

BOOK TWO
THE GOSPEL OF JESUS
THE SON OF GOD
Mark 8:31 - 15:39

**THE SON OF MAN CAME TO SERVE
AND TO GIVE HIS LIFE
AS A RANSOM FOR MANY
Mark 8:31 - 10:52**

The Structure of Book Two

Book One, just completed, takes place in Galilee and focuses on Jesus' mission to preach the good news of the healing, liberating and powerful word of God — a word that is breaking into people's lives through his ministry.

With Peter's act of faith, we change focus, and face towards Jerusalem and Jesus' death. Book Two, like Book One, it is divided into three parts.

In Part One (8:31 - 10:52) Jesus concentrates on his disciples, teaching them what it means for him to be the Messiah, and what it means for them to follow him.

In Part Two (11:1 - 13:37) we see Jesus in conflict with the religious authorities in Jerusalem. The contrast highlights what is essential and what is new in the 'good news'. In chapter 13 Jesus' suffering is seen as typifying what will happen to his disciples.

In Part Three (14:1 - 15:39) we contemplate Jesus' redemptive death.

Just as Book One reached a climax when Peter declared his faith in Jesus as the Messiah, so Book Two concludes with an act of faith of a non-Jew who declares that Jesus is the Son of God.

Part One (8:31 - 10:52) is divided into three sections. Each section begins with Jesus speaking of his coming death and resurrection. This is followed by a scene in which the disciples demonstrate that they fail to understand what Jesus is saying. This in turn is followed by Jesus instructing them.

However, when they fail to understand him for the third time, it becomes obvious that they can only reach a proper understanding — they can only 'see' — by a miracle of grace. Hence the final scene, which mirrors 8:22-26. A blind man, symbol of the disciple, is given sight by Jesus and, at last, is ready to follow him in a life of service: giving one's 'life a ransom for many' (Mark 10:45).

**A: Jesus introduces the theme of suffering
(Mark 8:31 - 9:29)**

Jesus must die and rise again (1)

This short passage introduces for the first time ('he *began* to teach them') a theme which is central to the rest of the gospel: the theme of suffering that leads to life. In the section on the parables, Mark has Jesus draw a distinction between 'those outside' and 'those around him along with the twelve'. It is these latter who 'have been given the secret of the kingdom of God'(4:11). One of its central mysteries is now being disclosed.

Peter has just acknowledged that Jesus whom he has come to know and love is the Messiah (8:29). Jesus' reaction to Peter's act of faith is consistent with his reaction to all previous Messianic claims: he demands strict silence (8:30; see 1:25).

Instead of the title 'Messiah', Jesus chooses an expression that was not so clearly defined: 'Son of Man'. We noted earlier (2:10) that it refers back to Daniel 7:13, and bespeaks solidarity with those who suffer and will be vindicated by God at the final judgment. If Peter is going to accept Jesus as the Messiah, he must be ready to accept a Messiah who suffers with the outcasts, but who will, ultimately, be vindicated by God.

Jesus has already spoken of himself, in parable, as a bridegroom. On that occasion he spoke of the time when 'the bridegroom is taken away'(2:20). Now he is no longer speaking in parables, but 'he was speaking the word quite openly'. The buildup of antipathy with the religious leaders (noted as early as 2:7, clearly stated in 3:6, and evidenced particularly in 7:1-13) and the fate of John the Baptist (6:27-29), as well as a long history of prophets being rejected, has been enough to make Jesus realise what is in store for him.

That he 'must' suffer is probably based on Jesus' identification with the Son of Man of Daniel 7, and also with the suffering servant of Isaiah 52-53. In this he fulfils the prophetic pattern of the Old Testament. The 'elders, the chief priests and the scribes' are the three groups that made up the supreme Jewish council in Jerusalem.

³¹ Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again.

³² He said all this quite openly. [He was speaking the word quite openly]

compare
Matthew 16:21
Luke 9:22

Death and resurrection

Jesus' faith in his ultimate vindication by God (see Psalm 34:19) is expressed here in the words: 'after three days rise again'. There seems to be an allusion to Hosea:

Come, let us return to the Lord; for it is he who has torn, and he will heal us; he has struck down, and he will bind us up. After two days he will revive us; on the third *day he will raise us up*, that we may live before him. Let us know, let us press on to know the Lord; his appearing is as sure as the dawn; he will come to us like the showers, like the spring rains that water the earth.

– Hosea 6:1-3

In biblical usage, 'three days' is, as in the text just quoted from Hosea, an expression to indicate something definitive. We find this in another saying of Jesus recorded by Luke. The Pharisees warn Jesus to leave the territory of Herod who is determined to kill him. Jesus replies:

Go and tell that fox for me, 'Listen, I am casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow, and *on the third day* I finish my work. Yet today, tomorrow, and the next day I must be on my way, because it is impossible for a prophet to be killed outside of Jerusalem.'

– Luke 13:32-33

Whatever may happen today (in the present) and tomorrow (in the foreseeable future), ultimately ('on the third day', or, as in Mark, 'after three days'), God will act and God's justice will triumph. The classical text concerns God's self-manifestation on Mount Sinai:

The Lord said to Moses: 'Go to the people and consecrate them today and tomorrow. Have them wash their clothes and prepare for the third day, because *on the third day* the Lord will come down upon Mount Sinai in the sight of all the people.

– Exodus 19:10-11

It was 'on the third day' also that Abraham caught sight of Mount Moriah (Genesis 22:4). It was only after three days' journey into the wilderness that Moses offered sacrifice to God (Exodus 3:18, 5:3, 8:27). King Hezekiah asked the prophet Isaiah:

What shall be the sign that the Lord will heal me, and that I shall go up to the house of the Lord *on the third day*?

