Word and to share in Christian fellowship?

January 22nd

Mark 3 vv 1-6

I think the survival of the churches in Cuxton and Halling is threatened by the fact that so few people now attend regularly. That might be true of many churches in this country, where around 90% of Anglican churches are experiencing decline in attendances and only 10% are growing. One factor in this is the legalisation of Sunday shopping and the growing tendency to treat Sunday just like any other day. Other clergy have told me that their flourishing children's work collapsed overnight when Sunday trading was made legal. It's not that people are doing bad things on Sundays. It would be wrong to do bad things on any day of the week. They are doing good things like sport and family

time and necessary work and shopping instead of doing the best thing of all – worshipping God. Mostly, people have not decided that they no longer are Christians. It is just that worshipping with other Christians has ceased to be important to them. The effect of this is fourfold. Our own relationship with Jesus is weakened if we do not meet for prayer, read the Scriptures and participate in the Sacraments. Why do you think God gave them to us? Why do you think people risk persecution for the privilege of taking part in Christian worship? Secondly, the faith is not passed on to the next generation. Children and young adults are unbaptised, don't know what the Bible teaches, have received little guidance on prayer and are quite unfamiliar with Christian culture generally. Thirdly, the Church itself is weakened. There aren't enough people to do what needs doing. Fourthly, secular politicians can point to our poor attendances as evidence that this is no longer a Christian country and ignore God in the way they govern.

So what should we do? In our own personal lives, we ought to prioritise our Christian commitment. We should not lightly miss Church on Sunday and we should take a Sabbath rest from work and all the everyday things which press in on us. If we can't do that on a Sunday, we must make time on other days – time for ourselves, time for God, time for people. The Church herself has to create opportunities, as we do with our Wednesday and Thursday Communion, but there is still something special about the Lord's people meeting on the Lord's Day to celebrate the service He gave us. *Do this in remembrance of me.* We are one body, old and young, rich & poor, of every race & culture. We should meet together as one even if sometimes we meet together with people like ourselves eg in the Mothers' Union or Sunday School or men's breakfast or youth service, for example. Also, I think we should try to treat Sunday as special so that the people who work for us can have a day off. It's hard to know what we should and shouldn't do. I don't shop on Sundays, but I don't mind going to the pub. I wouldn't organise a social or sporting event to clash with Sunday service, but I have run marathons on Sundays. I try not to do any work on Sundays but I benefit by power workers and policemen and doctors working on Sundays. I think we can only do the best we can but we shouldn't give up trying to keep Sunday special for those who don't know why it is.

January 23rd

1 King of glory,
King of peace,
I will love Thee;
and that love may
never cease,
I will move Thee.
Thou hast granted
my request,
Thou hast heard
me;
Thou didst note
my working
breast,
Thou hast spared
me.

2 Wherefore with
my utmost art
I will sing Thee,
and the cream of
all my heart
I will bring Thee.
Though my sins
against me cried,
Thou didst clear
me;
and alone, when
they replied,
Thou didst hear
me.

Mark 2 vv 7-12

3 Seven whole
days, not one in
seven,
I will praise Thee;
in my heart,
though not in
heav'n,
I can raise Thee.
Small it is, in this
poor sort
to enroll Thee:
e'en eternity's too
short
to extol Thee.

The people in today's reading pressed to come to Jesus and in Him they found their needs were met. This is what it means to be a Christian. This is what we have to share with the world, *seven whole days, not one in seven*.

January 24th

Mark 2 vv 13-21

Jesus prayed before He chose the apostles. It's not obvious to us why He chose these particular twelve men. In fact we know very little about some of them, but Jesus called them. He calls all the baptised. He doesn't call us because we are especially good or great. He calls us because He loves us. We don't receive His blessings as our reward for being good. We receive His blessings as His own free gift in accordance with His promises. His ways are essentially inscrutable to us. He is God! We just trust Him because He is our God and we are His people.

Within the Church, the fellowship of the baptised, God calls certain people for certain purposes. How can we recognise vocation? How do we know whom God is calling to do what? Looking at this story, we can follow the example of Jesus and pray about it. We have also to be open to the possibility that God does unexpected things and may be choosing people whom we might not have chosen!

January 25th (Conversion of St Paul)

Mark 2 vv 22-30

We sing the glorious conquest,
Before Damascus' gate,
When Saul, the Church's
spoiler,
Came breathing threats and
hate;
The ravening wolf rushed
forward
Full early to the prey;
But lo! the Shepherd met him,
And bound him fast today.

O love that sought and held
him
The bondman of his Lord!
O Wisdom ordering all things
In order strong and sweet,
What nobler spoil was ever
Cast at the Victor's feet?
What wiser master builder
E'er wrought at Thine employ
Than he, till now so furious
Thy building to destroy?

O glory most excelling
That smote across his path!
O light that pierced and
blinded
The zealot in his wrath!
O voice that spake within him
The calm, reproving word!

Lord, teach thy Church the
lesson,
Still in her darkest hour
Of weakness and of danger,
To trust Thy hidden power;
Thy grace by ways mysterious
The wrath of man can bind,
And in Thy boldest foeman
Thy chosen saint can find.

I hope you like me including all these hymns. In the best hymns, there is a good deal of Christian wisdom, which is worth contemplating. It is also helpful to sing them in the context of Scripture. Saul was another unlikely choice to be an apostle, but some might say that he became the greatest of them all. The strong man was bound by the grace of God. The sins of the opponent of Christ were forgiven. The people of God were united in one communion & fellowship by reason of his preaching.

January 26th

Mark 2 vv 31-35

Many people didn't get Jesus' mission. Even His own human family didn't understand Him or why He had to come out in public and proclaim the Kingdom of God with all the risks entailed. Our families may not understand our calling as Christian people. It is hard for us if there is a conflict between our faith in God and our love for our families, but God must come first. We can only truly love other people in the context of our love for God. We shall always be His family. We pray for our human families to be part of His family too.

January 27th (Epiphany 3)

Mark 4 vv 1-13

We make a mistake about parables. We tend to think of them as simple stories with a straightforward moral, illustrations of a sermon point – like the story of the Boy Who Cried Wolf which conveys a plain message about the dangers of telling lies. The parables of Jesus are not like that, however. They are very much deeper than that. Their meanings are profound and they may speak to different people in different ways or they may mean different things to us at different times of our lives. I try not to say (in sermons or elsewhere), *This is what Jesus meant when He said this*. I'd rather say, *This is what this saying of Jesus means to me*, or, *This is one possible meaning of what He said*. What Jesus says is open-ended. There is no limit to His possibilities. In order to understand Jesus, we need His grace. So we approach the Scriptures, as we approach life generally, prayerfully. Ask the Holy Spirit to reveal to us what this Word means to us today. Worryingly, we are warned that parables actually obscure the Truth from the hard-hearted who aren't seeking it anyway and haven't received the grace to repent and return to God. Is this is what is meant by blasphemy against the Holy Ghost in the last chapter – to be wholly hardened against God's grace?

January 28th

Mark 4 vv 14-20

So what could this parable mean to us? The Word of God is like the rain and the sunshine. It is freely poured out on everybody, good and bad alike. Does this mean that our mission as Christian people is likewise to everybody, not just to other Christians or friends and family or immediate neighbours? How would that work in practice when it is so much easier to make contact with some people than with others? Or are we indifferent to the Word so it is as if it is snatched away from us as soon as we hear it or read it? Do we forget it as soon as we've seen it? What might discourage us so that we give up although we had made a good start? What is it about being a Christian in our parish that could put us off? Does whatever it is succeed? It's probably only too obvious what there is to distract us from the Christian life. How do we prioritise the demands on our time, energy & money? And what does it mean to bear fruit? Fruit is more seed and seed is the Word. So fruitful Christians are doing what Jesus does, spreading God's love.

