

PART TWO : GOD'S POWERFUL WORD

Mark 3:7 - 6:6a

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

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

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

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

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

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

compare

Matthew

PART A : God's word is for everyone (3:7-19a)

The Good News continues to spread

This passage parallels Mark 1:14-15, being a summary statement of Jesus' mission. The authorities are determined to destroy Jesus (3:6). Jesus is determined to continue his mission. He withdraws to the 'sea' to confront the powers of chaos. The crowds flock to him, seeking release from their afflictions. Mark names seven regions, Jewish and non-Jewish: the gospel is for all.

The ordinary, needy people crowd around him to 'touch him': to experience the healing that comes from him. The gospel is too attractive for official opposition to stop its spread. The cry of the unclean spirits echoes Mark's main theme: 'You are the Son of God!' (see 1:1). It is not, however, a cry of faith, but one of recognition that God the creator is conquering chaos in Jesus. It is a plea for Jesus to stop, but he cannot stop till all that is evil is purged from our lives. His command for silence recalls Mark 1:24-25.

Jesus is teaching us how to respond to opposition. In his case, the opposition was sinful and so, by definition, against God's will. Jesus, however, knew that nothing could separate him from his Father's love, and that God's grace is present and active even where there is sin. Trusting in that grace, he remained faithful to his mission, with the results that we witness in this scene.

We, too, meet opposition. Sometimes it is deserved and sometimes not. Sometimes those opposing us have good intentions and sometimes not. In every case, God is present, gracing us through this opposition. Let us look for the grace and use the opposition as an opportunity for placing our trust more completely in God, from whom alone comes our life and any good that might be done through us.

This scene also demonstrates that when the fire of God's love encounters anything other than love, it must devour it. It is not enough to acknowledge God's presence. We must allow our cherished 'peace' to be disturbed. We must allow our hearts to be purified. We must give up all self-reliance and allow God's love to purify us.

A 'renewed Israel'

Jesus leaves the sea and goes to the 'mountain', to the place of prayer and revelation. He responds in a powerfully symbolic way to his rejection by the religious leaders by publicly selecting and commissioning a group of twelve, to carry on his universal mission of renewing the twelve tribes of the covenant community of Israel (compare the symbolic action of Moses in Exodus 24:4). He has already said that new wine needs new skins (2:22). Since the old Israel will not accept the gospel, he must establish a renewed Israel that will.

Because of the twelve constellations in the zodiac, the number twelve is used to represent universality in the heavenly aspect – that is, by divine design. 'Cananaean' means 'man of zeal'. By the time Mark is writing the Zealots were a leading faction in the resistance to Roman occupation. Presumably Simon had similar ideas. 'Iscariot' may be a transliteration of the Aramaic *yaskar yothê*, meaning 'he who betrays'.

The mention of Idumaea, Tyre and Sidon in the previous scene already prepares us for the fact that the good news is not only for the Jews, but indeed for peoples of every culture, for 'the time is fulfilled'(1:15), and Israel is now to gather in all the peoples of the world. This is the new covenant promised by Jeremiah (31:31 — see Hebrews 8:8). We recall also to the words of Zechariah:

Thus says the Lord of hosts: In those days ten men from nations of every language shall take hold of a Jew, grasping his garment and saying, 'Let us go with you, for we have heard that God is with you'

– Zechariah 8:23

The twelve are called to be not only disciples, but 'apostles', that is to say, they are to share in Jesus' mission: a mission described here as heralding the good news and combating evil. As a condition for doing this, however, Mark makes it clear that they are called first 'to be with him'. Jesus wants them to be his companions, and when he calls those he wants they come to him. If they do not respond to this call, they will have nothing to say to others and no 'authority' to confront evil.

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

14 And he appointed twelve, whom he also named apostles, to be with him, and to be sent out to proclaim the message, ¹⁵ and to have authority to cast out demons.

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

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

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

19 and Judas Iscariot, who betrayed him.

compare Matthew 10:1-4
Luke 6:12-16

^{19b} *Then he went home;*
²⁰ *and the crowd came together again, so that they could not even eat.*

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

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

²³ **And he called them to him, and spoke to them in parables, 'How can Satan cast out Satan? ²⁴ If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. ²⁵ And if a house is divided against itself, that house will not be able to stand.**

²⁶ **And if Satan has risen up against himself and is divided, he cannot stand, but his end has come. ²⁷ But no one can enter a strong man's house and plunder his property without first tying up the strong man; then indeed the house can be plundered.**

²⁸ **'Truly I tell you, people will be forgiven for their sins and whatever blasphemies they utter; ²⁹ but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit can never have forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin' – ³⁰ for they had said, 'He has an unclean spirit.'**

compare Matthew 12:24-32
Luke 11:15-23; 12:10

PART B : Parables on the power of God's word (3:19b - 4:34)

God's word conquers evil

Such was the power and energy of Jesus' ministry that even his family were seriously concerned (compare John 7:5). The following scene identifies his family as his 'mother and brothers and sisters'(3:32). This and 6:3 are the only times Mark mentions Jesus' mother. In light of the fact that the social unit was the extended family, the expression 'brothers and sisters' could refer to other children of Mary, to children of Joseph by a previous marriage, or to Jesus' cousins. Later, Mark will identify some of the brothers as 'James and Joses and Judas and Simon'(6:3).

Later still, he includes among the women watching the crucifixion 'the mother of James the younger and Joses'(15:40). He cannot be referring to Jesus' mother, or he would surely have identified her as such. So we should conclude that the 'brothers' mentioned in 6:3, and so, possibly, in this present context, were not Jesus' blood brothers. This fits with the ancient tradition that Jesus was Mary's only child.

