

BOOK ONE

**THE GOSPEL OF JESUS
THE MESSIAH**

Mark 1:14 - 8:30

**PART ONE : GOD'S HEALING
AND LIBERATING WORD**

Mark 1:14 - 3:6

The Structure of Book One

Caesarea Philippi is at the foot of Mount Hermon at the northern extremity of Galilee. It was there, according to Mark 8:27-30, that Peter first acknowledged Jesus as the Messiah. This marked a turning point in Jesus' ministry as he began from there his journey south with his disciples, heading for Jerusalem. After Caesarea Philippi, Mark focuses on what it means for Jesus to be the Messiah, and on what it means to be his disciple: what it means to walk with Jesus to Jerusalem.

Prior to Caesarea Philippi our attention is focused on the good news: on the healing and liberating effect of God's love, visible in the life and ministry of Jesus. Mark wants us to listen to Jesus, and, even more importantly, to watch him, in the hope that we, like Peter, will come to acknowledge him as the one who brings meaning to our lives. Hopefully, we might then commit ourselves to walk with him. Mark knows that only when we are attracted to Jesus does it make sense to spell out the cost of accompanying him on his journey.

The fact that Mark focuses attention on Jesus' ministry in Galilee is itself instructive, for in Galilee, as in the community for whom Mark wrote, dwelt Jews and non-Jews. It is there that Jesus chose to live. He intended his message for everyone.

Mark sets out Jesus' Galilean ministry in three parts.

Part One (1:14 - 3:6a) opens with a summary of Jesus' ministry (1:14-15) and the call of the first disciples (1:16-20). It ends on a tragic note as we witness the religious leaders rejecting Jesus (3:1-6a). In this part, Mark concentrates on Jesus' healing and liberating word.

Part Two (3:6b - 6:6) also begins with a summary statement concerning Jesus' ministry (3:6b-12), and the call, this time, of the Twelve (3:13-19). It, too, ends in tragedy, as the people of Jesus' own town reject him (6:1-6). In this part the focus is on the power of God's Spirit as witnessed in Jesus' words and actions.

Part Three (6:6 - 8:30) once again opens with a summary statement of Jesus' ministry (6:6), followed by the account of Jesus' sending of the Twelve on their first mission (6:7-13). It ends, not in the tragedy of rejection, but in Peter's acceptance of Jesus as the Messiah (8:27-30). In this part, Mark reflects on the difficulty of truly hearing and truly seeing Jesus.

After the first portrayal of the 'miracle of the loaves', he presents us with a series of scenes in which people fail to 'hear' what Jesus is really saying. This is followed by the miraculous healing of a deaf man — surely a symbol of us all. Then comes his second portrayal of the 'miracle of the loaves', followed by scenes in which we see people failing to 'see' Jesus for who he is. This is followed by the miraculous healing of someone who is blind. Only then is Peter's confession possible, for it is by a miracle of grace that the leader of the Twelve hears and sees Jesus with the ears and eyes of faith.

Summary of the Good News

¹⁴ **Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God,**
¹⁵ **and saying, 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent**
[keep on repenting],
and believe in
[keep on believing in]
the good news.'

The Baptist has just spoken of one 'coming after' him (1:7). Here he is standing before us and telling us that 'the time is fulfilled': the time to which the prophets had looked forward with such longing (see, for example, Jeremiah 50:20 and Daniel 7:22; 12:4,9); the time that had filled the dreams and sustained the lives of a whole people; the time when God would visit this world and establish his peace and justice and the reign of his love. The time of expectation has come to an end. History has reached its full flowering!

To appreciate the startling nature of what Jesus is proclaiming here, one needs to appreciate the enthusiasm of the Messianic expectation that was characteristic of Judaism at that time. Against the background of that expectation there is no avoiding the absoluteness of Jesus' claim. The time for repentance, the time for a change of mind and heart (see 1:4), is now! Not in the distant future, not tomorrow. Here and now! The time for the fulfilment of all that God has promised 'has come near'. Jesus is proclaiming that God is acting powerfully, now, to bring healing and liberation.

What this means and how people are to change their minds and hearts is the subject of the rest of the gospel. Here, Mark tells us simply that it requires an attitude of 'believing': that is to say, an attitude of listening, of heeding what we hear, and of faithfully acting upon it. Essential, too, is the realisation that what Jesus is revealing is something 'new', and that the news is 'good'. The challenge thrown down by Mark in the opening words of his Gospel (1:1) issues now from the mouth of Jesus. We will need to listen to Jesus and not to Roman propaganda if we are to hear the good news. It is the recognition of how good the news is that will give people the courage to dare to make whatever changes are necessary to heed Jesus' summons.

The essence of the good news is found, as we have already noted, in Jesus' baptismal experience, an experience of intimacy which Jesus realised was not meant for him alone. He realised that God is the Father-Mother of each man and each woman. He realised that God wants to say to every man: 'You are my son, the one I love. In you I delight'. God wants to say to every woman: 'You are my daughter, the one I love. In you I delight'.

compare
Matthew 4:12,17
Luke 4:14a

Jesus knew that it was the failure of his contemporaries to know this wonderful truth that accounted for their desperate situation, and he was determined to share with them his own experience. He was moved to tell them, and to show them, that God, the Ultimate Reality for whom they all yearned, was to be found at the heart of their lives, loving them and delighting in them.

It is typical of Mark to go straight to the heart of Jesus' preaching, and immediately to demand of his readers full attention and readiness for commitment. Both the news that Jesus is proclaiming, and the reign of God that it is his mission to bring about are 'of God': that is to say, they are from God, they are about God, and they lead to God. Jesus can be understood only in relation to the Spirit of God that fills him at his baptism, the Spirit that drives him into combat with evil, the Spirit that fills his mind and heart as he begins his public ministry. Indeed, in the words of Isaiah:

How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger who announces peace,
who brings good news, who announces salvation, who says to Zion, 'Your God reigns.'

– Isaiah 52:7

The official Prayer of the Church begins each day with the following words: 'O that today you would listen to his voice! Do not harden your hearts' (Psalm 95:7-8). We might reflect on them as we begin our study of Mark. If we have not taken the trouble to listen and to follow in the past, it is still possible now to do so. Even if we have in some way listened and followed, it is necessary to keep listening and to be ready now to follow, for God may be calling us now on a new journey.

God cannot be contained within the limits of our ideas concerning him or the ways in which we have so far come to know him. Yet this transcendent God is immanent in our lives and in our world, and has come near us in Jesus. A disciple of Jesus must always be ready to 'repent', to be open to the surprise of God's word calling us to an ever deeper intimacy, and to an ever closer sharing in the mission which God entrusted to Jesus.

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

17 And Jesus said to them, 'Follow me and I will make you fish for people.'

18 And immediately they left their nets and followed him.

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

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

compare
Matthew 4:18-22
Luke 5:1-11

Joining Jesus in his mission

Here we see what we need to do if we are going to repent. We need to follow Jesus, leaving behind anything, however important, that impedes our journeying with him.

From the beginning Mark draws attention to the fact that Jesus' mission was never meant to be one that he was to carry out on his own. The goal was to reconcile all to God. This involves the building of community and so the necessity of extending an invitation to others to help make this possible. The sea is a symbol of the forces of chaos prior to the creative action of God's Spirit. In watching Jesus call the fishermen from the sea, we are watching his Spirit call them to be part of a new creation. Jesus' redeeming action is already at work.

The Greek word translated 'follow' in 1:18 (not in 1:20) is *akoluthêô*, from which derives our English 'acolyte'. It is commonly used in the gospels for that way of accompanying Jesus that is special to a disciple. These first disciples are being called to carry on Jesus' mission of rescuing others from the 'sea'. They will 'fish for people' (compare Jeremiah 16:16).

Note that the initiative comes from Jesus, both in word (1:17), and in a look that penetrates to the heart (1:19). Mark underscores the urgency of the call with one of his favourite words, 'immediately'. There seems to be a conscious contrast here with the way Elisha responded when Elijah called him (1Kings 19:19-21). Following Jesus must come before anything else, no matter how important (see also 8:18-22). Mark stresses the need for a complete and wholehearted response.

Christian detachment is not a matter of refraining from becoming really involved in this world. God loves the world, and Jesus longed to heal it so that we would live to the full. Disciples of Jesus are committed to undertake God's project for the world with all their hearts and minds and with all their energy.

Teilhard de Chardin expresses this well:

God does not deflect our gaze prematurely from the work he himself has given us, since he presents himself to us as attainable only through that very work. Nor does God blot out, in his intense light, the detail of our earthly aims, since the closeness of our union with him is in fact determined by the exact fulfilment of the least of our tasks ... It is a matter of life and death that the earth should flourish to the utmost of its natural powers...