January 29th

Mark 14 vv 23-25

Do people know that you are a Christians. *By their fruits*, Jesus says, *ye shall know them.*

Are there things in your life which you would rather God and other people didn't know about? *For the word of God is quick, and powerful, and sharper than any two edged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart. Neither is there any creature that is not manifest in his sight: but all things are naked and opened unto the eyes of him with whom we have to do.*

Have you really understood Jesus? Do you live by the Golden Rule? *Therefore all things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them: for this is the law and the prophets.*

Is this what v25 means? *Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Draw nigh to God, and he will draw nigh to you.*

January 30th

Mark 4 vv 26-29

I've talked a lot about the importance of the commitment of Christian people. I've even mentioned that the survival of our churches in Cuxton and Halling is called into question by the apparent lack of Christian commitment of most people in these two villages. Daunting isn't it? Our efforts feel so inadequate, yet everything depends on us. Only it doesn't. Everything depends on God. What He wants from us is that we are faithful. He doesn't demand that we are successful because success depends upon Him and Him alone. I don't know whether churches will survive in these two villages or if the Church here will continue in its present form. I do know, however, that God's purposes will not be thwarted. Growth is His gift. If we want to part of His plan, what is required of us is that we remain faithful.

Crowns and thrones may perish, kingdoms rise and wane,
But the church of Jesus constant will remain.
Gates of hell can never gainst that church prevail;
We have Christ's own promise, and that cannot fail.

January 31st

Mark 4 vv 30-34

There have been many times in the history of the Church when it must have seemed that it didn't have much going for it. Very few remained faithful when Jesus was crucified. After the Resurrection & Ascension, the believers shut themselves away on the Feast of Pentecost and the Holy Spirit came upon them and empowered them to preach the Gospel in the streets. There must have been many times when a Christian missionary or a small band of faithful people disembarked on a foreign shore and began to preach. St Augustine was very wary of coming to Kent to preach to our ancestors, but the pope insisted and here we are. Churches, missions, hospitals, all kinds of Christian work have started in a very small way with people who felt quite inadequate to the task. But it is God Who gives the increase. And that is why I don't worry about the Church in our two villages or in England as a whole. The LORD can save with few as with many. What is required of us is that we remain faithful.

February 1st

Mark 4 vv 35-41



This is the symbol of the World Council of Churches. It represents a boat. The mast is the Cross. Oikumene is a Greek word which means the whole inhabited earth. It is related to the word for house and also to the word *economy*. We can think of the world as our common

home. We can think of ourselves as the household of God. We can think of running the household (domestic economy) for the benefit of its inhabitants and in accordance with the wishes of its Maker & Owner. We can think of the Church as the household of God called out of the world but nevertheless in the world as leaven and light and salt. We can think of the Church as a ship, an ark, in which we are saved from chaos and destruction by the Presence of Christ in our midst. We can think of our essential unity in Him. Our motive power is the Cross, self-sacrificing love. The end of our voyage is to rest in Him. Our mission is the redemption of the cosmos, that the kingdoms of this world are transformed into the kingdom of our God and of His Christ, that the household of God is redeemed humanity and the new heavens and the new earth spoken about are our common home.

February 2nd (Candlemas)

Mark 5 vv 1-20

The story of the Gadarene demoniac is a dreadful one. Reading it, you can only have sympathy for this man's plight. I don't know what you think was wrong with him but it was something truly terrible. The compassion Jesus showed him is the example we are required to follow in dealing with such terribly distressed people. That we haven't yet learnt is shown by a story of something which was going on very recently in this country. A badly distressed teenage girl was being kept locked all the time in a windowless cell with no amusements and very few visitors and her food was given to her through a hatchway in the door. Who wouldn't be distressed after being kept for months like that? However bad she was, there must be a more humane way of taking care of her. Jesus comes as Light in the darkness of this world, the darkness of those who are oppressed by poverty or disease or whatever, and the darkness in the souls of those who have no compassion.

LORD, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace : according to thy word. For mine eyes have seen : thy salvation, Which thou hast prepared : before the face of all people; To be a light to lighten the Gentiles : and to be the glory of thy people Israel. Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Ghost : as it was in beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world without end. Amen.

February 3rd (Epiphany 4)

Mark 5 vv 21-43

St Matthew's version of this passage is the Gospel reading in the 1662 prayer book for Trinity 24. November 10th 1918 was Trinity 24 and so this was the reading which communicants would have heard the day before the Armistice. It so happened that 11th November was Trinity 24 in 2018 and we had the same reading. I was thinking what would these two stories have meant to people living in the reality of the First World War? For one thing, they were probably more likely to know the stories than we are. They had the spiritual resources to be found in the Bible and in belonging to the Church which so many of us have carelessly cast away. If the Bible, the Word of God, is part of you it sustains you in all life's trials, The two points which struck me as relevant at that time were that you, whoever you are, you can reach out and touch Jesus whatever is crowding around you to be healed and that He is more powerful even than death.

February 4th

Mark 6 vv 1-6

When I was about to be ordained, I had an interview with the Bishop of Rochester to discuss where I should serve. He said that, as I had lived so long in the Medway Towns, I should serve my curacy somewhere else and I went to Orpington and then Ramsgate. Now I am back on the banks of the Medway, although I'm not sure that Cuxton & Halling count as part of the Medway Towns. We are in the Borough of Medway, but we weren't always. I have always felt at home here, however, and I think that may cut both ways. On the one hand, I identify with the people of these two villages and the villages themselves as places, and this is perhaps a good thing, basing my ministry on the Incarnation of Jesus Christ Who became one of us and shared our life. On the other hand, I wonder sometimes if I am too much part of things so that I don't see what the parish needs, as someone might from the outside, or how we relate to the wider world, and also, as even Jesus found at Nazareth, perhaps I am too commonplace to be seen as someone potentially bringing something different to these two places. New wine in old bottles, perhaps?

February 5th

Mark 6 vv 7-9

The mission is urgent. The Kingdom of God is at hand. It is at hand today as it was at hand then. The Kingdom of God is always imminent and it is urgent that we are ready for it. I don't think that Jesus is teaching here that we shouldn't prepare properly for what we try to do in His Name. If you're in the choir, you'll practise the music. If you're a preacher, you'll study the Bible. If you feel called to run a youth club, you'll need premises and equipment. But the need to prepare can become a reason for never starting a project. You can never be certain that you have enough money or people or time. You can never be absolutely confident that your talents are sufficient. There comes a time when you just have to get on with it, to get on with it in faith that, if what you are doing is God's Will, He will supply the resources you need to carry it out.

Take my life and let it be
Consecrated, Lord, to Thee.
Take my moments and my
days,
Let them flow in endless praise.

Take my love, my Lord, I pour
At Thy feet its treasure store.
Take myself and I will be
Ever, only, all for Thee.

February 5th

Mark 6 vv 10&11

I've always found this difficult. Are we supposed just to give up on people who don't respond to the Gospel? Should we move on from people or places who are not receptive? Maybe Jesus told these particular ministers to move on because, at that time, there was no time to waste on the recalcitrant. Jesus had only three years in which to proclaim the Kingdom of God. More generally, does it make sense for the Church to waste resources (and maybe face persecution) seeking to serve an indifferent or hostile population when there is plenty of good work to be done where it will be appreciated? The Church of England doesn't face persecution, but it does have to husband its resources carefully. Is it wise to put vicars in parishes where the people aren't interested and there are few social needs they can help with? Doesn't it make more sense to deploy the limited number of clergy we have in parishes where the Word is eagerly received and lay people can and do support the work of the Church financially, prayerfully and by getting involved, or in very poor parishes where the Church can offer essential help to people in desperate physical need? On the other hand, we believe that God doesn't give up on anyone, however hard-hearted he or she may be. Should we give up on them?