Jesus' actions also attracted the attention of the religious leaders in Jerusalem, who sent scribes up to Galilee to investigate him. They concluded that his power (which they could not deny) came from a pagan deity, called in the Canaanite epic, Zubulu ('Prince, Lord of the house'), here referred to as Beelzebul (see 2Kings 1:2), and identified with Satan. Jesus wastes no time in exposing the ridiculous nature of their conclusions. He does so through simple illustrations which would have made immediate sense to the crowd.

Pope John-Paul II in his encyclical 'Dominum et Vivificantem' 1986, offers a reflection on this scene nn. 46ff.

We have already encountered an unclean spirit in the synagogue, where Jesus first confronts the scribes (1:23). Here they are fighting back, accusing him of having an ‘unclean spirit’. The scribes see themselves as defending God’s ‘kingdom’ and God’s ‘house’. Jesus is more than suggesting that all is not well in their domain. If they are looking for Satan, they had better look at themselves. They exercise power, but he, as John the Baptist has already said, is the ‘more powerful one’(1:7), and he is determined to liberate the people from the prison in which the scribes are holding them. Here Jesus is pointing to the fruits of his ministry as proof that the power working in him is that of the Holy Spirit.

The word ‘parable’ covers a number of literary forms, ranging from simple illustrative analogies (as in the present passage) to quite intriguing riddles. The appeal of a parable is not so much to the logical mind, as to the imagination. The problem with most of those who opposed Jesus was that they refused, or were unable, to listen to anything that lay outside the logic of their prejudices. Jesus wants to bypass logic, and so he uses illustrations and stories to fascinate, intrigue and sometimes to startle his audience. He hopes to break through the defences of their closed minds, and entice their hardened hearts to be opened to conversion.

He concludes with a solemn warning not to sin against the Holy Spirit. This is the first time in Mark that we have met the expression ‘Truly I tell you’. It underlines the importance of the following statement, and translates an Aramaic expression which seems to have been characteristic of Jesus’ way of speaking. It will recur at important points throughout the gospel, and may be an indication that we are dealing with Jesus’ own words remembered and handed down in the community.

If we are dying of thirst and there is a pure spring close by, but we judge that the water from it is poisonous and so refuse to drink it, we will surely die. Likewise with those who reject God’s Spirit. Jesus does not want his audience to miss the point that God wants to forgive every sin, and that God is in fact offering this forgiveness through Jesus’ ministry. However, if the scribes persist in judging as evil (‘unclean’) the Holy Spirit who is acting powerfully through Jesus, they are turning their backs on the only source of forgiveness there is. Their sin will be ‘eternal’, that is to say, it will affect them not only here in the present world, but also in the world that lies beyond death.

Whenever we deliberately call good evil, we sin against the Holy Spirit, and so long as we persist in such wrong judgment, our sin remains. This makes it all the more important to listen to Jesus when he warns us not to assume the high moral ground and pass judgment on others. We do not have the wisdom to judge well, and may easily be guilty of calling unclean what is, in truth, the action of the Holy Spirit.

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

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

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

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

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

compare
Matthew 12:46-50
Luke 8:19-21

Intimacy with Jesus - doing God's will

In commenting on the previous passage, we discussed who Jesus' brothers and sisters might be. Here we learn that everything has to be redefined in the light of the gospel. Our most intimate relationship cannot be even with our family. It must be with God and with those who are associated with us in obeying God's will. It is for this reason that the early Christians called each other 'brother' and 'sister' (Romans 1:13; 16:1).

For Jesus, the way to salvation is through this obedience. This is traditional teaching in Judaism, as is the conviction that God's will is a loving one. Jeremiah, speaking for God, could write:

Surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope.

– Jeremiah 29:11

What is new about Jesus' teaching is his understanding of the 'catholic' or universal scope of God's love, as well as of God's amazing intimacy with each and every person. Jesus calls everyone to do God's will, because he is convinced of the delicate personal love that God has for all

The central importance of this teaching of Jesus is clear from the whole of the New Testament, and from the constant tradition of the Christian community. We are called to an 'obedience of faith' (Romans 1:5).

John of the Cross writes:

The union of love of God is a habitual and loving attentiveness of the will to God.

– Spiritual Canticle 28.10

St Teresa of Avila writes in her Book of the Foundations:

When once a soul has resolved to love You and has resigned itself into Your hands, You will have nothing of it save that it shall obey You and find out for itself how it may serve You and desire to do so. It has no need to look for paths or to choose them, for its will is Yours. You, my Lord, take upon yourself the task of guiding it in the way which is the greatest benefit to it.

The highest perfection consists not in interior favours or in great raptures or in visions or in the spirit of prophecy, but in the bringing of our souls so closely into conformity with the will of God that, as soon as we realise that he wills anything, we desire it ourselves with all our might.

The following is a prayer of Charles de Foucauld. One could find similar sentiments expressed by any number of the saints. As we reflect upon it, let us pray to share the intimacy with God experienced by its author, and his fidelity as a disciple of Jesus.

Father, I abandon myself into your hands.
Do with me what you will.
Whatever you may do, I thank you.
I am ready for all, I accept all.
Let only your will be done in me and in all your creatures.
I wish no more than this, O Lord.
Into your hands I commend my spirit.
I offer it to you with all the love of my heart,
for I love you Lord,
and so need to give myself into your hands, without reserve,
and with boundless confidence, for you are my Father.

¹ Again he began to teach beside the sea. Such a very large crowd gathered around him that he got into a boat *on the sea* and sat there, while the whole crowd was beside the sea on the land.