Far too many Christians are insufficiently conscious of the divine responsibility of their lives. They live just like other people, giving only half of themselves, never experiencing the spur or the intoxication of advancing the kingdom of God in every domain of humankind. If you must blame us, then blame our weakness, not our faith. Our faith imposes upon us the right and the duty to throw ourselves into the things of the earth.

– The Divine Milieu

As John of the cross notes, in the Ascent of Mount Carmel (I.2,4), it makes little difference whether the leg of a bird is tied with a strong rope or with the tiniest thread. If anything is holding it, it cannot fly. Flight to God cannot occur till all attachments that cause us to resist the call of grace, however small, are broken.

Christian detachment calls us to be attached to people and to things in such a way that we are willing to let them go if ever and whenever we are called to do so. Furthermore, detachment is not possible for us on our own initiative. We can leave what we love only when called and graced to do so. Jesus' first disciples did, indeed, leave their father and their nets but only in response to Jesus' call to accompany him.

The call to follow Jesus is well expressed by Paul in the following passage in which he speaks of the ministry of reconciliation which Christ continues through him. It is a ministry of calling people to follow Jesus: a following which makes of a disciple a new creature:

So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation:
 everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!
 All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ,
 and has given us the ministry of reconciliation;
 that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself,
 not counting their trespasses against them,
 and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us.

– 2Corinthians 5:17-19

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

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

23 Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, 24 and he cried out, 'What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God.'

25 But Jesus rebuked him saying, 'Be silent, and come out of him!' 26 **And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him. 27 They were all amazed, and they kept on asking one another, 'What is this? A new teaching— with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him.'**

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

compare
Matthew 4:23-25; 7:28-29
Luke 4:31-37

Jesus' teaching vanquishes evil

Jesus chose Capernaum as the base for his ministry in Galilee. It was a fishing town on the main trade route from Egypt to Damascus (the Roman 'Via Maris'). Its population at the time of Jesus has been estimated at 15,000 inhabitants, a mixture of Jew and non-Jew. Mark establishes the essential pattern for Jesus' ministry in a scene where the 'Holy One of God' confronts and defeats an 'unclean spirit'.

To understand the category 'unclean' we need to go back to the ancient regulations forbidding contact with certain foods (see Leviticus 11), certain objects, for example a corpse (Numbers 5:2) and certain people, for example, lepers (Leviticus 13:45), and women at the time of menstruation (Leviticus 15:19) and childbirth (Leviticus 12:2-5). The reasons for such regulations varied from the desire to avoid disease to a determination not to encroach upon the sacred. This was especially important in the regulations concerning women, for blood was deemed sacred.

A person who broke these ancient taboos was declared 'unclean' and had to avoid social contact. It was especially important that they not contaminate places deemed holy because of God's presence. The separation of what is 'holy' from what is 'unclean' led to lands other than Israel being called 'unclean' (see Amos 7:17). The same held for their inhabitants, the Gentiles (Isaiah 35:8; 52:1).

A person who separated himself from God by sin was thought of as being 'like one who is unclean' (Isaiah 64:6). By the time of the New Testament, popular imagination thought of the 'unclean' as being outside the protective power of God's holiness and so a prey to the influence of 'unclean demons'. It is not without significance that Mark locates this unclean spirit in a place (the synagogue) and on a day (the Sabbath) that symbolise the centre of power of the scribes. It is important to note that the accent throughout this scene is on Jesus' teaching. 'He entered the synagogue and *taught*'. 'They were astounded at his *teaching*'. 'He *taught* as one having authority'. 'What is this? A new *teaching* — with authority!'

In the light of the contrast made between the teaching and authority of the scribes and that of Jesus, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that Mark wants us to read this passage symbolically. Jesus is determined to exorcise the evil that is corrupting the religious establishment. The teaching of the scribes should have revealed God as Liberator and Saviour. It should have been an instrument in drawing people into communion with the Holy One. In fact, it kept people in the area of the ‘unclean’. It is not physical illness that is a barrier to receiving the good news. The evil that has to be exorcised is of a spiritual nature. Jesus has to confront teaching that does not further the kingdom of God.

The evil spirit names Jesus in a vain effort to control him and to stop him meddling in the synagogue. It is no match for the one who has come to overthrow evil in all its manifestations. This is the point which Mark does not want us to miss, right from the outset of his Gospel. However, the unclean spirit does not leave without ‘convulsing him and crying with a loud voice’. Everything that sin has built up in an individual or in a society must be shaken to its foundations for full purification to be effected. We might recall the response of Isaiah to his vision of the all holy God:

Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!

– Isaiah 6:5

Jesus’ word of command echoes the word of God bringing order out of chaos. The astonishing healing is a sign of the action of God’s word overpowering all that would limit our living life to the full, and demonstrating that no power can resist God’s word, if only we would heed it. Jesus’ injunction, ‘Be silent!’, is the first of many occasions on which Jesus enjoins secrecy on those who acclaim him in Messianic terms. A number of reasons are suggested for this. One suggestion is that Jesus resisted Messianic claims because he wanted to ensure that those who accepted him as the Messiah knew who and what it was they were accepting. For this to happen it was necessary that they come to know him personally, rather than simply hear of him through others. It is only after Jesus has presented the good news about God that Peter acknowledges him as the Messiah (8:29). Even that acknowledgment, however, has to be corrected and refined still more through an exploration of Jesus’ special relationship of obedience to God and his mission of suffering.

Another suggestion is that Jesus, at this early stage of his ministry, was anxious to avoid the kind of publicity that would bring him into conflict with the authorities. In fact it was actions such as the one described in this scene — actions performed on the Sabbath and so running counter to the prevailing understanding of God’s will concerning the Sabbath rest — that did eventually lead to his condemnation by the Jewish religious leadership. When opposition came, Jesus faced it; but it was not his intention to provoke it unnecessarily.

Everything about Jesus, not just what he said, carried *authority*, for it brought people in touch with the *author* of life, and so was a ‘word of God’, revealing the mystery of God and able to engage the hearts and the minds of anyone who was open to listen to him.

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

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

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

Healing leads to ministry

We find the same sense of urgency continued here. Simon's mother-in-law is ill. Jesus takes her by the hand and *lifts her up*. Mark uses the same language when he describes Jesus' healing of the daughter of Jairus (5:41), and of the tormented boy (9:27). In fact, the Greek word translated here as 'lifted up' is the same word as that used for the resurrection (16:6). She is a symbol of all who are raised up by Jesus to a new life.

It is a life of service. The verb 'serve' translates the Greek *diakonein*, from which we get our word 'deacon'. It is used in the New Testament for ministry performed by a person commissioned by God. Mark has already used it of the angels sent by God to minister to Jesus (1:13). This woman is healed, and the fruit of the healing is that she places herself at God's disposal to be a minister of love.

We all have love to offer. We all have something to give to others in service. How often we, like Simon's mother-in-law, can be so overwhelmed by our own pain that we are tempted to give up and isolate ourselves from those who need our love. We, too, need Jesus' healing touch, that we might share his ministry of service. We might reflect on the following statement from Saint Paul:

There are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit;
and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord;
and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God
who activates all of them in everyone.
To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit
for the common good.

– 1Corinthians 12:4-7

Paul is reflecting on the Christian life. From the Spirit of God we each receive all that we have as a gift of grace. From the risen Christ we are all commissioned (a commission which the community needs to recognise and name) to use the gifts we have to carry on his mission in the world: to 'serve' God in serving others, and to 'give our lives' for them (Mark 10:45). Nor should we be despondent if our gifts seem so poor, for it is God, who creates out of nothing, who:

by the power at work within us is able to accomplish far
more than all we can ask or imagine.

– Ephesians 3:20

compare
Matthew 8:14-15
Luke 4:38-39

It is surprising how often we find that our healing comes precisely when we forget ourselves and serve others. Listen to Isaiah:

Is not this the fast that I choose:
to loose the bonds of injustice,
to undo the thongs of the yoke,
to let the oppressed go free,
and to break every yoke?

Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,
and bring the homeless poor into your house;
when you see the naked, to cover them,
and not to hide yourself from your own kin?
Then your light shall break forth like the dawn,
and your healing shall spring up quickly;
your vindicator shall go before you,
the glory of the

 ll, and the Lord will answer;
you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am.

If you remove the yoke from among you,
the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil,
if you offer your food to the hungry
and satisfy the needs of the afflicted,
then your light shall rise in the darkness
and your gloom be like the noonday.
The Lord will guide you continually,

³² That evening, at sunset, they brought to him all who were sick or possessed with demons. ³³ And the whole city was gathered around the door.