February 6th (Accession of HMQ)

Mark 6 vv 12&13

The Queen was anointed with oil at her Coronation. In the bible, kings and priests are anointed. The sick are anointed with oil. Anointing symbolises the gift of the Holy Spirit. Messiah and Christ are Hebrew and Greek respectively for the Anointed One – Jesus to Whom the Spirit is not given by measure, our King, our High Priest, the One Who heals our diseases and our divisions. Christian people are, we are told, kings and priests. We are anointed with the Holy Spirit. God has reconciled us to Himself by Jesus Christ (healing our divisions and our disease) and has given to us the ministry of reconciliation. The work of the Church is fully comprehensive. It's not just what we do in church buildings or under the auspices of ecclesiastical committees, councils and synods. It is nothing less than reaching out to the needs of the whole world.

Take my hands and let them
move
At the impulse of Thy love.

Take my feet and let them be
Swift and beautiful for Thee.

February 7th

Mark 6 vv 14-16

On the radio, I heard a Muslim woman speaking about the way she sees life. She said that God is everything to her. He made her and gave her everything that she has. Her life is obedience to His Will. She seeks to use the talents and opportunities He has given her in this life in the knowledge that she will one day stand before Him as her judge and have to give account for what she has done with God's gifts to her. This is exactly what one would expect a Christian to say or, I think, a Jew and similar to what a member of any of the world's major religions might affirm. We differ in what we believe about God and how He has revealed Himself to humanity, but what we have in common, is that God is all in all. The religious life is fully comprehensive. So Herod, trying to understand Jesus, tries (although he fails) to understand Him in the light of religious faith.

Where the Muslim woman felt alienated from contemporary Western culture (and we should feel alienated too) is that this God-centred life makes little sense to our contemporaries. Religion is an optional extra, they think. It might be dangerous if it leads to fanaticism. It may be beneficial if it promotes community cohesion and encourages charitable works. Generally, it is a harmless pastime, like stamp-collecting or gardening. It is not the main business of life. This is the attitude we are up against in the world and which we have to guard against in our own personal lives, living as we do in an increasingly secular culture.

February 8th

Mark 6 vv 17-29

Religion wasn't an optional extra for John the Baptist. Neither is it for those who are prepared to face martyrdom today. I said the difference between the Muslim woman and us Christians was not so much our commitment to God as how we understand Him. Allah is just Arabic for God. Muslims believe that God's decisive revelation of Himself is in the Koran which He made known to Mohammed. Christians believe that God's decisive revelation of Himself is in His Son Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh. John the Baptist proclaims the Word of God without fear or favour. John bears witness to Jesus. How do we recognise the authentic Word of God? *The just shall live by faith. By their fruits shall ye know them.*

February 9th

Mark 6 vv 30-34

I suppose this is an experience common to parents and to clergy and probably to others in the so-called caring professions. We need our rest. We need to recharge our batteries. But we also have to respond when our children, our parishioners, our patients or our clients make demands on us. There is a balance to strike between becoming burnt out because always available and letting people down by being overly self-protective. It's probably unreasonable to expect children to respect their parents' need for some peace and quiet, but we adults ought to know better than to make excessive demands on the professionals we rely on.

February 10th (Epiphany 5)

Mark 6 vv 35-44

This is a very well known story. It demonstrates how God meets all our needs. It recalls Moses feeding the Children of Israel in the Wilderness. A greater than Moses is here. It betokens Jesus the Bread of Life. It anticipates the Marriage Feast of the Lamb with His Bride, the Church. It prefigures the Holy Communion in which we *Do this in remembrance of me* until He returns in glory. In the light of what we have been thinking about, however, I want to concentrate on the five loaves and two fishes. *What are they among so many?* We may feel that what we have to offer is hopelessly inadequate. What difference does what I can do make to anything? If everybody thought like that, nobody would do anything. But if we value what we can contribute it all adds up. We do make a difference. It is God Who gives the increase. If, instead of worrying that we'll probably be unsuccessful, we actually are faithful, then we can trust God to accomplish His purposes in our lives. *Give us this day, our daily bread.*

February 11th

Mark 6 vv 45&46

The crowd got very excited about this miraculous feeding. They wanted to make Jesus King – King on their terms, not on His. Maybe the disciples were carried away too. So He dismissed them and He Himself went up into the mountain to pray. So what does Jesus want us to do? It is easy to get excited and over enthusiastic, thinking we're doing what He would want, when in fact we're acting in accordance with our own ideas. As we plan, it is important that we are prayerfully attentive to what Jesus is saying to us.

February 12th

Mark 6 vv 47-52

V52 is interesting. If they had understood the miracle of the loaves and fishes, they wouldn't have been surprised at His walking on the water and calming the storm. Just Who is Jesus? If we believe that He is Who the Bible and the Church teach that He is, we have no reason to be afraid. *I am Who I am.*

GOD is our hope and strength : a very present help in trouble. Therefore will we not fear, though the earth be moved : and though the hills be carried into the midst of the sea; Though the waters thereof rage and swell : and though the mountains shake at the tempest of the same. The rivers of the flood thereof shall make glad the city of God : the holy place of the tabernacle of the most Highest. God is in the midst of her, therefore shall she not be removed : God shall help her, and that right early. The heathen make much ado, and the kingdoms are moved : but God hath shewed his voice, and the earth shall melt away. The Lord of hosts is with us : the God of Jacob is our refuge. O come hither, and behold the works of the Lord : what destruction he hath brought upon the earth. He maketh wars to cease in all the world : he breaketh the bow, and knappeth the spear in sunder, and burneth the chariots in the fire. Be still then, and know that I am God : I will be exalted among the heathen, and I will be exalted in the earth. The Lord of hosts is with us : the God of Jacob is our refuge.

Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Ghost : as it was in beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world without end. Amen.

February 13th

Mark 6 vv 53-56

Christ the Healer, the Healer of our divisions, the Healer of our diseases. This is the vocation of the Church – to heal our human relationship with God, to heal our human relationships with one another, to care for those in every kind of need.

February 14th (St Valentine)

Mark 7 vv 1-5

So, why spoil things? The Pharisees nitpicking the habits of Jesus' disciples when they had the opportunity to meet Jesus for themselves. How many Valentine's Day dinners will be spoiled by silly arguing, quarrelling and fault-finding? Why don't we receive what we're offered with gratitude and love, rather than raising objections and looking for things to complain about?

February 15th

Mark 7 vv 6-13

Religion is one of the most powerful forces influencing human nature and shaping human society, for good and ill. If you think religion is a bad thing, you can cite terrorism and the Inquisition on the grand scale, hypocrisy and censoriousness, hardness of heart and blindness to human need. If you think religion is a good thing, you can rhapsodise about what a wonderful world it would be if people kept God's commandments and talk about what the Church does in education, health care and charity work. What I don't think you can meaningfully deny is that religion has an enormous influence on all human civilisations. Even atheist states put a great deal of effort into combating and controlling religion. So it matters what we believe about God and it matters how we respond in the light of our relationship with Him. God is love and that fact must be the foundation on which we base our words and our deeds. Indeed it is His love which makes us the people we are. It is imperative that we are always open to Him.

February 16th

Mark 7 vv 14-23

There are good religious disciplines and different denominations may differ in what they are. You may kneel to pray with your hands together and your eyes closed or you may stand with your arms outstretched to heaven or you might think posture unimportant and focus on God internally in your heart. You may or may not fast. You may or may not bow at the Name of Jesus or use the sign of the Cross. Some stand to sing; some sit. Some use incense and candles. These disciplines may be an expression of what is in your heart. They may help to frame your heart, conform it to the love of God. They may deepen your sense of worship. But they are not ends in themselves. We are physical creatures and things like posture and music both express and condition what is in our minds. Educators find a multimedia approach helpful to comprehension. Yet, in the end, it is what is in the heart which matters - for us to have the mind of Christ, to worship God in spirit and in truth. If these external expressions of religion spring from spiritual pride on our part or make it harder for our brothers and sisters to come to Christ, then we need to review our practices. True religion is religion of the heart which finds its proper expression in acting and speaking lovingly.