² He began to teach them many things in parables, and *in his teaching* he said to them: ³ *'Listen!* [Listen! Imagine!] **A sower went out to sow.**

⁴ And as he sowed, some seed fell on the path, and the birds came and ate it up.

⁵ Other seed fell on rocky ground, where it did not have much soil, and it sprang up quickly, since it had no depth of soil.

⁶ And when the sun rose, it was scorched; and since it had no root, it withered away.

⁷ Other seed fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked it, and it yielded no grain.

⁸ Other seed fell into good soil and brought forth grain, growing up and increasing and yielding thirty and sixty and a hundredfold.'

⁹ And he said, 'Let anyone with ears to hear listen [keep on listening]!'

compare
Matthew 13:1-9
Luke 8:4-8

An amazing harvest

This is a rather more lengthy parable than the short illustrative images which we examined in 3:24-27. Later we will examine an allegorical interpretation of it, but it is important first to listen to Jesus' story and to imagine it precisely as a parable.

An allegory, as we will see, is an attempt to express a meaning of a parable in such a way as to apply it to one's life. A parable, on the other hand, as we noted in commenting upon 3:23, appeals not to the logical mind so much as to the imagination. We are meant to listen and to imagine (4:3), and to let the parable carry us in the direction of its central thrust.

Here the central thrust is clear enough. Every detail of the story is a commonplace, except the final one. Every farmer listening to Jesus knew that some of the seed necessarily fell on the hardened earth on which he had to walk to plough and sow. The only way to retain the soil on the slopes was to terrace the hillsides with rocks, and inevitably some seed fell in among the rocks and weeds.

According to some scholars, it seems that the one thing that no farmer ever experienced was a thirty-fold crop; certainly not sixty or a hundredfold. Thus, it was the size of the harvest that would have caught the attention of Jesus' listeners, and they would have wondered what kind of seed could produce such an unbelievable crop? In the context, Jesus is hoping that his audience might realise that he is speaking about the word he is preaching to them, and that he might touch the longings of their hearts and move them to want to listen.

The people had heard many words and had often failed to let them strike home. The learned among them, if they took Jesus seriously, would have to admit that much of their learning was unsoundly based. Jesus is asking them all to cease focusing their attention on the words that, in the past, they have failed to receive. Yes, many graces have been lost and many opportunities not taken up.

Now, however, whatever the mistakes of the past, they can begin to listen. If they do, they need not fear that their lives have been in vain, for the word Jesus is preaching is so good that if now they allow it to enter their minds and hearts and lives, they will find that the harvest will be unbelievable, and that it will more than make up for the losses that have occurred through past neglect, lost opportunities, or through following false directions.

The plea with which Jesus concludes this parable (4:9) calls to mind the opening words of the prayer which was prayed each day by observant Jews: 'Hear, O Israel' (Deuteronomy 6:4). Through Jesus' ministry God is speaking his word, the word for which they have been waiting. It will produce its amazing harvest wherte it is welcomed.

We are reminded also of the verse with which the Daily Prayer of the Church opens:

O that today you would listen to his voice!
Do not harden your hearts.

– Psalm 95:7-8

We might also reflect on the following, from Isaiah:

Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live. . .
My word that goes out from my mouth shall not return to me empty,
but it shall accomplish that which I purpose,
and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.

– Isaiah 55:3,11

¹⁰ *When he was alone, those who were around him along with the twelve asked him about the parables.*

¹¹ **And he said to them, 'To you has been given the secret [mystery] of the kingdom of God, but for those outside, everything comes in parables [riddles]**

¹² **in order that [the following prophecy might be fulfilled] "they may indeed look, but not perceive, and may indeed listen, but not understand; so that they may not turn again and be forgiven."**

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

compare
Matthew 13:10-17
Luke 8:9-10

Listening to Jesus

Jesus is quoting from a passage in Isaiah (6:10) where God is encouraging the prophet to accept the mission to preach, and to not allow himself to be dissuaded by the obstinate refusal of so many to listen. God promises Isaiah that his mission will succeed in spite of the blindness and hardness of heart surrounding him.

Jesus is facing similar rejection, but he is determined to keep speaking the word entrusted to him by his Father, and so to keep offering salvation to the crowds.

Jesus uses parables as a means of facilitating revelation. They remain, however, meaningless riddles to those who are unwilling to repent, and who avoid any insights that might urge change upon them.

There is something gentle about the use of parables, for they respect the freedom of the audience. No one is forced to see, for a parable penetrates only so far as the listener is open to receive it.

At the same time, Jesus does not want those who are closed to his message to be able to use his words against him, or to provoke a riot. His message had the power to subvert the authority claimed by the priests as well as by the Roman overlords.

Those who seek out Jesus' company and are willing to be his disciples have revealed to them the otherwise hidden reality of the kingdom of God. God, who 'reveals mysteries' (Daniel 2:28) has revealed himself and his action to these disciples of Jesus. This has been possible because they have been willing to leave all to follow him.

However the final sentence, found only in Mark, reinforces his theme that understanding comes to a disciple only through a miracle of grace.

The parable of the seed - an allegory

If our heart is hard, like the path in the field, Satan can take away even the word of God from us. We should pray for the gift promised through Ezekiel:

A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit
I will put within you; and I will remove from
your body the heart of stone and give you a
heart of flesh. I will put my spirit within you.
– Ezekiel 36:26-27

We can lose heart when ‘trouble or persecution arise on account of the word’, and we can be distracted by ‘the cares of the world and the lure of wealth, and the desire for other things’, to such an extent that there is no room in our lives for listening to God’s word.