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

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

³⁶ And Simon and his companions hunted for him. ³⁷ When they found him, they said to him, 'Everyone is searching for you.' ³⁸ He answered, 'Let us go on to the neighbouring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do.'

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

compare Matthew 8:16
Luke 4:40-44

Healing in obedience to God's will

In accord with the understanding of his time, Mark distinguishes between physical and mental illnesses and attributes the later to demonic possession, as in 1:21-28. As in the earlier passage, Jesus repeats his injunction of silence.

The key to this passage is that it contains Mark's first explicit reference to Jesus' prayer. Mark wishes to underline the fact that Jesus' mission cannot be described simply as a mission of love. If it were, he would surely have stayed to meet the needs of those who were searching for him so keenly.

His mission, rather, was to mediate the love of the Father to people, and to do so always in obedience to God's will. Hence the need for prayer. In fact he discerns in prayer that it is God's will for him to move on . The whole of Galilee must know of and experience the good news.

It is surely appropriate to speculate that obedience in this case would not have been easy for Jesus. Who finds it easy to leave people when they want us as much as those people wanted him? Jesus remained continually attentive to the Spirit of the One whose mission he was carrying out. Here we have another lesson in detachment.

As we watch Jesus seeking solitude even from the grace-filled activity which the Spirit of God was accomplishing in and through him, we are reminded not to neglect the silence of solitary prayer ourselves. John of the Cross has the following advice:

Let those who are singularly active, who think they can win the world with their preaching and exterior works, observe here that they would profit the Church and please God much more, not to mention the good example they would give, were they to spend at least half of this time with God in prayer, even though they may not have reached a prayer as sublime as this. They would then certainly accomplish more by one work than they otherwise would by a thousand. For through their prayer they would merit this result, and themselves be spiritually strengthened. Without prayer they would do a great deal of hammering but accomplish little, and sometimes nothing, and even at times cause harm.

– The Spiritual Canticle 29.3

Jesus opposes a system which creates outcasts

We see Jesus experiencing a mixture of compassion and anger - compassion for the poor man suspected of leprosy, and anger at the system that treated him so badly. The man could have had any one of a number of virulent skin complaints. Whatever the exact nature of his disease, he was considered a leper and came under the following law:

The person who has the leprosy shall wear torn clothes and let the hair of his head be dishevelled; and he shall cover his upper lip and cry out, 'Unclean, unclean.' He shall remain unclean as long as he has the disease; he is unclean. He shall live alone; his dwelling shall be outside the camp.

– Leviticus 13:45-46

As this text makes clear, leprosy was not just another physical ailment. It made a person a social outcast. A leper did not belong. He not only had no hope of a cure; he had no hope of enjoying ordinary human companionship, no hope of receiving love, no hope of being accepted as a person. He had to say Goodbye to his home and loved ones. He had to 'stay outside in places where nobody lived.' This is the first point to notice. It will not be difficult to find the equivalent in our society - those who for one reason or another are categorised by their race, colour, social class, looks, sex, but not treated as persons.

The second point to note (and this is also clear from the Leviticus text) is that a leper was treated in this way in God's name. A leper would find little hope here from God. Furthermore, no matter how personally compassionate people might feel towards him, they understood that they had no choice but to obey God's instructions as inscribed in the Law. They, too, were taught that the words of Scripture were the words of God and so since it was God who was telling them not to touch him and to cast him out of the camp, they obediently did what they were told.

That the prevailing understanding of Leviticus was wrong is made abundantly clear by Jesus. Sure, the passage does reveal something about God's holiness and of the need for purification if we are to be in God's presence. The words of Scripture are inspired by God, but they are God's words as imperfectly understood by limited, imperfect human beings.

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

⁴¹ *Moved with pity,* [some manuscripts have 'indignation'] **Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him, and said to him, 'I do choose. Be made clean!'** ⁴² **Immediately the leprosy left him, and he was made clean.**

⁴³ *After sternly warning him* [or 'expressing to him his strong feelings'] *he sent him away at once,* ⁴⁴ **saying to him, 'See that you say nothing to anyone; but go, show yourself to the priest, and offer for your cleansing what Moses commanded, as a testimony to them.'**

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

compare Matthew 8:1-4
Luke 5:12-14

The leper

The authors of Leviticus drew unwarranted conclusions from their understanding of God's purity: they thought that this meant that lepers (and other classes of people) had to be separated from the assembly. Jesus, who is the perfect revelation of God's word, shows us that the solution is not casting the lepers out but a love that heals and purifies. This is just one more example of the danger of reading Scriptural texts literally without recognising their imperfection and seeing them in the light of the fuller revelation given by Jesus. How many terrible things have been done in God's name over the centuries by people who failed to distinguish what is from God and what is human imperfection in the sacred Scriptures.

We are told that the leper approached Jesus. This already tells us a lot about Jesus. What kind of man must he have been for a leper to have dared to approach him, breaking all conventions (including the 'word of God' as understood by all his contemporaries), and risking the ire of the crowd? Something in him tells him that Jesus can cure him. Did Jesus know this prior to this encounter? Who knows? How do we come to know ourselves except through the responses of others? Lepers were not new to Jesus. He would have come across them as a boy and as a young man, and not known what to do other than to weep for them. But now, something in this man's eyes and in his manner, especially the absolute trust, stirred Jesus deeply.

The manuscripts followed by the editors of the NRSV speak of Jesus' compassion, and this may well be what Mark intends to portray. However, the whole feeling of the passage seems to point rather to indignation. Physical illness does not separate people from God's love, nor is it a barrier to receiving the good news. What is a barrier is the system which creates outcasts, and Jesus cannot contain his anger at those who perpetuate it.

Jesus knows that the Law, at its best, recognises God to be 'merciful and gracious ... abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness' (Exodus 34:6. See also Hosea 2:19). Moved by the Spirit of God who hears the cry of the poor (Job 34:28), Jesus reaches out to the leper, and, bypassing the injunctions of Leviticus, embraces him with his healing touch. Seeing the horror on the faces of those around him, Jesus is overwhelmed with righteous anger at their failure to believe in God's compassion.

Jesus acted with such compassion because he knew what it was like to be an outsider. He lived with the poor, felt with them, was one of them. He knew that to love someone we must go out to them; we must be willing to take their place. So often we 'love' people till it hurts and then we stop. So often we 'help' people, but up to a point. So often we assist others from our point of view and only so long as it does not interfere radically with our priorities. In this scene with the leper, Jesus shows us the compassion of God. The kind of love Jesus demonstrates here is the kind of love that will take him to the cross. He was not willing to draw the line, but loved even to the emptying of himself.

Jesus sends the man back to the priests to show them what God is doing in their midst. Mark has already quoted from the prophet Malachi when introducing John the Baptist (1:2), and it is possible that he has the same text in mind here. In the synagogue at Capernaum, Jesus confronted the scribes. Here he confronts the priests:

See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple. The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight-- indeed, he is coming, says the Lord of hosts. But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? ... He will purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, until they present offerings to the Lord in righteousness ... Then I will draw near to you for judgment; I will be swift to bear witness ... against those who oppress the hired workers in their wages, the widow and the orphan, against those who thrust aside the alien, and do not fear me, says the Lord of hosts.

– Malachi 3:1-5

For reasons that have already been noted when commenting on 1:21-28, Jesus enjoins silence upon the healed man, who, however, cannot refrain from glorifying God and ‘spreading the word’. And the result? The leper is welcomed back into the community, while Jesus is forced to take the place once occupied by the leper: he is no longer able to go openly into a town, but has to stay outside in the uninhabited countryside. He would have had to do so for the prescribed period, till it was ascertained that he had not contracted the disease. Jesus is the Servant of the Lord (see Isaiah 53:2-4). Mark is telling us that the only real compassion is that which is willing to share the condition of the oppressed. You cannot help me unless you are willing to sit with me and share my pain and my shame. You can heal me only if you love me enough to be with me whatever my condition. There is no other way.

He concludes this moving and powerful scene by telling us that no Law can stop the spread of the gospel. Jesus refused to obey the Law when it required of him that he restrain the compassion of God that moved his heart. The people learned from him, and they, too, learned not to be contained by the words of the Law. They refused to stay away from him, for they were learning a new way of looking upon God: a way that broke through all the man-made limits of the Law, and that moved them, as it had moved the leper, to dare to seek healing from the one who revealed to them a God in whom their hearts could believe.