February 17th (Septuagesima)

Mark 7 vv 24-30

People find this a difficult story. I once had someone walk out of church when it was the Gospel reading. I wonder where you first heard the story? School, Sunday School, Church, home or in your own personal bible reading? I think the context in which we are introduced to bible passages continues to exert its influence on how we understand them sometimes for the rest of our lives. How was it explained to by parents, Sunday School or day school teachers or by your vicar? Matthew tells us that the disciples tried to get rid of the woman. That was surely wrong. So that's one lesson for us. But did Jesus discourage her? The woman herself was persistent in asking for His help, even when it appeared that He might not be going to grant her request. That is another example for us, that we should persist in prayer even when discouraged. My view is that, as with the loaves and fishes, Jesus knew all along what He was going to do and His initial response gave the woman the opportunity both to affirm her faith and to grow in understanding what faith in Jesus means, another lesson for us when God doesn't our prayers in the way we would like. The story also makes the general point that the Gospel was first preached to the Jews and then to the Gentiles, a lesson for us in how we should respect the Jews. And, as point of fact, Jesus' own ministry on earth was conducted mainly among Jews and it was the apostles, especially Paul, who would preach the Gospel to the Gentiles after the Crucifixion, Resurrection, Ascension and Pentecost.

February 18th

Mark 7 vv 31-37

Some people say that they would rather be blind than deaf. Deafness isolates us from society to a degree that blindness doesn't. Many of us experience some hearing loss as we get older. Some people cannot hear from both and others may lose hearing through illness, accident or too much exposure to noise. You can usually communicate what is important with someone who is deaf. Make signs. Write it down. But it is easy not to include them in the sort of ordinary conversation which we all enjoy. Some profoundly deaf people prefer to socialise within the deaf community, with other people who communicate naturally using sign language. Some such people would even prefer not to be

“cured” of their deafness because they would no longer completely belong to the deaf community but wouldn’t fit in with everybody else who has always been able to hear. We need to respond sensitively to people’s needs and wishes.

February 19th

Mark 8 vv 1-9

Some people find a second feeding miracle hard to believe. However, if Jesus did it once, He could do it twice. Later on, He will refer to the fact that there were two miraculous feedings. Maybe, it needed to be done twice to make the point, though the disciples still don’t seem to have got it! Some people think that the twelve baskets left in the first miracle represent the twelve tribes of Israel and the seven in the second, the Gentile nations which have been traditionally counted as seven – originally the Hittites, the Gergashites, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites, from Deuteronomy 7^{1&2}, which everybody loves to be asked to read out loud in class.

February 20th

Mark 8 vv 10-13

Signs or miracles are like parables. They point those who are prepared to receive the Word of God towards the Truth, which is manifested in the Word made flesh, Jesus Christ, Who is the Way, the Truth & the Life. They do not convince determined unbelievers. Indeed those whose minds are closed to the Word of God fail to perceive the signs. They may not be able to deny that something remarkable has happened, but they are unable to recognise that it is a manifestation of God’s love.

February 21st

Mark 8 vv 14-21

Is this a practical demonstration of what Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount? Therefore take no thought, saying, What shall we eat? or, What shall we drink? or, Wherewithal shall we be clothed? (For after all these things do the Gentiles seek:) for your heavenly Father knoweth that ye have need of all these things. **But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you.** Take therefore no thought for the morrow: for the morrow shall take thought for the things of itself. Sufficient unto the day *is* the evil thereof.

February 22nd

Mark 8 vv 22-26

People have been cured all at once of blindness by the miracles of modern medicine. It hasn't always worked out very well. They've been overwhelmed by seeing a world they had never seen before or not for many years. Maybe, this is why Jesus heals the man gradually. Again, we need to be sensitive to what people actually need, not just march in and give them what we think they need.

February 23rd

Mark 8 vv27&28

Whom do men say that I am? That's the question, isn't it? What do people think of Jesus? What do you think people think about Jesus? You could ask them. Some might think He never existed. Some might say He was a good man, a martyr for a cause. Some might say He was a fool to stand against the rich and powerful. For some, He is an inspiration to political change, a rebel even. He is generally acknowledged as a teacher. He's known for His reputed miracles and as a healer. To some, He's a spiritual guide or leader. Some Hindus come close to acknowledging Him as possibly one god among many gods and Muslims regard Jesus as a prophet, second only to Mohammed. Some people think that all religion is a bad thing, closing minds to science, imposing outdated moral standards and the source of a fanaticism which only too often erupts in violence. And many people aren't especially interested in Jesus at all. But, if you believe, that Jesus is Who Christians believe Him to be, your world is turned upside down.

February 24th (Sexagesima)

Mark 8 v29

But whom say ye that I am? Who do you say Jesus is? What difference does your answer to that question make to your life? If you were converted later in life, you may be able to point to the difference. If, like me, you cannot remember a time when you were not a Christian, it could be harder to say how different your life would be if you couldn't affirm with Peter, *thou art the Christ*. But how much difference does it make that you are a Christian?

February 25th

Mark 8 v30

After the Resurrection, Christians are commanded to preach the Gospel to the whole world. At this point, however, the disciples are to tell no-

one. Maybe Jesus needs to avoid a premature confrontation with the authorities. *My time is not yet*, He says. Maybe the crowds will misunderstand Who the Messiah is and what He came to do. Perhaps, as word spreads, the crowds will become so big as to be unmanageable. The true nature of Jesus will only become apparent through what happens on Good Friday and at Easter. Maybe that is why they're to say nothing yet.

February 26th

Mark 8 vv 31-33

It was Peter who received that wonderful revelation from God that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God. He affirmed this with His own lips. *For with the heart man believeth unto righteousness; and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation.* We've all done it, but Peter was the first to be recorded. And yet he still gets Jesus wrong. Don't we all? But Peter is restored. He is the rock on which the Church is built. For all our inadequacies, we each have our own place by God's grace as living stones in the Temple of the Holy Spirit which is the universal Church.

February 27th

Mark 8 vv 34-38

If you believe what the bible says about Jesus, your world is turned upside down.

O LORD God, who seest that we put not our trust in any thing that we do; Mercifully grant that by thy power we may be defended against all adversity; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

February 28th

Mark 9 v1

In our first year studying Theology, the first eight chapters of Mark were our NT test, but the tutors made us to this verse as well. It obviously connects with the last passage about those who take up their cross finding their life in Jesus. But what does it mean? Here are some possible interpretations.

1. Some of those present already had eternal life through faith in Jesus and, although their bodies would eventually die as all our bodies do, their life would continue more wonderfully in heaven. *Today thou shalt be with me in paradise.*

2. Three of them would see the Kingdom of God in the Transfiguration of our Lord Jesus Christ six days later.
3. They would see the Kingdom of God come in the Crucifixion & Resurrection.
4. They would see the Kingdom come through the preaching of the Gospel to the ends of the earth.
5. They would see Jesus come again in glory.

1 When the trumpet of the Lord shall sound,
and time shall be no more,
and the morning breaks,
eternal, bright and fair;
when the saved of earth shall gather
over on the other shore,
and the roll is called up yonder,
I'll be there.

2 On that bright and cloudless morning
when the dead in Christ shall rise,
and the glory of his resurrection share;
when his chosen ones shall gather
to their home beyond the skies,
and the roll is called up yonder,
I'll be there. [Refrain]

Refrain: When the roll is called up yonder,
when the roll is called up yonder, I'll be there.

3 Let us labour for the Master from the dawn till setting sun,
let us talk of all his wondrous love and care;
then when all of life is over,
and our work on earth is done,
and the roll is called up yonder,
I'll be there. [Refrain]

March 1st

Mark 9 vv 2&3

We mustn't make an image of God, which means we have to be careful about imagining Him. He is infinitely more than anything we can conceive of. He reveals Himself in the man Jesus Christ. He reveals Himself on the Cross. These are authentic manifestations of the thrice holy God – the one who empties Himself and takes the form of a servant and humbles Himself to accept death on the Cross. Yet there are also those visions of the LORD high & lifted up, surrounded by worshipping cherubim and seraphim, angels, archangels and the spirits of just men made perfect. God has given Him a Name which is above every Name that at the Name of Jesus the whole creation bows. In the light of what we have just learnt about the Cross, there is a glimpse of

another authentic manifestation of God shining in Glory. In this passage from Revelation 5, we see Jesus the slain Lamb exalted to the highest heaven.