We will know that we have truly taken the word into our hearts by the fruit that it produces in our lives, fruit just defined by Jesus in terms of doing the will of God (3:35).

¹⁴ **‘The sower sows the word.**

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

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

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

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

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

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

compare
Matthew 13:18-23
Luke 8:11-15

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

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

23 Let anyone with ears to hear listen!

24 And he said to them, 'Pay attention to what you hear;

Four Proverbs

Placing these sayings here, one after the other, Mark forces us to stop and 'listen', and to 'pay attention to what you hear'.

Mark seems to have two central themes here. The first is that the present, often hidden, state of the word is only temporary, and not meant to be its final condition (the word is spoken to be heard). The second is the need to respond to the word.

The first saying (4:21) asks a question, especially of those to whom 'has been given the secret of the kingdom of God' (4:11). The lamp in this context is surely a symbol of Jesus' word. Is Jesus asking his listeners what they are going to do with it? We are reminded of another saying of Jesus recorded by John:

I am the light of the world.
Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness
but will have the light of life.

– John 8:12

Matthew has the same saying in another context, in which Jesus is reminding his disciples that they, like him, are meant to enlighten the world (Matthew 5:15). Luke repeats the saying later in his gospel to bring out the point that disciples need to purify their lives if they wish to see clearly and to attract others to the truth (Luke 11:33).

The second saying (4:22) seems also, in this context, to be referring to the revelatory power of Jesus' words. The Letter to the Hebrews makes this point quite powerfully:

The word of God is living and active,
sharper than any two-edged sword,
piercing until it divides soul from spirit,
joints from marrow;
it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart.
And before him no creature is hidden,
but all are naked and laid bare to the eyes of the one
to whom we must render an account.

– Hebrews 4:12-13

This saying, too, is found in another context in Matthew (10:26) and Luke (12:2), where it is used to help encourage a disciple not to act out of fear.

compare Luke 8:16-18

The third saying (4:24b), not found in Luke in this context, seems to speak of the need for openness. The more we offer ourselves to God, opening ourselves to receive God's word, the more God will be able to reveal to us. Matthew uses this saying in the context of judging (Matthew 7:2), and Luke uses it in relation to a disciple being compassionate like God by being generous in forgiving (Luke 6:38).

The fourth saying (4:25) seems to be telling us that the more we listen to Jesus' word, the more we will be attuned to hear it (compare Proverbs 9:9). On the other hand, every time we fail to listen, it becomes harder the next time even to hear (compare Proverbs 8:36).

There is a constant danger that we take it for granted that we are hearing, when in fact we are not really listening. We do it with each other; we do it with God. Or, having listened once, we keep acting on what we have heard, but have stopped listening.

Jesus seems to be warning us to keep on listening and to keep on taking notice of what we hear. If we fail to do this we will learn, to our dismay, that we are no longer living as Jesus' disciples, obeying 'every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord' (Deuteronomy 8:3 — see Matthew 4:4). Matthew uses this saying with a similar intention (Matthew 13:12). He uses it also, as does Luke, in a different context, referring to our use of our God-given talents (Matthew 25:29; Luke 19:26).

^{24b}**the measure you give will be the measure you get, and still more will be given you.**

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

compare Luke 6:18

²⁶ **He also said, 'The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground,**

²⁷ **and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how.**

²⁸ **The earth produces of itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head.**

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

We do not produce the harvest

We are to listen to Jesus' word, and let it into the rich soil of our hearts which God has created to enjoy the harvest mentioned in this parable.

At the same time, we must not forget that something is happening in us and among us that is much bigger than ourselves, and that the harvest can never be measured by our effort.

There is no place for anxiety, and there is no place certainly for pride. The seed is good, as is the soil. All that is asked of us is to receive it, and, like Jesus himself, to wait on God, free of care, believing that the promise made us will be fulfilled. We could join Paul in praising God:

Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever.
Amen.

– Ephesians 3:20-21

The hidden power of grace

The startling contrast between the tiny seed and the large shrub encourages us not to judge by appearances. God is at work among us. It is his reign that Jesus is preaching. Moreover, there is room for all to find a home in the shelter of the community of Jesus' disciples.

We recall the splendid image of Ezekiel as he looked forward to the final restoration of Israel:

On the mountain height of Israel I will plant it, in order that it may produce boughs and bear fruit, and become a noble cedar. Under it every kind of bird will live; in the shade of its branches will nest winged creatures of every kind.

– Ezekiel 17:23

³⁰ He also said, 'With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it?

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

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

compare
Matthew 13:31-32
Luke 13:18-19

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

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

Understanding the parables

As noted earlier, Jesus adapted his teaching to the receptive capacity of his audience, and he used stories to attract them and to help them understand.

However, once again (see 4:11), Mark makes the point that if we truly want to understand Jesus, we must seek this understanding from him in the intimacy of close companionship.

We are not meant to make a tidy summary of the parables. The call, as we have seen, is to ‘listen’ and to ‘imagine’, while praying for the courage to keep our minds and hearts open to accepting the risk of seeing things which we may have never seen before.

At the same time there is a consistent theme running through them all. Jesus directs our attention away from ourselves to God, and to the power of God’s word, and he encourages us to take hold of this word with all our hearts, and to let it direct our lives. If we do this, wonderful things will happen: things beyond all our expectations. Paul speaks of:

What no eye has seen, nor ear heard,
nor the human heart conceived,
what God has prepared for those who love him.