Who of us does not need healing? Who of us does not know the feeling of being alone, isolated from others, a ‘leper’ and an outcast? Firstly, do we really want to be healed? And secondly, can we, like this simple man, dare to approach Jesus and say to him: ‘If you want to, you can cleanse me (welcome me into the realm of the holy)’, believing that he does want to and will not fail to hear our cry? This is not to say that we will necessarily obtain the healing that we think we need. But we can be certain that God who knows us will grace us with whatever healing will release us to be more closely united to God’s Son, Jesus, and more able to love. To know that is enough. So let us, like children, dare to ask for whatever we desire, so long as we do so trusting that God knows best what is good for us. Furthermore, let us learn from Jesus how to welcome those who feel themselves to be outcasts. Who knows what miracles of healing are possible if we are willing to share each other’s pain?

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

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

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

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

⁵ **When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, ‘Son, your sins are forgiven.’**

compare
Matthew 9:1-2
Luke 5:17-20

A paralysed man is healed

In the opening scene of his gospel, Mark prepared us for the ‘forgiveness of sins’(1:4). In the scene before us we see Jesus proclaiming the presence of God who is healing us from the ultimate paralysis, the paralysis caused by sin. In commenting on 1:4, we noted that the Greek word translated ‘sin’ means ‘missing the mark’. It includes many aspects of our human condition that result from fear, insecurity, ignorance and lack of freedom, as well as from stubbornness, laziness, envy, lust and pride. We are not wholly responsible for the sin that is in our lives, any more than the man in the gospel is responsible for being paralysed. Our sinful condition is largely the result of factors that are hereditary and environmental. (Hence the term ‘original sin’ — sin that comes from our origins.)

We know, however, that there are times when we choose to say Yes to sin, when we fail to resist its attraction though we know we are able to do so. Whatever the measure of our personal responsibility, the fact is that we are sinners who so often ‘miss the mark’, and the result of sin is a paralysing, more or less serious, of our spirit.

Jesus knew our fears and our insecurity. He knew, as we will see shortly, the pain of rejection. He knew what it was like to be misunderstood and wrongly judged. He knew what it was like to feel abandoned not only by friends but also by God. He showed us that sin is no answer to any of these experiences. He also showed us that it is possible to be human and not sin. More than that, he witnessed to the truth that to give in to sin is to fall short of what as human beings we are called and graced to be. The good news of which he is the herald is that nothing can separate us from God’s love, and no circumstance can prevent us loving, no matter how limited our capacity to love may be.

To sin is one thing. To remain bound in sin is another. Whatever our sin, there is a liberating power at work in us that is greater than our sin, and Jesus knew the importance of forgiveness. From our own life experience we, too, know its importance. Wittingly or unwittingly we are always hurting others. Love that is not expressed in forgiveness will soon die. We would all end up locked into our past errors and sins and misunderstandings and hurts.

Jesus tells the paralysed man that his sins are forgiven. Before we reflect on the meaning of forgiveness, it is important to note that Jesus' statement is made in light of the faith of the men. Forgiveness does not happen by some magical power unrelated to the condition of the sinner. Forgiveness requires faith. We are called to listen to God's word, to place our trust in God, and to act accordingly. Where this disposition is present, all that love can do will be done, as it is faith that removes all obstacles to the working of the mysterious power of God's creating, healing and liberating love.

It is important to pause here to investigate more closely what Mark means by 'faith'. While 'faith' is impossible without 'trust', biblical usage is against identifying them. Hebrew words which express trust are never translated by the Greek word *pistis* which is the word invariably translated into English as 'faith'. *pistis* only ever translates words from the Hebrew root 'mn. To understand the meaning of faith as used in the Bible, therefore, we need to examine the meaning of Hebrew 'mn.

The noun 'mnh denotes the quality of behaving reliably according to one's nature or commitments. It is often translated 'faithfulness', and it picks up the notion of reliable, secure, sure, certain, trustworthy. God has this quality because God always acts according to who God is:

The word of the Lord is upright, and all his work is done in *faithfulness*.

– Psalm 33:4

I will take you for my wife in *faithfulness*; and you shall know the Lord.

– Hosea 2:20

To speak of Yahweh in this way is to say that he is the real God, not a false God, that he always acts according to the truth, and so we can be secure in him and place our trust in him. When applied to us it does not state that we are *trusting*, but that we are *trustworthy* because what we do and say is in accordance with the truth. If we seek the truth (Jeremiah 5:1,3), and deal honestly and carry out our obligations (2Chronicles 31:12,15,18; 34:12; Proverbs 3:3), then we share in this quality of the Lord. People who are faithful can be relied on (Jeremiah 15:18).

The adjective derived from 'mnh is generally translated 'faithful'. When used of God, it states that he is real, sure, faithful, and so trustworthy: Abraham is said to have a faithful heart (Nehemiah 9:8), and Moses is spoken of as being trustworthy because of the intimacy of God's communication with him (Numbers 12:7). We hear of a faithful priest (1Samuel 2:35) and a trustworthy prophet (1Samuel 3:20). The city is spoken of as being faithful (Isaiah 1:21,26), witnesses as being reliable (Isaiah 8:2), and a supply of water as being sure (Isaiah 33:16).

The Hebrew verb 'mn means to trust in the faithfulness of another and to behave in a trustworthy way. Both these ideas are contained in the word 'believe', first used by Mark in his summary of Jesus' preaching: 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news'(1:15).

Faith

We might sum up this study by stating that God has faith in its fullness – God is faithful. God always acts according to who God is. He is love and so can be depended on to act lovingly. He has made promises and can be depended upon absolutely to keep faith. Jesus has faith in its human perfection. He always acts towards God as Son, in perfect trust and obedience. In doing so he reveals who God is for us and how we are to respond to grace. He is our ‘leader in faith’(Hebrews 12:2). We have faith when we act in accordance with who we are: creatures who are totally dependent on God and who are adopted as Jesus’ brothers and sisters, children with him of God. Faith is a fruit of trust. It goes beyond trust in that it consists in the following five elements:

- To believe is to listen to God’s word, trusting that God is revealing himself to us.
- To believe is to heed what God says (reveals), trusting that God is faithful and so accepting his word as true with all our hearts and minds and soul and strength.
- To believe is to act in accordance with God’s will, trusting that God is our wise and loving Father.
- To believe is to respond in love to God, trusting that God is love. The English word ‘be-lieve’ nicely expresses this aspect.
- To believe is to live in communion with Jesus, sharing his faith.

In the scene upon which we are reflecting, we see Jesus recognising the faith of the men before him and assuring the paralysed man that his sins are forgiven. Forgiveness is always a surprise. We can never earn it, and when it comes it is always so healing and refreshing. It protects us against despair and utter loneliness and encourages us to keep hoping. It reassures us that wherever we have been and whatever we have done we really can still love and be loved.

Sometimes people say that the secret is to bury the past and forget the hurt. Where forgiveness is refused we might have to try to do that, but we all know that we will never really succeed and however we try to cover over the wound it will keep festering. Whatever people might say, the passing of time does not of itself bring healing. No. We need to acknowledge our sin and want to change. But more than anything else we need the person we have hurt to graciously continue to love us. That is the key to healing and to reconciliation. Such love is unearned. But so is all love. It is a mystery and a miracle. It is the radiant warmth of God himself - so of course we find it healing.

This is the fundamental meaning of the word ‘forgive’. It means to give and to keep giving, to *for-give*. If you hurt me and I say it doesn’t matter, but I withdraw my love from you, you know you are not forgiven. If I hurt you and you keep on loving me, I am not automatically forgiven. Certainly not if I abuse your love or take you for granted and keep on hurting you. But you are giving me the chance to be healed. Your giving of yourself to me offers me the key out of the prison which my sin has created. When this offer of forgiveness is without conditions and without reserve it is a tremendous gift of love. Hopefully I will respond, repent of my behaviour and we will experience a deep reconciliation and peace - fruits of renewed love.

We can choose to remain paralysed. We can give in to the fear of freedom, the fear of what might be involved if we have to begin walking again. We can deny God’s love and refuse to accept it. But we cannot cause God to stop loving us. This is the good news preached by Jesus and demonstrated in this scene where the love of God penetrates to the deepest recesses of our hidden paralysis. Julian of Norwich (died 1413) is confident of God’s forgiveness:

Full lovingly does our Lord hold us when it seems to us we are nearly forsaken and cast away because of our sin – and deservedly so. Our courteous Lord does not want his servants to despair even when they fall often and grievously into sin. For our falling does not hinder him from loving us ... Some of us believe that God is all powerful and may do everything; and that he is all wise and can do everything; but as for believing that he is all love and will do everything, there we hold back. In my view nothing hinders God’s lovers more than the failure to understand this. As by his courtesy God forgives our sins when we repent, even so he wills that we should forgive our sin, and so give up our senseless worrying and faithless fear.