And I saw in the right hand of him that sat on the throne a book written within and on the backside, sealed with seven seals. And I saw a strong angel proclaiming with a loud voice, Who is worthy to open the book, and to loose the seals thereof? And no man in heaven, nor in earth, neither under the earth, was able to open the book, neither to look thereon. And I wept much, because no man was found worthy to open and to read the book, neither to look thereon. And one of the elders saith unto me, Weep not: behold, the Lion of the tribe of Juda, the Root of David, hath prevailed to open the book, and to loose the seven seals thereof. And I beheld, and, lo, in the midst of the throne and of the four beasts, and in the midst of the elders, stood a Lamb as it had been slain, having seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven Spirits of God sent forth into all the earth. And he came and took the book out of the right hand of him that sat upon the throne. And when he had taken the book, the four beasts and four *and* twenty elders fell down before the Lamb, having every one of them harps, and golden vials full of odours, which are the prayers of saints. And they sung a new song, saying, Thou art worthy to take the book, and to open the seals thereof: for thou wast slain, and hast redeemed us to God by thy blood out of every kindred, and tongue, and people, and nation; And hast made us unto our God kings and priests: and we shall reign on the earth. And I beheld, and I heard the voice of many angels round about the throne and the beasts and the elders: and the number of them was ten thousand times ten thousand, and thousands of thousands; Saying with a loud voice, Worthy is the Lamb that was slain to receive power, and riches, and wisdom, and strength, and honour, and glory, and blessing. And every creature which is in heaven, and on the earth, and under the earth, and such as are in the sea, and all that are in them, heard I saying, Blessing, and honour, and glory, and power, *be* unto him that sitteth upon the throne, and unto the Lamb for ever and ever. And the four beasts said, Amen. And the four *and* twenty elders fell down and worshipped him that liveth for ever and ever.

March 2nd

Mark 9 vv 3&4

We can only know anything of God because He reveals Himself to us. He reveals Himself to us in the wonders of the world He made. He reveals Himself to our hearts & minds. He makes Himself known in the Law & the Prophets (the OT). This is not an exclusive list. God is Sovereign and makes Himself known in any way He pleases. And He

makes Himself known in Jesus. Through Jesus everything was made that was made. In Jesus is the light of men. Jesus is the fulfilment of the Law & the Prophets. Every aspect of every authentic revelation of God is a revelation of Jesus & the Holy Spirit. We understand Jesus in the context of the OT & every other manifestation of God. We understand the Bible and the whole of Creation and the Christian Church & ourselves & everything else there is to understand in the light of Christ.

March 3rd (Quinquagesima)

Mark 9 vv 5&6

For he wist not what to say.

Sometimes it's better not to speak at all if you don't know what to say. To say the least, this was an awesome experience for Peter and James and John. How were they supposed to react? How could they comprehend it? What were they supposed to do? Maybe, the correct response was not to do anything or to seek to understand. Maybe the wisest thing to do was simply to adore. Perhaps we don't do enough of that in our relationship with God. There is a time for straightforward adoration as well as a time for faith to seek understanding and a time to be busy doing the Lord's work. It is in the adoration that we find the grace to think and speak and do.

March 4th

Mark 9 v7

This is my beloved Son; hear him.

He speaks to us in many ways: when we are tempted; when we are busy; when we are overwhelmed; when we are seeking Him in the bible or in public worship; when we are troubled; when we are headstrong. But it is appropriate that sometimes we listen, that we make a point of listening, taking time out of our busy lives, even taking time out our busy lives of intercessory prayer and our manifold and various commitments to the Church & just stop and listen for God.

March 5th

Mark 9 vv 8-13

The time is not yet for Jesus to be fully revealed to the masses. His Crucifixion, the supreme manifestation of His Love, is still to come. The expectation was that Elijah would prepare the way for the coming Kingdom of God (Malachi 4). John the Baptist acts in the spirit and

power of Elijah and so prepares for the coming of God's Kingdom in Jesus.

Lo! from the desert homes
Where he hath hid so
long,
The new Elias comes,
In sternest wisdom

strong;
The voice that cries
Of Christ on high,
And judgment nigh
From opening skies.

March 6th (Ash Wednesday)

Mark 9 vv 14&15

Without Jesus present, the disciples don't know how to meet this particular situation. But they will have to manage without His physical Presence. He will be taken from them on Good Friday. He will return Easter Day, but, forty days later, He will ascend into Heaven where He will sit at God's Right Hand, everliving to make intercession for us. How shall we manage without Him? He promises that He will not leave us comfortless. He will send His Holy Spirit. Jesus is the Paraclete (Comforter). The Holy Spirit is another Comforter (Paraclete). The Holy Spirit is as Jesus to us. It is in seeking the guidance of the Holy Spirit that we learn what Jesus would do.

1 Alleluia! Sing to Jesus;
His the sceptre, His the throne.
Alleluia! His the triumph,
His the victory alone.
Hark! The songs of peaceful
Zion
thunder like a mighty flood;
"Jesus out of ev'ry nation
has redeemed us by His blood.

2 Alleluia! Not as orphans
are we left in sorrow now.
Alleluia! He is near us;
faith believes, nor questions
how.
Though the cloud from sight
received Him
when the forty days were o'er,
shall our hearts forget His
promise,
"I am with you evermore"?

March 7th

Mark 9 vv 16-18

What was wrong with this boy? The symptoms are those of epilepsy. A lot of damage has been done by Christians who have thought that epilepsy or mental illness or other kinds of physical illness were the result of demon possession. Exorcism isn't the answer to disease. Even in C21 Britain people do terrible things to other people (including children) in the attempt to exorcise what they believe are demons. Go

to the doctor if you have a medical condition – whether it is epilepsy or anything else. Certainly pray about it. Certainly ask your friends to pray about it. Ask for the prayers of the Church, maybe including anointing with oil. But don't jump to conclusions and don't go in for "do it yourself" exorcisms. They can be very dangerous. If there is a genuine reason to believe that exorcism might be necessary, consult your vicar who will put you in touch with a specialist minister, but, if it is necessary, like every aspect of Christian ministry, exorcism overcomes evil through love & faith, not cruelty or spiritual pride.

March 8th

Mark 9 vv 19-29

Jesus is calm and peaceful. They bring the boy to Him. Jesus gets the father to tell the story. That's very often the best way to help someone. Listen to them, not only because you need to know what the problem is if you are to help them, but also because being listened to is good for us in itself. Maybe it is all we need sometimes – just to be heard. The father is desperate. He feels he hasn't got much faith. But come to Jesus with the faith you do have, not the faith you think you ought to have. The evil in the boy tries to resist Jesus, but Jesus is always more powerful: love than hate, good than evil, faith than fear, life than death. There is no spirit more powerful than the Holy Spirit, worth remembering if you are fearful of ghosts or demons or whatever. Prayer and fasting are the techniques Jesus commends to would be exorcists – not high drama, shouting, violence, simply faith and love. Even so, I repeat. Exorcism is a very special ministry. Do not try it at home.

Note: Occasionally, I'm asked to bless houses or other buildings. This might be simply because people want their home or place of work blessed. Sometimes it is because they do feel there is a troubling presence. Don't be afraid. Trust in God and I or another minister will pray with you for peace. In the highly unlikely event of anything really sinister, I or he would summon help from a more specialist minister.

March 9th

Mark 9 vv 30-32

It takes some understanding, that anyone would voluntarily travel to his own crucifixion. It takes some understanding that the longed for King

would die humbly and cruelly. It takes some understanding that the immortal Son of God would die a mortal death. No wonder the disciples didn't get it. How many people do get it?