– 1Corinthians 2:9

compare Matthew 13:34-35

PART C: Nothing can withstand God's powerful word (4:35 - 6:6a)

Having collected together a number of Jesus' parables which speak of the power of God's word, Mark now wishes to demonstrate this power in action. Nowhere is the dramatic quality of Mark's writing more obvious than in the following three scenes. As mentioned in the opening chapter introducing the gospels, Mark is interested in the real Jesus and what he really did. At the same time he is not limiting himself to giving us an external, photo-like description of Jesus' actions. His aim is to portray the significance of Jesus for himself and for those for whom he is writing. To do this he draws on the insights of those who were closest to Jesus, and gives expression to these insights in the dramatic language that is typical of the sacred Scriptures.

As we examine the following portraits, we will not be able to ascertain what the events would have looked like to an impartial and uninvolved observer. What we have, however, is something far richer than that. We have a record of Jesus as those who loved him came to see him, and as they came to understand his significance for them.

If we read these scenes with the careful, clinical eyes of a modern archivist, we will be disappointed. Mark's portraits were never designed to answer the kinds of questions such a person might ask. We must contemplate Jesus, portrayed for us so powerfully by Mark, as we contemplate the ancient frescoes in the catacombs, with our heart open to believe that what Jesus meant to those who grew to love him he could mean for us, if we so desire.

Mark's central interest is to draw his readers into a close communion with the risen Christ who is actively present among them in the ways described in the following scenes. Whatever might have been the precise historical details that lay behind the portraits we are about to contemplate, we can be confident that Mark is portraying for us the real Jesus of Nazareth.

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

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

³⁷ **A great windstorm arose and the waves beat into [were hurling themselves upon] the boat, so that the boat was already being swamped.**

³⁸ **But he was in the stern, asleep on the cushion; and they woke him up and said to him, 'Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?'**

³⁹ **He woke up and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, 'Peace! Be still!' Then the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm.**

⁴⁰ **He said to them, 'Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?'**

⁴¹ **And they were filled with great awe and said to one another, 'Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?'**

compare
Matthew 8:23-27
Luke 8:22-25

External Chaos

It is clear from the primeval narrative of creation (Genesis 1:2,6-8) and that of the flood (Genesis 6-9), that the sea, as distinct from the land, was for the Jews a symbol of chaos, and therefore of the evil which tries to resist God's creative and redeeming action. In the scene before us Jesus is venturing out into the midst of chaos. He is also taking his disciples to the 'other side' - the Gentile side, the country thought of as 'unclean', at the mercy of evil spirits.

The waves hurl themselves against the boat, seeking to destroy Jesus and his close disciples. Jesus is clearly unafraid. The same cannot be said of his disciples.

The scene would have carried a special relevancy for the Christian community at the time Mark was writing, as it still does wherever there is persecution. Jesus appears not to hear our cry, but the awakened ('risen') Christ is truly caring, and at his command the forces of evil fall silent. We are watching the Creator vanquishing the sea monster:

You rule the raging of the sea; when its waves rise,
you still them. You crushed Rahab like a carcass;
you scattered your enemies with your mighty arm.

– Psalm 89:9-10

Jesus 'rebukes' the wind - an expression we find in Psalm 104:7 where the word of the Creator God rebukes the waters of chaos and they flee before his command. God also rebukes the waters of the Red Sea (Psalm 106:9). In Jesus we see our Creator and Redeemer conquering the forces of evil - a lesson his disciples must learn.

Notice that Jesus does not contrast faith with doubt but with fear. There is a kind of doubt that is consistent with faith: the doubt that rises from a humble mind which recognises the limits of its own understanding. This kind of doubt is important: it is the cutting edge of the mind seeking deeper insight. Such doubt is accompanied by wonder and is characteristic of a mind that is open to the mystery of life.

There is, however, another kind of doubt: one that feeds on fear. This is the doubt of a small mind, a self-centred doubt, a doubt that leads to cynicism and despair. It is as though a person expects to be able to understand everything, and the realisation that this is not the case produces insecurity and fear. Again and again in the gospels, we hear Jesus repeating a phrase often found in the Old Testament: 'Do not be afraid!' (Mark 5:36; 6:50). It is fear that enslaves us.

We may be powerless either to prevent or stop this fear. We are not powerless, however, in the way we respond to it. To simply give in to it is to be enslaved by it. We can take this feeling to prayer. We can remember with gratitude moments of love that have been real to us. We can learn to counteract the often nebulous and dysfunctional thoughts that are at the root of our feeling. We are not powerless to respond to God's encouraging grace. We need not be a victim of fear.

Yet there is another and more profound 'fear' which overwhelms us when we realise the tremendous distance that separates us from God. Out of this 'fear' faith can be born, so long as we do not sink into our own misery, but cry out to Him who alone can save us. We are not to remain locked in this fear. Whatever might be happening around us and to us, Jesus, though apparently ignoring our cry, is there with us in the boat. He does care for us. He wants to save us. As Paul says:

Nothing in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

– Romans 8:39

An appropriate reflection on this scene can be found in the prayer of Jonah, whose lack of faith provoked a storm similar to the one in our gospel narrative:

I called to the Lord out of my distress,
and ... you heard my voice.
You cast me into the deep, into the heart of the seas,
and the flood surrounded me;
all your waves and your billows passed over me.
Then I said, 'I am driven away from your sight ...
The waters closed in over me; the deep surrounded me . . .
As my life was ebbing away, I remembered the Lord;
and my prayer came to you ...
Deliverance belongs to the Lord!

– Jonah 2:2-9; see also Psalm 107:23-30

¹ They came to the other side of the sea, to the country of the Gerasenes. ²And when he had stepped out of the boat, *immediately* a man out of the tombs with an unclean spirit met him.

³ He lived among the tombs; and no one could restrain him any more, even with a chain;

⁴ for he had often been restrained with shackles and chains, but the chains he wrenched apart, and the shackles he broke in pieces; and no one had the strength to subdue him.