– ‘Showings’ ch. 39 and 73

Sin does not prevent God offering love. It can prevent us receiving it. We are made for the intimacy of union with God. So it matters that we do not sin. But when we do sin, we must not become so self-focused and so ashamed that we fail to remember the love that poured out for us from the wounded heart of Jesus. Let acknowledgment of our sin humble us.

⁶ Now some of the scribes were sitting there, questioning in their hearts, ⁷ ‘Why does this fellow speak in this way? It is blasphemy! Who can forgive sins but God alone?’ ⁸ At once Jesus perceived in his spirit that they were discussing these questions among themselves; and he said to them, ‘Why do you raise such questions in your hearts? ⁹ Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, “Your sins are forgiven,” or to say, “Stand up and take your mat and walk”?’

¹⁰ But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins’ – he said to the paralytic ¹¹ ‘I say to you, stand up, take your mat and go to your home.’

¹² And he stood up, and immediately took the mat and went out before all of them; so that they were all amazed and glorified God, saying, ‘We have never seen anything like this!’

compare Matthew 9:3-8
Luke 5:21-26

The Son of Man

Let us allow our friends to take us to Jesus and allow him to assure us of God's forgiveness, as he continues to give himself, and therefore God, to us in love. We may then learn from our failures, learn that we are utterly dependent upon God's love, and learn that his great love is without end.

Mark has already presented Jesus as confronting the scribes (1:22). Here they are scandalised by Jesus' words. They claim that only God can forgive sin. And they are right. Only the creator God can dispel the darkness. There is no love and no forgiveness that does not have its source in God. Their mistake, and it is a serious one, is to forget that the transcendent God is at the heart of creation. God can forgive through us, as he forgives in this scene through Jesus, and through the love and faith of this man's friends.

Jesus identifies himself as the 'Son of Man'. This is the first time that we have met what is, to our ears, a rather strange expression. In the New Testament, apart from Acts 7:56 and Apocalypse 1:13 and 14:14, it is found only in the gospels and always on the lips of Jesus himself. It possibly represents Jesus' own understanding of himself and of his mission. It is certainly used by Mark to express his understanding of the true identity of Jesus, and of the proper way to understand the titles 'Messiah' and 'Son of God'.

We find 'Son of Man' in the Old Testament as an idiomatic way of speaking about a human being (Psalm 8:4 and frequently in Ezekiel). There is a quite specialised use, however, in the Book of Daniel, and it is to this text that we must turn to discover the meaning of the expression as found here in Mark. The Book of Daniel was written at the time of the persecution of the Jews by the Syrian king, Antiochus IV (c.165BC). The invading army seemed to be winning, but the author of the Book of Daniel gives expression to his faith in God's providence in an imaginative portrayal of the last judgment: 'The court sat in judgment and the books were opened'(Daniel 7:10). In his vision he sees:

One like a Son of Man coming with the clouds of heaven. And he came to the Ancient One [God] and was presented before him. To him was given dominion and glory and kingship, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that shall not pass away, and his kingship is one that shall never be destroyed.

– Daniel 7:13-14

Who is this 'Son of Man'? It is certainly not the Syrian king, in spite of his pretensions to power. The explanation of the vision makes it clear that it is the heavenly counterpart or representative of the ordinary, downtrodden and persecuted people of God who will ultimately prevail and who will be exalted by God in the final judgment. The text reads:

The kingship and dominion and the greatness of the kingdoms under the whole heaven shall be given to the people of the holy ones of the Most High; their kingdom shall be an everlasting kingdom, and all dominions shall serve and obey them.

– Daniel 7:27

Jesus has been carefully avoiding Messianic claims (1:25; 1:35; 1:44). In identifying himself as the ‘Son of Man’ he is declaring his solidarity with the poor and the oppressed and the victims of injustice in all its forms. In this there is already a hint (to be developed clearly in the second half of the gospel) that this solidarity is expressed by suffering with and for the oppressed.

Moreover, the expression ‘Son of Man’ avoids the earthly and nationalistic hopes popularly associated with the Messiah and focuses rather on God’s judgment of the world. In this present passage, Jesus is claiming that this ultimate judgment of God is already, now, active among them in Jesus’ own ministry of forgiving sins. This is the ‘kingdom of God’ that has already ‘come near’ (1:15). This is the ‘good news’ which Jesus has been commissioned to reveal and make effective in people’s lives.

The expression will occur only once more in the first half of the gospel, in a passage upon which we shall shortly be commenting (2:28). In the second half of the gospel, however, it will be used more frequently. We will leave till then a further exploration of its meaning as used by Mark.

Years ago I had an experience which has etched itself in my memory as a powerful symbol of forgiveness. I was chaplain at a university and was setting up a house in which I was going to live along with a community of students. The house was pretty run down and had been left in rather a mess by those who had been renting before us. I especially remember the shade on the standing lamp in the lounge room. It was filthy and seemed beyond being able to be cleaned. One evening, having failed to find a replacement shade, I arrived home, walked into the lounge and there, to my amazement, was the shade allowing a gentle light into the room. The woman who owned the house was also an artist. The irremovable black stains were still on the shade, but she had touched them up so that they were now the centres of daisies. The black marks, with a little touch of green here and violet there had been transformed into garden paths.

My first thought was what a wonderful image this was of forgiven sin. Everyone knows how Peter persistently denied Jesus. This was not something he could undo or pretend away. The fact of his sin was something he could never forget. It would remain a black stain till the day he died. But when Jesus looked across to him with loving forgiveness in his eyes, Peter’s heart was moved and he wept bitterly.

When this same loving Jesus gave him the opportunity, three times, to declare his love, Jesus was healing Peter’s soul and transforming the pain into the beauty of a garden. The sin was still there, but now, bathed in love, the memory of the sin having been forgiven was the centre for the flowers of humility and compassion.

If forgiveness can be such a wonderful grace for us, how can we refuse to offer it to others? Offering it may demand of us what it demanded of Jesus. A heart of flesh is easy to pierce. Blood and tears may well flow. But we owe it to others to continue to love them unconditionally. Did not Jesus who forgives us plead with us to ‘love one another as I have loved you’? And love in the real world always means forgiveness, for none of us is innocent.

Forgiveness

It is God's forgiveness that liberates us to grow in love. If we can only allow ourselves to be moved by grace and our hearts to become the heart of Jesus, we will find that by forgiving others we are liberated from so much of the hurt which they have caused us. We are also offering those who have hurt us an opportunity to live again. Some hurts do radically alter relationships. We cannot pretend that this is not the case. We have to face the reality of this. Nothing is gained by pretence. But there is no need for any hurt to choke off our love. No one can stop us loving. Jesus died because of the way people treated him. There is no going back on that. But he could still pray: 'Father forgive them'. His heart was pierced but remained pure, And the love that he gave to the end continues as a stream of grace poured out over our hurting world. As his disciples let us commit ourselves to be like him in this.

We thank God for those who, when we have been paralysed, have held us and carried us to Jesus by their faith and their love. When we see someone who is too afraid to move, let us, along with others, lift that person up and take him or her to God. We would do well to reflect on the implications of words which we so often pray: 'Forgive us our sins ('trespasses') as we forgive those who sin against us'. If God took us at our word, what kind of forgiveness would we receive?

God's word reaches the outcasts

The tax alluded to was a symbol of Roman oppression, and of humiliation for the Jews who refused to accept subjection except to God. The tax collected in Galilee went to the Roman puppet, Herod Antipas, and the tax collectors were Jews who had accepted the task of collecting the tax. They were especially despised because of their practice of extorting as much as they could so as to retain whatever they collected over and above the fixed sum determined by the census. They were considered traitors and were excommunicated from attending the synagogue.

Scribes have already been mentioned (1:22; 2:6). The Pharisees (the 'separated ones') were a sect of laymen who carried on the tradition of the Hasidim, who, in the period of the Maccabees (c.167BC) resisted all attempts to allow Greek culture to corrupt Jewish traditions. (1Maccabees 2:42; 7:13). At their best the members of the Pharisee sect were truly devoted to God and wanted to do God's will in the least detail of their daily lives. They found God's will in the writings of their sacred Scriptures which they scrupulously followed. The gospels make it clear, however, that many were blind to the surprising way in which God revealed his love and his will in Jesus. Jesus' rejection of their understanding made him a threat which they were determined to oppose. In the experience of many communities in the early Church it was the Pharisees who were mainly responsible for defending Judaism against what they saw as the inroads of Christianity. It is not surprising, therefore, that from the Christian perspective they came to symbolise those responsible for the rejection of Jesus and of the members of the Jewish community who chose to follow him.