'Tis mystery all! The Immortal dies! Who can explore His strange design?

In vain the firstborn seraph tries to sound the depths of love Divine!

'Tis mercy all! let earth adore, Let angel minds inquire no more.

He left His Father's throne above, so free, so infinite His grace;

Emptied Himself of all but love, and bled for Adam's helpless race:

'Tis mercy all, immense and free; For, O my God, it found out me.

March 10th (Lent 1)

Mark 9 vv 33-35

This is something I have wrestled with. The Church needs leadership. Leaders have to act with authority. They have to be confident in their authority. Their authority has to be accepted by those for whom they are responsible. On the other hand, leaders ought not to be proud, to seek the trappings of authority, to desire power for its own sake, to lord it over other people. It sometimes seems as if we are required at the same time to take our place in the front and simultaneously to occupy the humblest position. The ideal leadership of the Church is a model for leadership in the world – the servant king, the servant president, the servant prime minister, the servant general, the servant chief executive, the servant chairman of the board, the servant headmaster. What do you think about all that? No wonder we are told to pray *for kings and all that are in authority*.

March 11th

Mark 9 vv 36&37

Jesus' welcome for children is well known. He clearly loved children as He loves all of us. He has particular warnings for those who harm children. The angels of children do always behold the face of our Father in heaven. (I wonder if He had in mind what we now know about child abuse perpetrated by powerful people in Church and state among other things.) He also takes children as an example of what we all ought to be. What does He mean? Vulnerable? Trusting? Loving? Humble? Straightforward? Ready to acknowledge their own dependence?

March 12th

Mark 9 vv 38-42

What do we make of the fact that there are two churches in Cuxton and two in Halling? Christ prayed that we might be one. *The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not the communion of the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not the communion of the body of Christ? For we being many are one bread and one body: for we are all partakers of that one bread.* There are many reasons for the sad divisions in Christ's Church: differences of understanding of the faith; differences in missionary and pastoral strategy, cultural differences. We may not yet be able to see how to come together as one worshipping community, but we must celebrate each other as fellow Christians.

March 13th

Mark 9 vv 43-50

You might not want to take these verses too literally. However, they do make clear the commitment which is required of us.

Jesus, all for	All of my	For it's only in
Jesus	ambitions, hopes	Your will that I am
All I am and have	and plans	free
and ever hope to	I surrender these	For it's only in
be	into Your hands	Your will that I am
Jesus, all for	All of my	free
Jesus	ambitions, hopes	Jesus, all for
All I am and have	and plans	Jesus
and ever hope to	I surrender these	All I am and have
be	into Your hands	and ever hope to
		be

March 14th

Mark 10 vv 1-12

This is a hard issue. The vows in the marriage service are of unconditional love. What you effectively say is that, no matter what happens, no matter what your partner does, turns out to be, or becomes, you will remain faithful. The service quotes Jesus, Himself quoting Adam, to the effect that the two become one flesh. God makes man and wife one in an indissoluble union. God loves us unconditionally. We are made in His image. Redeemed human nature is Christ-like, God-like; it loves unconditionally. Mostly, we love our children unconditionally; we promise to love our husbands or wives unconditionally, no matter what. In theory, you can no more become divorced than you can become unbaptised. The Church is the bride of

Christ. The baptised are one with Him. Adultery is the equivalent of apostasy – infidelity to husband or wife, infidelity to God. Yet, we are human. We mess up our relationships. Our partners mess up our relationships. Moses (under God’s guidance) provided a way out of marriages which fail because of our all too human hardness of heart. Divorce ought not to happen, but it does because human beings are weak and sinful. Baptised people should all be totally committed Christians, but there are many failures to live up to our baptismal promises just as there are failures to live up to our marriage vows. God is merciful as well as just. We can be forgiven and make fresh starts. Divorce isn’t the unforgiveable sin. So we try to find the way to help people whose marriages have failed without undermining the basic premise of marriage – unconditional love. I’m not sure we’ve found it.

March 15th

Mark 10 vv 13-16

This story is often cited when Christians discuss another controversial issue. Should we baptise our babies or should baptism wait until they are old enough to understand and to decide for themselves. This is actually the 1662 reading at *The Publick Baptism of Infants*. I would defend infant baptism. You join the Church when you are baptised. Jesus clearly welcomes children. We never truly understand until we get to heaven. We become Christians by the grace of God. We don’t choose Him; He chooses us. In the OT, boys were circumcised on the eighth day. Children are included in God’s covenant with His people. Most of the Christian Church has always practised infant Baptism and it is consonant, if not explicit, with household Baptisms in the NT. Pastorally and evangelistically, it damages the Church’s relationship with the wider community if we seem to be rejecting people’s children.

March 16th

Mark 10 vv 17 -31

And another controversy! Ought Christians to give up all their material possessions? At the start of Acts, the Christian community hand over their belongings to the Church and hold things in common. Members of religious orders take vows of poverty. Christian people have often given more generously than they can afford and been prepared to accept much lower paid work than their qualifications would warrant because they see what they are doing as working for the Lord. Indeed, some of

us are uncomfortable with the chief executives of charities being paid like the executives of local authorities or companies. The argument for doing so is that, if we want charities to be run efficiently, we have to employ the best people and that means paying them well. The argument against is that the people we want heading churches, missions and charities shouldn't be the sort of people who are motivated by money. Now that there are millions of Christians in the world, it would hardly be possible to run the whole Church like a giant commune and, if we did, problems would no doubt soon arise as they do in Acts 5&6. So, most Christians do accept that it is right to own private property including money and most of us accept that some people will be better off than others – so long as no one is left destitute and the rich don't oppress the poor. But, underlying all this, is the point that whatever we might own is at God's disposal and our life is in Him not in possessions.

March 17th (Lent 2)

Mark 10 vv 32-44

I sometimes wonder why people want to be in charge. Have you noticed how quickly our prime ministers age in office? Power brings enormous responsibility and a lot of hard work. In many cases, you get little thanks for doing well and all the blame when things go wrong even if it's not your fault. Do you ever watch those dramas about, say, the time of Henry VIII? Various characters vie for positions at court and, when they fall out of favour, are imprisoned or executed. If only they'd stayed at home quietly managing their farms and businesses. Yet, despite everything which Jesus had said about authority and the fact that He was leading His disciples in the way of the Cross, James and John still wanted top jobs and the other ten were jealous when they found about it. If nobody were prepared to take a leading role, we should be in trouble. We need leaders and we need the best people to be leaders, but power only too often attracts the worst of people or corrupts good people who attain it, and the route to power is only too often a matter of eliminating rivals, deceiving potential supporters and bullying subordinates. Or am I being too cynical?

ALMIGHTY God, who seest that we have no power of ourselves to help ourselves; Keep us both outwardly in our bodies, and inwardly in our souls; that we may be defended from all adversities which may happen to the body, and from all evil

thoughts which may assault and hurt the soul; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

March 18th

Mark 10 v45

For even the Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many.

This is one of those verses we ought to have by heart. The last eight words summarise what Jesus' incarnation is all about. He came to die for us. He came to pay the price. He came to set us free from sin and death, from all the power of the devil.

He died that we might be forgiven, he died to make us good,
That we might go at last to heaven, saved by his precious blood.

There was no other good enough to pay the price of sin; He only could unlock the gate of heaven and let us in.

March 19th

Mark 10 v45

For even the Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many.