⁵ Night and day among the tombs and on the mountains he was always howling and bruising himself with stones.

⁶ When he saw Jesus from a distance, he ran and bowed down before him;

⁷ and he shouted at the top of his voice, ‘What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I adjure you by God, do not torment me.’ ⁸ For he had said to him, ‘Come out of the man, you unclean spirit!’

⁹ Then Jesus asked him, ‘What is your name?’ He replied, ‘My name is Legion; for we are many.’

compare
Matthew 8:28-34
Luke 8:26-39

Internal chaos

Sometimes we are able to believe even if everything around us seems to be in chaos. But what about when the chaos is experienced within? What about when our psyche is falling apart and we experience a profound oppression from within? In this second scene Mark is saying that not even that kind of situation can separate us from the healing word of God coming to us in Jesus.

Mark locates the episode on the eastern, and therefore non-Jewish, side of the lake, in the district of the ‘Decapolis’ (named after the ten Greek cities with their surrounding districts). One of these cities was Gerasa, about fifty kilometres southeast of the lake.

The deranged man, wandering among the tombs and howling in the night, has been broken by the awful meaninglessness of his world. Others cannot cope with him and so they have tried to bind him and lock him away. He, however, will not be confined and is crying out to be released.

Then Jesus enters his world, and with Jesus comes the power of God. The deranged man sees Jesus with the kind of lucid clarity known only to those who have suffered severe mental illness. Across the chasm that separates the pure from the impure, he senses that Jesus understands his cry, and he is right; for, as we shall discover when contemplating Jesus on the cross, he, too, knew what it was like to cry to God in his distress:

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?
Why are you so far from helping me, from the
words of my groaning? O my God, I cry by day,
but you do not answer; and by night, but find no
rest.

Psalm 22:1-2

The man runs up to Jesus, wanting healing, while at the same time attempting to push Jesus away, afraid of what might happen to him if the healing he desperately wants is granted to him. Again we hear the cry: ‘What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God?’ (compare 1:24).

There is no place for evil in the presence of God. God, however, in Jesus, does not stay away from evil, but comes to the one trapped in it to liberate him.

He finds himself unable to answer Jesus' direct question: 'What is your name?'. He does not know who he is, for his psyche is a constant battleground for the legion of forces which are tearing him apart. He is one person one moment and another the next: a constant prey to the vagaries of his uncontrollable mind.

Jesus heals him by his presence and by the peace and serenity, the security and love that emanate from him. He puts meaning into the man's meaningless world.

The dramatic account of the expulsion of the demons into the pigs — unclean animals (Leviticus 11:7), and so fitting recipients for unclean spirits — and of their flight into the lake, and so into the abyss which is their proper home, has about it all the elements of folklore. Behind this embellishment, however, lies a simple story of Jesus conquering all that inhibits the fullness of life to which we are called. It is yet another miracle of love, illustrating the words of Isaiah:

Thus says the Lord, he who created you,
O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel:
Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I
have called you by name, you are mine.

— Isaiah 43:1

The effect on the local people is instructive. When they actually saw 'what it was that had happened', they were 'afraid'. They, too, were living in a world of 'tombs' and 'darkness' and 'pigs', but, unlike the man they treated as deranged, they did not realise it. One is forced to ask: 'Who is really deranged?'

The answer emerges as the scene comes to its close. It is the 'deranged' man who alone sees Jesus for who he is and who longs to be 'with him' (compare 3:14).

¹⁰ He begged him earnestly not to send them out of the country.

¹¹ Now there on the hillside a great herd of swine was feeding; ¹² and the unclean spirits begged him, 'Send us into the swine; let us enter them.'

¹³ So he gave them permission. And the unclean spirits came out and entered the swine; and the herd, *numbering about two thousand*, rushed down the steep bank into the sea, and were drowned in the sea.

¹⁴ The swineherds ran off and told it in the city and in the country. Then people came to see what it was that had happened. ¹⁵ They came to Jesus and saw the demoniac sitting there, *clothed and in his right mind, the very man who had had the legion*; and they were afraid.

¹⁶ Those who had seen what had happened to the demoniac and to the swine reported it. ¹⁷ Then they began to beg Jesus to leave their neighbourhood.

¹⁸ As he was getting into the boat, the man who had been possessed by demons begged him that he might be with him. ¹⁹ But Jesus refused, and said to him, 'Go home to your friends, and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, *and what mercy he has shown you.*' ²⁰ And he went away and began to proclaim in the Decapolis how much Jesus had done for him; *and everyone was amazed.*

The deranged man

The locals, who consider themselves sane, are apparently so only because they refuse to look at themselves or at the world they have constructed. All they see is Jesus coming into their world and disturbing it. Their only desire is to get rid of him (5:16). We are reminded of the following words from Isaiah:

I was ready to be sought out by those who did not ask, to be found by those who did not seek me. I said, 'Here I am, here I am,' to a nation that did not call on my name. I held out my hands all day long to a rebellious people, who walk in a way that is not good, following their own devices; a people who provoke me to my face continually ... who sit inside tombs, and spend the night in secret places; who eat swine's flesh ... who say, 'Keep to yourself, do not come near me.

– Isaiah 65:1-5

The heart of Jesus, however, goes out to them as it went out to the poor man. He would love to have this man close to him, but sees in him one who can help his fellow countrymen, and so he entrusts him with spreading the good news of God's mercy among them. It was the clarity of this man's seeing that gave him no protection against the overwhelmingly destructive power of the world in which he lived. It is this same clarity that enables him to see Jesus. Now, healed through the Holy Spirit that has emanated from Jesus and has penetrated his psyche, he is the one who can take this grace to others who are living in the same world but who fail to see it (compare 1:45). Like Jesus himself (1:38), this man must go, not where he wants, but where God sends him. He becomes a missionary of the good news in the non-Jewish world.