Mark could not have chosen a more powerful scene with which to demonstrate the profound difference between the religious attitude of Jesus and that typified by a number of the Pharisees of his day. Levi and his friends are 'sick' — Jesus does not deny that. He is, however, concerned to bring them to health — something which will not happen if they are condemned and ostracised. He chooses to love them, even to the extent of seeking them out to share with them the intimacy of a meal.

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

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

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

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

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

compare Matthew 9:9-13
Luke 5:27-32

Tax collectors and sinners

That Jesus would call this man to be part of his mission, and would enjoy the company of his friends, should surely give us confidence in the compassion of the heart of God. None of us needs to fear that he or she has nothing to offer. We are all called to love, and Jesus welcomes us and invites us to take our part in bringing about that communion of love which is God's kingdom on earth.

There are people who criticise the Church because of the sinners that are in it. We should not be complacent about sin, and we should expect the Christian community to challenge us to repent of our sin by accepting the grace of repentance and forgiveness offered us by the Spirit of Jesus. However, any community desiring to follow Jesus must have within it the whole range of humanity, from the most broken of sinners to the purest of saints. If there is no room for sinners in the Church, there is no room for anyone, and it is not the Church of Jesus.

It is because we are sinners that we need the intimacy of communion with Jesus. Let us humbly and with gratitude accept his invitation to dine with him:

Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking;
if you hear my voice and open the door,
I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me.

– Revelation 3:20

God's word liberates from slavish conformity to ritual

The Law required people to fast on the Day of Atonement (Leviticus 16:29; 23:29). The Pharisees used to fast twice a week (Luke 18:12) and they expected that if Jesus were truly a religious man he, like the disciples of John, would be similarly conscientious. It is clear from the dialogue that Jesus is not against fasting on principle. What concerns him is the false perspective which many of the officially respected religious people were giving. Their priorities were wrong. Jesus' position is consistent with the prophetic tradition found, for example, in Isaiah 58:6-7.

People seem to find it easier to follow the requirements of religious devotion and ritual rather than face up to the radical demands of a truly religious life. Jesus knew how easily we revert to insecurity and cling to religious practices, even when such practices fail to reveal God's true concern for us or to express our real response to God. Jesus knew that what the people needed most was not to be reminded of the Law but to experience God's love. He was intent on communicating to his contemporaries the essence of the good news, even if the pious were scandalised by his ignoring of practices customarily expected of the observant.

The Christian community for whom Mark is writing had learned from Jesus to celebrate his continued presence as the Bridegroom among them. They also fasted because they experienced his absence and longed for the time when they could celebrate with him the fullness of communion for which their hearts yearned – a fullness that could come only when they joined him in the risen life.

A number of texts from the Old Testament liken God's love of his people to that of a bridegroom for his bride:

I will take you for my wife forever; I will take you for my wife in righteousness and in justice, in steadfast love, and in mercy. I will take you for my wife in faithfulness; and you shall know the Lord;.

– Hosea 2:19-20¹

¹see also Isaiah 54:5-8; 62:4-5; Ezekiel 16:8-14 .

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

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

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

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

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

compare Matthew 9:14-17
Luke 5:33-39

Religious ritual

In John's Gospel we find the Baptist speaking of himself as the 'friend of the bridegroom'. The bridegroom is Jesus (John 3:29). This same image holds a particularly important place in the Book of Revelation (19:7; 21:2). Likewise Paul writes to the Corinthians:

I feel a divine jealousy for you, for I promised you in marriage to one husband, to present you as a chaste virgin to Christ.

– 2Corinthians 11:2. See Ephesians 5:32

After reading the Law, Nehemiah could say:

This day is holy to the Lord your God; do not mourn or weep ... Go your way, eat the fat and drink sweet wine ... and do not be grieved, for the joy of the Lord is your strength.

– Nehemiah 8:9-10

Jesus has more reason than Nehemiah to call his disciples to celebrate. Jesus knew that acknowledging the reality of God's love and accepting it was essential to the repentance required of us if we are to experience the reign of God in our lives. Without this, we would remain locked in our sin. Jesus makes the point that the good news cannot be patched onto the old cloak of the Law, nor poured into its ancient skins. The new creation which he was initiating would need to be expressed in new ways.

However well-founded and inspiring the religious customs handed on to us may be, they cannot substitute for our openness to the surprise of God's self-revelation in the present moment. Every time a child is born into our world, a new cloth is created and we are gifted with new wine. Every generation brings with it a new energy and a new revelation — not contradicting the old, but certainly not able to be contained within it.

The call of Jesus is for us to be faithful to what has gone before by being as open to the surprise of God's action in our lives as were our ancestors in faith. We are being called ever forward into a future full of hope. Our Christian faith is faith in that promised future, which God will create through us if we listen now to 'every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord' (Deuteronomy 8:3 — see Matthew 4:4). In our willingness to do God's will, we must be ready to be detached from everything, however sacred it might appear. We must be ready, like Jesus, to 'seek first the kingdom of God' (Matthew 6:33).

The metaphor of the new wine requiring new skins is important in the realm of theology and catechesis. There are some who think that truth can be mastered permanently, and preserved in the skins of defined dogma. We do not seem to realise that truth is found in human judgment, and that, if we are to make right judgments, we must be continually open to new insight and be able to express these insights in words that relate to the questions being asked. No one period of history, no one philosophy, no single point of view can contain the fullness of truth. Learning from the past and faithful to the insights of those who have gone before us, let us dare to face up to the new questions being asked today. Let us keep our eyes on Jesus and find the direction that will continue to lead us towards the truth, especially towards the revelation of the truth of God to be found in him.

God's word liberates from narrow interpretations of the Law

This is Mark's most daring portrait to this point. The prohibition against agricultural labour on the Sabbath (the seventh day of the week) goes back to the earliest years of Israel's presence in Canaan:

On the seventh day you shall rest; even in ploughing time and in harvest time you shall rest.

– Exodus 34:21

In later writings it is evident that the prohibition has been extended to all kinds of nonessential activity (see, for example, Jeremiah 17:19-27 and Nehemiah 13:15-22). It was during and after the exile that Jewish self-identity assumed a special importance now that Judah was part – and a small part – of the huge Persian empire. The people were forced to ask themselves what it was that set them apart from the peoples around them. They sought to identify what it was that made them special to God and how they were to express this special identity.

Of particular significance was the covenant which God had made with them, and among the many ways in which they responded to this covenant three stood out as important identifying traits: the practice of circumcision, certain food laws and the institution of the Sabbath. It was particularly this last that took on more and more importance in the self-identity of the Jew. Special Sabbath temple sacrifices were instituted, and, more importantly, this was the day when the people assembled for prayer in the synagogues. The Sabbath was a day consecrated to God, and its observance was symbolic of the commitment of the people to keep their part of the covenant.

You shall keep my Sabbaths, for this is a sign between me and you throughout your generations, given in order that you may know that I, the Lord, sanctify you. ... Whoever does any work on it shall be cut off from among the people. ... Therefore the Israelites shall keep the Sabbath, observing the Sabbath throughout their generations, as a perpetual covenant.

– Exodus 31:13,16; see also Ezekiel 20:12

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

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

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

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

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

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

compare Matthew 12:1-8
Luke 6:1-5

Lord of the Sabbath

This consecration to the Lord was to be a source of delight:

If you refrain from trampling the Sabbath, from pursuing your own interests on my holy day; if you call the Sabbath a delight and the holy day of the Lord honourable; if you honour it, not going your own ways, serving your own interests, or pursuing your own affairs; then you shall take delight in the Lord.

– Isaiah 58:13-14

According to the regulations worked out by the Pharisees, the disciples were offending against the law and so breaking the covenant. Jesus reminds them of the time when David bypassed a regulation of the Law to commandeer bread to satisfy the hunger of his troops (1Samuel 21:1-6). The ‘bread of the Presence’ refers to the twelve fresh loaves placed on a table in the tabernacle each Sabbath, and afterwards consumed by the priests (Leviticus 24:5-9; Exodus 25:30; 40:23).

Mark names Abiathar as the high priest at the time. In fact it was Abiathar’s father, Ahimelech. The story as handed down by word of mouth may originally have referred to ‘Ab-Abiathar’ (the ‘father of Abiathar’). It would have been easy for the first ‘Ab’ to drop out.

Jesus is making two points. The first is that his followers have the same right as those of David to commandeer grain. They are following one who is greater than David (see 12:35) and they are on a more important campaign, for they are fighting for the very existence of Israel as God’s covenant people. Secondly, they are hungry, and feeding the hungry is more central to the covenant than the meticulous observance of Sabbath regulations as conceived by the Pharisees.