I remember preaching on this verse when I was a curate at Orpington. I remember explaining that *minister* as a noun means servant and *minister* as a verb means to serve. We think of ministers as big, important people with large incomes, big houses, expensive cars and all the trappings of state. Maybe, some of them think of themselves in that way, but ministers are servants. They are the Queen's servants. They are our servants. Ultimately, they are God's servants. The same goes for ministers of religion. We are your servants. We are God's servants. In the Church of England, we are the Queen's servants. *Endue thy ministers with righteousness. And make thy chosen people joyful.*

March 20th

Mark 10 vv 46-52

I told you that we studied Mark chapters 1-8 (+9¹) in college in the first year. The reason to break there is that the Gospel story effectively changes direction when the apostles acknowledge formally that Jesus is the Son of God. Remember the first verse of the Gospel is *The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.* Until this

point, there is less obvious pattern regarding where Jesus goes. People who are cured are generally sent home and told to keep quiet about it. The exception is the Gadarene demoniac, but he must have lived in Gentile territory as they kept pigs. Now, the movement is definitely towards Jerusalem, Crucifixion and Resurrection. When eyes are opened, the individual who can now see clearly follows Jesus.

March 21st

Mark 11 vv 1-11

What sense would this have made to the people actually present on that Sunday before Passover and, indeed, to the first generation of people who heard about it and, later, read about it? They might have remembered that kings entered Jerusalem on a donkey. They might have remembered that kings rode a donkey when they came in peace or a horse when they rode to war. They might have remembered the prophecy in Zechariah 9⁹. And they would have experienced everything that happened in the light of the Passover celebration – God setting His people free. But they could only do this if they knew their Bible stories.

March 22nd

Mark 11 vv 12-14

This is another difficult story. I think we have to read it in the context of Luke 21: ²⁹ *And he spake to them a parable; Behold the fig tree, and all the trees;* ³⁰ *When they now shoot forth, ye see and know of your own selves that summer is now nigh at hand.* ³¹ *So likewise ye, when ye see these things come to pass, know ye that the kingdom of God is nigh at hand.* It is a matter of being ready. The Kingdom of God is always imminent. It may come at any time. We have to be ready when we are called. On the one hand, we don't have to be afraid of what's going on in the world. God is in charge. His Kingdom is near. On the other hand, we have to be ready ourselves to receive Him – good servants doing their Master's will when He returns, not lazy or bad servants caught out disobeying Him.

March 23rd

Mark 11 vv 15-19

We were asked recently what we thought a cathedral was for. Actually, it is defined in law *a centre of worship and mission*. So anything which detracts from worship and mission would be an abuse. There should be

a welcoming atmosphere. People ought to be encouraged to come in. There should be opportunities for preaching and teaching the faith. There must be space for private prayer as well as public prayers. Pastors ought to be on hand. Everything about the way the building is cared for, its services, its music, its ministry must be done in the Name of the Lord Jesus. And this has to be achieved in the context of maintaining, cleaning, heating and perhaps improving this extremely expensive building as well as dealing with some people who may have serious needs and be quite difficult to relate to, and also in the context that the cathedral is an important symbol in the life of the city and of the nation, which may well have expectations which don't fit comfortably with the Gospel. Again, the dean and all the ministers need the support of our prayers.

March 24th (Lent 3)

Mark 11 vv 20-26

Prayer is one of the most basic human impulses. I find it hard to believe that there is anyone who never prays. But what is prayer? Is it getting God to give us what we want, to run the world in the way in which we think it should be run? That wouldn't make sense. God obviously knows so much better than we do what needs doing. Why would we expect or want Him to change His plans on our say so? Prayer is addressing God in faith. We bring to Him everything which is on our hearts. We pray for grace that our wills may be aligned with His Will. We trust Him. Our channel of communication with Him is open when we pray and through it we receive grace. Talk to God about everything. Trust Him. Your prayers are part of His plan by which He accomplishes His loving purposes. You don't believe that God will cast this mountain into the sea. Why would He? Why would you ask Him to? But you do believe that God will do what is right even though you don't know what that is. Pray for what you think is right and allow yourself to be guided by Him into all truth. He knows what is right. An important step in aligning our wills with God's Will is to be like Him ready to forgive. If we are not ready to forgive, the channels of love are blocked and we are not loving people. If we are not loving people we are not blessed. And, yes, God could cast that mountain into the sea if it were in accordance with His purposes.

By what authority doest thou these things?

That's always a good question and I'm not sure that some people are quick enough to ask it. A diocesan official told a group of clergy that couples getting married must follow a certain procedure. It is probably the wisest course of action to take. The Church's lawyers think that it ought to be a legal requirement. But in fact it isn't. We don't have the right to say that they must do it and, if they refuse, there is nothing we can do about it. In the same way, people often tell me that we must do such and such because some official or bureaucrat has said we must when in fact, if you check what the law actually says, they don't have that right. In my opinion, it is always a good idea to ask *By what authority doest thou these things?* when some bureaucrat starts issuing orders, especially in these days of proliferating over regulation.

However, it is quite different when we are dealing with Jesus. He acts with God's authority because He is God. We celebrate His Incarnation today – *conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary* – God made man. Someone once asked me why I was quite relaxed about things like confetti and wedding photography and video recordings while being strict about not marrying divorced people. The answer is that the first three examples are man made rules which have only the authority of the people who make them, whereas the principle that marriage is lifelong no matter what is the way God made the world. Since then, as I hinted on 14th March, I've come round to conducting weddings for people who have been divorced, but that isn't because I've decided that we can just discount what Jesus said about marriage. It is because I have come to the conclusion that sometimes the best thing we can do for people in the circumstances in which they now are is to help them to find a new path in a new relationship. But I still worry that I might be mistaken and am perhaps undermining the institution of marriage for everybody.

W E beseech thee, O Lord, pour thy grace into our hearts; that, as we have known the incarnation of thy Son Jesus Christ by the message of an angel, so by his cross and passion we may be brought unto the glory of his resurrection; through the same Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

March 26th

Mark 12 vv 1-9

This is another NT passage which probably only makes sense if you know the OT background. In Isaiah 5, God compares His care for Israel to the care of farmer tending a vineyard. What more could God have done for His people? Everything we have, we receive as blessing from Him. Just as the disappointed farmer would grub up an unfruitful vineyard, so God will destroy a people which doesn't bring forth the fruits of justice and mercy. Psalm 80 comes at it the other way round. God's people are His vineyard. How come He has let them be devastated? The remedy is in the last verse: *Turn us again, O Lord God of hosts : shew the light of thy countenance, and we shall be whole.* The only remedy is for God's people to turn back to Him – to repent. It is on God we depend for the grace to repent. We can only be restored if we return to God. We can only return to God by His grace working in our lives. Jesus expands these ideas. The farmer has left the vineyard in the hands of tenants – the rulers, kings, officials, priests, Pharisees, Sadducees. He sends His servants the prophets to seek the fruit of the vineyard, justice and mercy. Instead of yielding up to God justice and mercy, the tenants abuse the prophets God sends. Lastly, in culmination, God sends His Son. Instead, however, of respecting the Son of God, instead of repenting and turning to Him, they crucify Him. So there will be a new beginning. The Son they crucify will rise from the dead and the Gospel will be preached to the whole earth. Jew and Gentile will be redeemed through faith in Him. The human leadership – kings, priests, officials, etc. – who have let down God and His people will be replaced by a new order in which Christ the King pours out upon His people His Holy Spirit and His people are empowered to bring forth the fruits of the Spirit – Galatians 5^{22&23}: *But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, Meekness, temperance: against such there is no law.*

March 27th

Mark 12 vv 10-12

Vv 10&11 are a quotation from Psalm 118, the same Passover psalm the crowds were singing on Palm Sunday: *Blessed be he that cometh in the name of the Lord.* This idea of the stone rejected by the builders becoming the chief cornerstone recurs several times in the NT. The leaders of Israel who ought to have recognised the Messiah instead

betrayed Him and handed Him over to the Romans to be crucified. But God raised Him from the dead. God's whole plan for the salvation of the whole of creation depends solely and absolutely on Jesus. Those who are in Christ – i.e. baptised Christians – are also living stones in His Temple. The Holy Spirit dwells in this Temple. God dwells in us and we in Him. We are the Body of Christ playing our part in what God is doing through Him. Forgive me using the collect for 28th October!