The good news is that nothing — not even a psyche that has collapsed before the onslaught of evil — 'will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord' (Romans 8:39). Under the broken psyche of this poor man was a self made by God in God's image: a hidden self, an 'inner being' that yearned for communion with God and for a place in the community. We might pray for each other the prayer of Paul in his Letter to the Ephesians:

For this reason I bow my knees before the Father,
from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name.
I pray that, according to the riches of his glory,
he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being
with power through his Spirit,
and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith,
as you are being rooted and grounded in love.
I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints ...
the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge,
so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.
Now to him who by the power at work within us is able
to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine,
to him be glory in the Church and in Christ Jesus
to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.

– Ephesians 3:14-21

This work cannot happen without the pain of purification. Let ours be the cry of the tormented man to Him who purifies us only so that he may liberate us to love.

Suffering and Death

In this scene a young girl of twelve is raised to life and a woman who has been ailing for twelve years is healed. By the way Mark has structured this scene, he obviously intends the two stories to be read in relation to each other. As usual, the meaning is found at the level of symbol.

Both the woman and the girl represent ailing Israel (the twelve tribes). Jesus has already said that as a physician his place is among the sick (2:17). A structural sickness for Jesus' contemporaries was the honour-shame culture which kept the poor isolated.

Jairus is a man. He belongs to the ruling class. This gives him a claim to honour, a claim he expects to be acknowledged. He approaches Jesus in a public way and gives him honour before presenting his request. As we would expect, Jesus responds generously and goes off with him to attend to his daughter.

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

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

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

24 He went with him. And a

compare
Matthew 9:18-19
Luke 8:40-42

large crowd followed him and pressed in on him.

²⁵ Now there was a woman who had been suffering from haemorrhages for twelve years. ²⁶ She had endured much under many physicians, and had spent all that she had; and she was no better, *but rather grew worse.* ²⁷ She had heard about Jesus, and came up behind him in the crowd and touched his cloak, ²⁸ for she said 'If I but touch his clothes, I will be made well.'

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

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

³¹ And his disciples said to him, 'You see the crowd pressing in on you; how can you say, 'Who touched me?''³² He looked all around to see who had done it. ³³ But the woman, knowing what had happened to her, came in fear and trembling, fell down before him, and told him the whole truth.

³⁴ He said to her, 'Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease.'

³⁵ While he was still speaking,

compare Matthew 9:20-22

Luke 8:43-48

Then the story takes an unexpected turn. We are introduced to a woman from a lower rank in the society of the day. Her ailment meant that she was considered ritually unclean (Leviticus 15:19). This in turn meant that anything she touched had to be excluded from the assembly for the period prescribed by law. There is something about Jesus that causes her, as it caused the leper (1:40), to sense that, in spite of the law forbidding it, she can approach him.

Jesus deliberately breaks across socially acceptable behaviour. He delays attending to the needs of the male aristocrat and attends to the anonymous woman outcast. As we shall see shortly, this delay meant that he was too late (or so it appeared) to save Jairus's daughter.

The woman has been losing blood for twelve years. Her life ('life is in the blood', Leviticus 17:14), is draining away. Like so many others (3:10), she wants to touch Jesus. He is with Jairus, so she cannot approach him publicly. In any case he is a man and she is a woman considered 'unclean' because of her physical ailment. However such is her 'faith' that she risks shame and secretly (as she hopes) touches his cloak and is healed.

Jesus, knowing that her need is for an even deeper contact, invites her to come forward. She does so and through her communion with him finds a more profound healing: the healing called here 'peace'. This is the only time the word occurs in Mark. It carries the meaning of 'wholeness' and 'harmony'. Her faith has brought her not only freedom from haemorrhaging, but salvation.

Our attention returns to Jairus and we are told that his daughter is now dead. Jesus' immediate response is to encourage Jairus to follow the example of the outcast woman and 'believe'. Can those in positions of power and prestige in the community be expected to learn from the poor?

In the previous two scenes we have seen demonstrated the truth that neither the storms that rage around us nor the storms that rage within can separate us from God's love if only we are open to receive it. Here Mark faces the ultimate question: What about death? Can death separate us from God's love? His answer is a resounding No. In the light of the death and resurrection of Jesus, he has learned that we must pass through death to enjoy the risen life. So it is with this girl of twelve, who represents Israel.

The three disciples who witness this miracle are the same three who are chosen later to witness the transfiguration (9:2) and the agony (14:33). We are told that the child 'got up'. It is of significance that this is the same word that is used for the resurrection (16:6) when Jesus is raised by God from the dead. The amazement with which her 'resurrection' is greeted is repeated later at the tomb (16:8).

The young girl's need for food prepares us for the next section which centres on Jesus feeding the crowd (6:32-44).

The scene is not meant to raise our hopes that, when the time comes for us to die, we will be brought back to this life. It is, however, meant to demonstrate the power of God to reach beyond death and to take us from death into the life-beyond-death. Mark is encouraging his community, in the midst of persecution, to trust that the risen Christ will be there on the other side of death, and that he will take them by the hand and raise them to share his risen life.

some people came from the leader's house to say, 'Your daughter is dead. Why trouble the teacher any further?'

³⁶ But overhearing what they said, Jesus said to the leader of the synagogue, 'Do not fear, only believe.'

³⁷ He allowed no one to follow him except Peter, James, and John, the brother of James.