Jesus reminds them of a principle with which they would have agreed: ‘The Sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the Sabbath’. We find a similar perspective in the Second Book of Maccabees where the author writes:

The Lord has not chosen the people for the sake of the Place, but the Place for the sake of the people.

– 2Maccabees 5:19

Jesus, however, adds the challenging statement: ‘The Son of Man is lord even of the Sabbath’. In the light of our comments on the expression ‘Son of Man’ in 2:10, Jesus seems to be saying that he, and all those whom he represents have been released from the oppressive interpretations of the Law with which they have been burdened by their religious leaders, and are free to celebrate the creative action of God’s redeeming love in their lives. This is God’s own judgment breaking into the world in the ministry of Jesus, the ‘Son of Man’.

Christianity had its roots in Judaism, and it is understandable that the first generation of Christians would have found it difficult to undergo the painful uprooting process necessary for the Church if it was to be seen as relevant to the non-Jewish world. Stephen and his followers among the Greek-speaking converts seem to have been the first to realise the necessity of liberating the Christian community from the restrictions of the culture in which it was born. He was also the first victim of the opposition which this aroused (Acts 6-7).

A number of the Jewish Christians were determined to retain the Jewish Law as being essential to the Church, and Paul's letters witness to the constant battle he fought to allow non-Jewish converts to live as disciples of Jesus without having to conform to the Law which was so sacred to the Jews. Paul's position was accepted in principle at the Jerusalem Assembly (Acts 15; Galatians 2:1-10), but old habits die hard, and the opposition seems to have collapsed only with the fall of Jerusalem in 70AD, shortly after which the Jewish authorities, as an act of self-preservation, excommunicated Christian Jews from the synagogue. This made irrelevant any further debate of the matter within the Christian community.

The 'law'

Though Mark never refers to the 'law' as such, some understanding of it is needed if we are to grasp the full significance of this and later scenes. It is important from the outset to state that the word 'law' does not satisfactorily convey the meaning intended by the Hebrew word *Torah*. The Concise Oxford Dictionary gives as its first definition of law: 'a body of enacted or customary rules recognised by a community as binding'. This is a fairly adequate definition of the Greek word *nomos* which the English 'law' translates. However behind the Greek *nomos* stands the Hebrew *Torah*, which is perhaps better translated as 'instruction', or 'way'. It includes what we intend by 'law', but has a broader as well as a more precise application.

We find *Torah* being used for the way God reveals his will via a specific oracle issued by a priest or a prophet. From this it came to stand for the totality of the way God has revealed himself and his will through the history of his dealings with the people of Israel. In this sense *Torah* ('law') is synonymous with the whole of Israelite tradition, written (the Scriptures), and oral. In this sense 'law' can be the equivalent of 'the religion of Israel'.

When the Scriptures were given a more definite form in the period after the exile, the *Torah* came also to be used in a more restricted sense for the first five books of the Jewish canon: the Book of Genesis and the Books concerned with Moses (Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy). An example of this usage is found in the Prologue to the Book of Sirach:

Many great teaching have been given to us through the Law and the Prophets and the other writings that followed them.

For the rest of this discussion we use the word 'law' in its widest application as 'the revelation from God found in the writings and traditions of Israel'. This is the meaning it generally has in the New Testament, and this revelation is found especially in the five books which express the essential constitution of Israel.

Living according to the law as an experience of salvation

It is clear from the whole of the New Testament that the law (*Torah*) was treasured as a genuine revelation of God and that living according to the law was a genuine experience of salvation. This remained the understanding of the Christian community when the Church saw itself as distinct from the Jewish synagogue and was increasingly Gentile. This is clear from the theological writings of Irenaeus. In his famous work *Against Heresies: a refutation and subversion of knowledge falsely so called* (180 AD), he writes:

God formed mankind ... but chose the patriarchs for the sake of mankind's salvation, and prepared a people ... and raised up prophets upon earth, accustoming people to bear his Spirit and to hold communion with God.

– AH, IV,14,2

The Bible records the religious experience of a people, many of whom in living their religion came to close communion with God. One has only to pray the psalms to realise this truth. Using a remarkably evocative image, which applies not only to Judaism (the 'law') but to all that is genuine in every human religion, Irenaeus continues:

God put the human race together in many ways to effect a symphony of salvation.

– AH, IV,14,2

For Irenaeus, and for Christians generally, Christianity is not just one among many religions, including Judaism. We find expressions of the Word of God in every human expression of truth. We find the life-giving activity of the Spirit of God in every genuine religious experience. In Christianity, however, we have the Word of God himself made flesh who with the Spirit is one God with the Father. The Word of God, however, who is incarnate in Jesus, is the same Word whom we find expressed in the sacred Scriptures of Judaism (the 'law'), and, indeed, in every religious culture, however incompletely:

The person who is truly spiritual, knowing always the same God, and always acknowledging the same Word of God (although he has but now been manifested to us), and acknowledging also at all times the same Spirit of God (although he has been poured out upon us after a new fashion in these last times) will know that he (the Son of God) descends even from the creation of the world to its end upon the human race, from whom those who believe God and follow his word receive that salvation which flows from him.

– AH, IV,33,15

The Second Vatican Council in its dogmatic constitution on divine revelation ('*Dei Verbum*', 1965) reminds us:

Through Moses, with the race of Israel, God acquired a people for himself, and to them he revealed himself in words and deeds as the one, true, living God, so that Israel might experience the ways of God with people.

– DV, n.14

Though the Word of God had not yet become flesh, he was still speaking to Israel (and, of course, to all peoples in different ways - though this is not part of our discussion here) revealing God and drawing the people into divine communion.

Jesus and the Law

Mark would agree with Paul that the law is a ‘gift’ from God (Romans 9:4); that it is ‘holy’ (Romans 7:12) and ‘good’ (Romans 7:12) and ‘beautiful’ (Romans 7:16), and that it reveals God’s fidelity to his covenant of love (what Paul calls his ‘justice’, Romans 1:32; 2:26; 7:12). It is God’s Spirit who breathes through the law (Romans 7:14). Besides revealing God, it directs us how respond to God, and therefore helps us to recognise our sinfulness (Romans 3:20; 7:7; Galatians 3:19).

To obey God’s will expressed in the law we must listen to Jesus and share in Jesus’ faith, hope and love (Galatians 2:15-21; Romans 3:31; 10:4). It is because Christ lives in his followers that they are able to carry out the just requirements of the law (Galatians 3:2,5; Romans 8:4). It is the love of Christ experienced in the Christian community which is the fulfilment of the law (Galatians 5:14; 6:2; Romans 13:10).

Jesus’ relationship to the law is summed up in the opening words of the Letter to the Hebrews:

Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds.

– Hebrews 1:1-2

This same point is made by Irenaeus:

The patriarchs and prophets sowed the word concerning Christ, but the Church reaped, that is, received the fruit ... both the sower and the reaper may rejoice together in the kingdom of Christ, who is present with all those who were from the beginning approved by God who granted them his Word to be present with them.

– *Against the Heretics*, IV,25,3

Likewise by the Second Vatican Council

The most intimate truth which revelation gives us about God and human salvation shines forth in Christ, who is himself both the mediator and the sum total of revelation.

– DV, n.2

God taught them to look for the promised saviour. And so, throughout the ages, he prepared the way for the Gospel.

– DV, n.3

Jesus Christ completed and perfected revelation.

– DV, n.4

Removing the limitations of the law

In the scene on which we are commenting it is clear that Jesus’ interpretation of the law is in conflict with that of at least a significant number of the religious leaders of his day. Jesus had his own way of getting to what we might call the heart of the law. This gave him a perspective that his followers found liberating and life-giving. However, there is more to it than this. What we have in the Jewish Scriptures (the ‘law’) is not the divine Word himself, not the divine Word-who-speaks, but the divine Word-as-heard.

God inspires human beings to express their experiences of his presence and his will, and so we must expect them to respond to God within their human limitations, historical and cultural, as well as personal. The fact that the words of these real human beings continue to be taken up by the community and treasured as inspired assures us that in heeding the inspired words we are, indeed, listening to God - but not in some ethereal or abstract way. We are listening to God as God was heard by limited human beings who, in turn, could give expression to their communion with God in ways that are necessarily limited and that must be subject to careful interpretation. This point is stressed in a document issued by the Pontifical Biblical Commission entitled *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* (1993). A few passages should suffice:

Scripture reveals the meaning of the events which bring it to fulfilment and that events reveal the meaning of Scripture, that is, they require that *certain aspects of the received interpretation be set aside and a new interpretation adopted.*

– page 91-92

In other words all understandings found in the law concerning God, God's ways with the human race, and our response to God, must be looked at anew in the light of the events that fulfil the law – that is to say, the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.