O ALMIGHTY God, who hast built thy Church upon the foundation of the Apostles and Prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the head corner-stone; Grant us so to be joined together in unity of spirit by their doctrine, that we may be made an holy temple acceptable unto thee; through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.

March 28th

Mark 12 vv 13-17

Suppose you asked me to go to a rock concert I didn't want to go to one Sunday evening and I said that I couldn't go because it was on a Sunday. It isn't really that I can't go because it's on a Sunday. I sometimes go to other entertainments on Sundays. The real reason I don't want to go is that I don't much like the idea of being in an overcrowded, overheated venue full of over-excited people and blasted with music which I'm pretty sure would be louder than I'm comfortable with and not really my cup of tea anyway. I'd try to find an excuse if you pressed me to go to a rock concert on any day of the week. So I'm being a hypocrite when I try to pretend that my reasons for not going on Sunday are my loyalty to God when in fact I just don't want to go. It would be abusing my religion for my own purposes. I think this is what is going on in today's story. A zealot might have claimed that he was refusing to pay his tax to the Roman government for religious reasons. Everything belongs to God. They were in the holy city in the holy land. They were the people of God. Surely God wouldn't want them to pay taxes to the pagan Romans. Religion could be used as an excuse to defy Rome and maybe start an insurrection. Jesus says that this isn't the way. When He draws a distinction between what is Caesar's and what is God's, He isn't saying that Caesar and his realm are in any way independent of God or that Caesar is not answerable to God. What He is saying is that in paying our taxes, in rendering to Caesar what is

Caesar's, we are at the same time rendering to God what is God's. It is God's Will that we are subject unto the high powers (Romans 13¹).

March 29th

Mark 12 vv 18-27

It's hard to imagine what life might be like after we've left this life behind. I think some people imagine it as very much like this life. People talk about their loved ones propping up the bar in some celestial hostelry. Other people say that they cannot believe in life after death at all. They think we shall simply cease to exist when our brains stop functioning. Near death experiences suggest tunnels, light, visions of Jesus and of our already deceased loved ones, occasionally beautiful gardens, and sometimes something so horrible to describe. The Sadducees didn't believe in life after death (or angels come to that), but the Pharisees did. The Sadducees think they've caught Jesus out with this over literal story. In ancient Israel, women largely depended on their fathers, brothers, husbands or sons to support them. Moreover, land remained in the family, passed down from generation to generation. So the custom was that, if a man died childless, his brother would marry his widow. That would see that she was provided for and keep the land in the family to be passed down to the next generation. Polygamy seems to have been permitted. Both parties had to consent to marriage. Forced marriage has always been wrong. But there wasn't necessarily much romance in what might well be primarily a business transaction. The Sadducees' example tries to reduce to the absurd the notion that we live after death. *Whose wife shall she be of them? for the seven had her to wife.* It's like when Mark Twain asks whether those who die as babies remain babies for all eternity or when Alf Garnett says that a man's amputated leg will be waiting for him in Heaven. Jesus tells them that heaven isn't like that at all. He doesn't tell us what heaven is like because it would be beyond our understanding. What we do know is that we shall see Him and know Him & be made like Him and that there will be no more tears, that what we have now is a foretaste of what is to come and that God has laid up for us things beyond our understanding. As God is love, we shall be love and we shall live in perfect love with God and with all the faithful departed, including those whom we have loved on earth. Jesus refers the Sadducees back to the Torah – the only part of the Bible they regard as

authoritative. God told Moses that He is the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. That being so, at least those three live in Him because God is the God of the living. If those three live eternally in God, why not all God's people? In fact we know Moses lives in God because he appeared with Elijah at the Transfiguration.

March 30th

Mark 12 vv 28-34

Maybe this brings us back to what I said earlier about divorced people marrying again. Of all the commandments, the most important are to love God and to love our neighbours. In fact, loving our neighbours follows from loving God. We can't credibly claim to love the God we can't see if we don't love the brother whom we can see. It's more than that, however. These are not merely the greatest of the commandments as you might say "*Thou shalt do no murder* is more important than *Thou shalt not go up and down as a talebearer among thy people* and *Love the LORD thy God* is even more important still." The love commandments summarise every other commandment. If we obey the love commands, we obey all the commandments. All the commandments follow from the command to love. It is love which inspires and empowers us to keep the commandments of God. God is love. It is literally love which makes the world go round. If our wills are aligned with His Will, if we are working with Him, we are love and loving is what we do. Thus the other commandments (including the sanctity of marriage) have to be understood in the light of what it is to love. That doesn't mean that we quickly conclude that any commandment can be reinterpreted to allow us to do whatever we like. What we like can be bad for us and for other people. But it also means that can't abuse God's commandments to do harm rather than good. Eric Liddle refused to run at the Olympics on the Sabbath, but, later as a missionary in China, he happily played football on Sundays with poor boys who had very little opportunity to enjoy themselves.

March 31st (Lent 4 Mothering Sunday)

Mark 12 vv 35-37

Whose Son is Jesus? Mary is evidently His mother and Mary may well feature in our thoughts this Mothering Sunday – a woman who willingly accepted God's Will for her life and devoted herself to Jesus. In the NT, many people assumed that His father was Joseph and people

today will often speak of Joseph as Jesus' father. We know better. Jesus is the Son of God. We say so, some of us twice daily, in the Creed. Yet much is made of the fact that Joseph is descended from King David. Our Lord's lineage after the flesh is traced back to Israel's greatest King. There are so many promises made in the Bible which depend on David and his son. They are partially fulfilled in Solomon and other rulers of David's line, including Zerubbabel who was a key figure in rebuilding the Temple which Solomon built and Nebuchadnezzar destroyed. It is the conviction of the Church that the promises made to David are fulfilled in Jesus, much more wonderfully than people in OT times could even imagine, much more wonderfully than any human being could imagine. So whose Son is Jesus? Is He the Son of David (as He is sometimes called in this Gospel and elsewhere in the NT)? Is He the One the Jews are expecting? Or is He the Son of God? Of course, He is the Son of God and this is why He fulfils all the promises made through David in a way that no earthly king could fulfil them. Jesus brings this out with this interpretation of Psalm 110¹ *The LORD said unto my Lord : Sit thou on my right hand, until I make thine enemies thy footstool.* In order to understand this, you have to think of King David singing or saying these words. You also have to understand that the LORD is the holy Name in the Hebrew, but *my lord* is just the ordinary word for Lord – Adonai. So the person David is addressing is David's lord. He calls Him *my lord*. He cannot therefore be David's son, but is one much greater than David. So Jesus is telling the scribes in a roundabout way that the OT itself predicts that it will be a much greater than David, one much more than one of David's descendants in whom all the prophecies are fulfilled.

1. Hail to the Lord's
Anointed,
Great David's greater Son!
Hail, in the time appointed,
His reign on earth begun!
He comes to break
oppression,
To set the captive free,
To take away transgression,
And rule in equity.

2. He comes with succour
speedy
To those who suffer wrong;
To help the poor and needy
And bid the weak be strong;
To give them songs for
sighing,
Their darkness turn to light,
Whose souls, condemned

and dying,
Were precious in His sight.
3. He shall come down like
showers

Upon the fruitful earth,
And joy and hope, like
flowers,
Spring in His path to birth.
Before Him on the
mountains

Shall peace, the herald, go
And righteousness, in
fountains,
From hill to valley flow.

4. Arabia's desert ranger
To Him shall bow the knee,
The Ethiopian stranger
His glory come to see;
With offerings of devotion
Ships from the isles shall
meet

To pour the wealth of ocean
In tribute at His feet.

5. Kings shall bow down
before Him
And gold and incense bring;
All nations shall adore Him,
His praise all peoples sing;
To Him shall prayer
unceasing

And daily vows ascend,
His kingdom still increasing,
A kingdom without end.

6. O'er every foe victorious,
He on His throne shall rest,
From age to age more
glorious,
All blessing and all-blest.
The tide of time shall never
His covenant remove;

His name shall stand
forever, --
That name to us is Love.