³⁸ When they came to the house of the leader of the synagogue, he saw a commotion, people weeping and wailing loudly.

³⁹ When he had entered, he said to them, 'Why do you make a commotion and weep? The child is not dead but sleeping.'

⁴⁰ And they laughed at him. Then he put them all outside, and took the child's father and mother and those who were with him, and went in where the child was. ⁴¹ He took her by the hand and said to her, 'Talitha cum,' which means, 'Little girl, get up!' ⁴² And immediately the girl got up and began to walk about (she was twelve years of age). At this they were overcome with amazement. ⁴³ He strictly ordered them that no one should know this, and told them to give her something to eat.

compare Matthew 9:23-26 ; Luke 8:49-56

Liberation from death

Mark shares the faith of Paul:

He [Christ] must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death.

– 1 Corinthians 15:25-26

Death has been swallowed up in victory. 'Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?'

– 1 Corinthians 15:54-55

When we speak of the 'spiritual' life, we are not speaking of experiences that are unrelated to our bodies. God's Spirit touches us, as it touched Jesus, in every part of our human condition, gracing and transforming our minds and our hearts, but also our affections and our senses. Like the woman in the scene before us, we need to touch and we need to 'feel in our body' that we are healed. Like the little girl we find ourselves lying there, unable to move, longing for his touch to bring us life.

We are here at the heart of the mystery of Jesus. It is not enough to have fine thoughts and high ideals. We are human and we need to put a face on God. We need to feel the warmth of God's affection. We need God's touch.

It is this that Jesus' disciples found in him, and Mark wrote his gospel that others might come to know Jesus and share in this experience. Let us take time to be that woman, to experience our need for healing and to seek him out to touch him in whatever way we can. Let us be that little girl. Let us not give up hope, but wait on his touch, knowing that he has come that we might live and live to the full (John 10:10).

A story is told of some soldiers who were advancing against a retreating army. They came upon a church which had been shelled and found a large broken statue of Christ in the rubble. As an act of devotion they attempted to reassemble the parts, but were unable to find the hands. Since they had to move on, one of them took a board and scribbled on it: 'I have no hands but yours'. He propped the board up against the statue and left.

'I have no hands but yours!' If the risen Christ is to touch me, it will have to be through your hands. If he is going to touch you it will have to be through someone who is graced by him to touch you. Let us, then, take to heart Jesus' request at the last supper: 'Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another'(John 13:34).

Lack of faith

This, the final scene in this part of Mark's gospel, is, like the final scene of the previous part, a scene of rejection.

At the end of Part One (3:6), in spite of the wonderful ways in which Jesus brought healing and liberation, it was the religious authorities who rejected him. Now, in spite of the incredible power of Jesus' word, it is the ordinary people of Jesus' home town who reject him. Familiarity led them to think that they knew him well, but they are closed to the surprise of recognising who he really is.

The drama of the occasion should not be lost on us. Having just demonstrated that not even death can resist Jesus' word, we find this word being resisted by the people of Nazareth. The point Mark is making is that God's word is a love-word. It is a word of invitation. Nothing can stop it reaching us, whatever our condition. However, when it does reach us, God respects our freedom, and awaits our response.

We are reminded of the words of the risen Christ to the Christian community of Laodicea:

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

'If you hear my voice and open the door.' Love never intrudes. Love never forces entry. God is all-powerful: all-powerful love. God, being God, cannot act in an unloving way. So, while God's love is offered to us unconditionally, it is not received by us unconditionally.

We must have faith. We must open our hearts and our minds and our lives to the word and to the Spirit being offered to us. If we do not, the offering will still be there, but to no effect. The word that can still the sea, and bring peace to a deranged man, and break the bonds of death, chooses not to force the human heart.

It is instructive to note why it is that the people of Nazareth reject Jesus. They were ready to acclaim a wonder-worker, for this would have brought pride to their town. But Jesus was simply too 'ordinary' for them.

¹ He left that place and came to his hometown, and his disciples followed him.

² On the Sabbath he began to teach in the synagogue, and many who heard him were astounded. They said, 'Where did this man get all this? What is this wisdom that has been given to him? What deeds of power are being done by his hands!

³ Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?' And they took offence at him.

⁴ Then Jesus said to them, 'Prophets are not without honour, except in their hometown, and among their own kin, and in their own house.'

⁵ And he could do no deed of power there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them.

⁶ And he was amazed at their unbelief.

compare Matthew 13:53-58
Luke 4:16-30

Jesus is rejected at Nazareth

Like many of us, they would accept the divine when it is up there on a pedestal, or somehow out there, majestically beyond our reach. However, when the divine enters into the simple, ordinary affairs of human life, it seems that it is too close for comfort.

It is still often the case that people who have no trouble accepting the divinity of Jesus, are offended when focus shifts to the ‘ordinariness’ of the humanity that he shared with us. Our faith tells us that it is God whom we see when we look upon the face of Jesus; it is God whom we hear when we listen to Jesus’ words. But it is not God in God’s transcendence. It is God, precisely as revealed in the human. If we bypass Jesus’ humanity we cannot see the God whom he reveals.

Mark’s final statement, too, is instructive. Jesus’ heart went out to the poor and the sick, and his touch healed them. But this was not a ‘deed of power’ as Mark understood the term. For a deed of power, a miracle, two things are required. Firstly, it must be something that arouses wonder — Jesus’ healing would surely have done that. But secondly, it must be a sign to those observing it, pointing them towards God and symbolising God’s redeeming action in their lives. Because the people lacked faith, it is this second and essential element that was missing. Jesus was ‘amazed at their disbelief’.