The exegete need not put absolute value in something which simply reflects limited human understanding.

– page 94

The Word of God finds expression in the work of human authors. The thought and the words belong at one and the same time both to God and to human beings, in such a way that the whole Bible comes at once from God and from the inspired human author. This does not mean, however, that God has given the historical conditioning of the message a value which is absolute.

– page 113

Addressing men and women, from the beginnings of the Old Testament onward, God made use of all the possibilities of human language, while at the same time accepting that his word be subject to the constraints caused by the limitations of this language.

– pages 132-133

If the reader wishes to find a few easy and obvious examples of the limited understandings found in the Old Testament but corrected in the New, he or she could consult Psalm 54, noting that verse five ('He will repay my enemies for their evil. In your faithfulness, put an end to them') is omitted when the psalm occurs in the Christian liturgy (see 25th Sunday, Year B). The reasons should be obvious. Likewise compare the advice given in Sirach 12:1-7 ('Don't help sinners ... for the Most High hates sinners') with the parable of the Good Samaritan, or read the injunction of Deuteronomy 23:1 excluding eunuchs from the assembly (already 'corrected' in Isaiah 56:4-5) in the light of Matthew 19:2. Examples could be multiplied.

Statements about the inherent limitation of human language and insight need to be made about any inspired literature, including, of course, the New Testament. Jesus himself, as human, also lived within the limitations of the human. The big difference is that Jesus is the perfect human revelation of God. He is not simply a limited human being responding as best he can to the overwhelming experience of the Word of God and giving expression to his religious experience in words.

He is the very Word of God himself living within the limitations of the human, but, within those limitations, giving expression in word, deed, attitude, feeling, decisions and relationships, to the perfect human communion with God which he experienced, having God's Spirit without reserve.

The law, however good, was imperfect, incomplete. It had to give way before the revelation of the Word-made-flesh. Mark, like Paul, held that the limitations and imperfections of the law had to be let go when they failed to express the revelation of God and of God's will given by him who is 'the lord of the Sabbath' (2:28).

You have died to the law through the Body of Christ, so that you may belong to another, to him who has been raised from the dead in order that we may bear fruit for God ...

We are discharged from the law, dead to that which held us captive, so that we serve not under the old written code but in the new life of the Spirit.

– Romans 7:4,6

This does not mean that the law has lost its value. It does mean that it now has to be treasured as seen through the eyes of Jesus and as understood with his mind. The law indicates the way to communion with God, but now it has come to its goal, now we have experienced its flower, now we can read it in its proper perspective and discern more accurately what is of God and where limited human perception was unable to receive God's Word without distortion.

As disciples of Jesus all are free from the necessity to observe all the detailed prescriptions of the law. Many of the laws will express lasting human values, values embraced by Jesus himself. A Jew, becoming a Christian, will find much in his religious tradition that is of lasting value. A Gentile, becoming a Christian, will be enriched by coming to know and follow the divine guidance found in the law. However, the early Christian community recognised that it was not necessary to become a Jew in order to become a Christian, for the basis of a person's communion with God was not conformity to the law but communion with Jesus. For Paul, as no doubt for many Jews who became disciples of Jesus, this was experienced as a deliberate and painful shift, likened to a death:

By works of the law shall no one be justified ... For I through the law died to the law, that I might live to God. I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me; and the life I now live in the flesh I live *in the faith of* the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me. I do not nullify the grace of God; for if justification were through the law, then Christ died to no purpose.

– Galatians 2:16,19-21; see also 4:4-7

If you are led by the Spirit you are not under the Law.

– Galatians 5:18; see also Philippians 3:7-11

Jesus and the Law

Their minds were hardened; for to this day, when they read the old covenant, that same veil remains, unlifted, because only through Christ is it *being annulled*. Yes, to this day whenever Moses is read a veil lies over their *hearts*; but when a *person* turns to the Lord the veil is removed.

– 2Corinthians 3:14-16

In Mark's Gospel we have already seen Jesus setting aside injunctions accepted as law by his contemporaries. Jesus touches lepers (1:41), and eats with sinners (2:16). In the scene upon which we are commenting, he does not follow the Sabbath regulations expected by the religious authorities of his day. Jesus' followers did not follow the cultic food laws (Acts 10-11), nor did they accept the necessity of circumcision as a requirement of belonging to God's people (Acts 15). Following Jesus' teaching they did not accept the barrier between Jews (judged to be 'holy') and Gentiles (judged to be 'unclean').

It is still obvious today that people find it extremely difficult, if not impossible, to let go practices which have been part of their religious identity. Many of Jesus' contemporaries, especially those responsible for preserving the tradition, were no exception. Jesus was crucified because he was seen as a threat to the temple and to all that the temple stood for (14:64; see Deuteronomy 13:1-5). Jesus' followers were to meet a similar fate (Acts 6:13; see Acts 7; re Paul, see Acts 21:28).

The other side to this is that many recognised in Jesus the fulfilment of their religious aspirations, and the flowering of the law. They found in his love the power to be liberated from sin – something they were unable to do within the confines of the law.

The leaders reject Jesus

We are back in the synagogue. As in the first encounter between Jesus and the scribes (1:21-28), so here, it is difficult not to read this scene metaphorically. In the earlier scene Jesus encountered an unclean spirit in the synagogue. Here we learn that the crippling restrictions of synagogue life made it impossible for people to live a properly productive life.

In the earlier scene, a question was asked: 'What is this?' (1:27). Mark has already suggested some answers. They are witnessing the actions of the 'Holy One of God' (1:24), in whose presence evil cannot remain; the 'Son of Man' (2:10 and 2:28), who identifies with the oppressed, the 'physician' (2:17) who has come to heal them; the 'bridegroom' (2:19) who is inviting them to enjoy the wedding feast with him; the 'lord of the Sabbath' (2:28) who is releasing them from the yoke of the Law.

With this tragic scene, the curtain falls on the opening act of Mark's drama. Jesus, by his healing and liberating actions, has demonstrated the reality of God's powerful, redeeming presence. In doing so, he has come up against those who wield power in the land, whether religious (represented here by the Pharisees) or political (represented here by the supporters of Herod). They are unwilling to see their position of authority undermined, and rather than yield to the attractiveness of Jesus' person and message, they 'conspire to destroy him'.

In this first section of his portrayal of Jesus' Galilean ministry, Mark has focused on the new spirit that Jesus introduced into the interpretation of the Law. He reaches his climax in this scene. Jesus knows what he must do and is determined that the people realise that they must choose between the understanding of God promoted by the Pharisees and his own view. He therefore summons the man into the middle of the synagogue where all can see him. Peter remembers the passion of that moment, when Jesus' heart and eyes burned with anger and grief at their 'hardness of heart' (see also 6:52 and 8:17). Jesus goes beyond the particular injunctions of the Law and the limited interpretations placed on them by the scribes, and asks the central question: Is the Sabbath law about doing good or doing harm? Is it about saving life, or killing?

¹ Again he entered the synagogue, and a man was there who had a withered hand.

² They watched him to see whether he would cure him on the Sabbath, so that they might accuse him.

³ And he said to the man who had the withered hand, 'Come forward.'

⁴ Then he said to them, 'Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the Sabbath, to save life or to kill?' But they were silent.

⁵ He looked around at them with anger; he was grieved at their hardness of heart and said to the man, 'Stretch out your hand.'

He stretched it out, and his hand was restored.

⁶ The Pharisees went out and immediately conspired with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him.

compare Matthew 12:9-14
Luke 6:6-11

The man with the withered hand

This second question has a bite to it. It is a challenge to the Pharisees to interpret the law in the light of the following words from the Book of Deuteronomy.

See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity. If you obey the commandments of the Lord your God that I am commanding you today, by loving the Lord your God, walking in his ways, and observing his commandments, decrees, and ordinances, then you shall live ... But if your heart turns away and you do not hear, but are led astray to bow down to other gods and serve them, I declare to you today that you shall perish ... I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live.

– Deuteronomy 30:15-19

The Pharisees were not used to arguing on this level. In their desire to obey God, they were concerned to focus attention on the least detail of the Law as interpreted and to carry it out meticulously, as well as to see that everyone else carried it out with the same scrupulous attention to detail. To admit Jesus' question was to forgo the basis of their power, for they were the ones who were learned in the Law and who controlled debate upon it. They chose to remain silent (3:4). Jesus will not be dissuaded from his mission and his healing action sets in motion an opposition which will eventually bring about his death.