– 2Kings 20:8

Jesus is confident that he will be raised to life by God 'after three days'. In other words, ultimately, when God's will is revealed, God will vindicate him and all those who put their trust in God. He will suffer, but he is determined to continue carrying out his mission, trusting that suffering and death will lead to life.

Peter fails to understand

There is no place for suffering in Peter's understanding of the Christ. His reaction is part of the continual testing that Jesus had to undergo during his life; hence the word 'Satan'. Peter, in this instance, incarnates evil, and Jesus rebukes him for it. He is not rejecting Peter. He is telling Peter to 'get behind' him: to follow him, and not to stand in his way as an obstacle. What it means to 'follow' Jesus will be made clear in the following passage.

Peter's thinking is perfectly understandable from the human point of view, but Jesus makes it clear that God's way of looking at things is different. Our mind goes to the saying from Isaiah:

For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.

– Isaiah 55:8-9

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

³³ **But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, 'Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.'**

compare
Matthew 16:22-23

³⁴ He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, 'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. ³⁵ For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake [because of me] and for the sake of [because of] the gospel, will save it. ³⁶ For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? ³⁷ Indeed, what can they give in return for their life?

³⁸ Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.'

^{9:1} And he said to them, 'Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see that the kingdom of God has come with power.'

compare Matthew 16:24-28
Luke 9:23-27

We find life by following Jesus

In the scene at Caesarea Philippi, Jesus asked 'Who am I?' Here he asks: 'Who are you?': 'What really is the human self?' The word translated 'life' in this passage is the Greek *psyche*. It has a wide range of meanings, depending on one's theory of psychology. It could be translated 'self', in the sense of one's aware self. It could be translated 'soul', in the sense of one's deepest, most intimate, and most mysterious self.

However one translates it, it is obvious from the above passage that Jesus has the deepest respect for a person's *psyche*. He wants it to be 'saved'; he recognises that gaining the whole world is of no value if it means losing it. Indeed nothing can replace it. A person's self is sacred, for it is the unique individual person who is created by God, sustained in life by God, and loved as a son or daughter by God.

Herein is a paradox that lies at the heart of Jesus' moral teaching. There is another 'self' to which we must say No, if we are ever to discover and enjoy our soul. This other 'self' is the one that is focused on itself. It is the 'self' that is afraid to let go. It is the 'self' that will not give itself away in love, or waste itself in giving life to another. It is like a seed that will not submit itself to the earth, that will not break open and 'lose' itself, so that life might burst from it. It is the heart that refuses to dare to love lest it be hurt.

That surface self, that small self, that fearful self, that insecure self, must learn to trust itself to Christ, and to follow him in his way of living. In this context, it is worth noting the following from Paul:

Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God, and that you are not your own? For you were bought with a price; therefore glorify God in your body.

– 1Corinthians 6:19-20

Jesus has already spoken of what lies ahead of him. Of course, his disciples are frightened — for him, but also for themselves. However, he has already said that he will go ahead, because he trusts that his Father will raise him to himself (8:31). He promises them the same.

If, because of him, they too have to carry a cross (under Roman occupation, the most common way for Jews to be killed in Jesus' day); if, because of him and because they have shared his mission of proclaiming the good news, they, too, have to forfeit their life, he assures them that they, like him, will have their real life preserved for them (by God). We are reminded of Paul's prayer that the real self, the hidden self, 'the inner being', might grow strong:

I bend 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, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know 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

It is surely with profound sadness that Jesus speaks of his contemporaries as 'this adulterous and sinful generation'. Adultery is to be understood, as often in the Bible (Jeremiah 3:8; Ezekiel 16:32; Revelation 2:22), as infidelity to the covenant with God. The leaders have rejected him (3:6), and so, largely, have the ordinary people (6:6). Jesus is warning his disciples that if they, too, are ashamed of him, because they will not accept that carrying out his mission will involve suffering, when the final judgment comes they will be the ones who will stand ashamed.

Speaking of the final judgment, Jesus once again speaks of the 'Son of Man', the one who, according to Daniel, represents all the oppressed ones who have remained faithful to God and who have cried out to God in their distress. When God comes to vindicate them, those who have rejected Jesus will find that they are not among those called to share in God's glory.

The imagery here is familiar to those of Jesus' contemporaries who were interested in the literature, popular at the time, that explored the afterlife. Except for one word. Nowhere else do we find God spoken of as the 'Father' of the Son of Man. We are here at the heart of Jesus' religious experience. At the baptism, he had a profound experience of being God's beloved son (1:11). Here, in the text before us, we find him, for the first time in Mark's gospel, using of God the familiar and intimate title 'Father'.

The 'glory' — also used here for the first time — refers to the hidden beauty of God at last radiantly manifest in such a way as to evoke praise from all who witness it. The glory of God is revealed in God's judgment, vindicating the oppressed against their oppressors, and giving the kingdom to the poor. Jesus is inviting his disciples to journey with him, so that they might enjoy with him his Father's glory. However, to journey with him they have to be willing to give their life with him. In an early Christian hymn quoted by Paul, Jesus is spoken of as having 'emptied himself' (Philippians 2:7). His disciples are being asked to do the same.

Jesus' coming in glory

In speaking of Jesus as the Messiah, Peter has implicitly expressed his desire to be Jesus' disciple. Here Jesus is teaching him, and the others, that the decision to follow him is one that is a matter of life and death.

It is not easy to determine the meaning of the final sentence: 'Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see that the kingdom of God has come with power'. The Greek word translated here 'until' does not imply that they will taste death afterwards. Jesus may be saying that they will never taste death. In which case it is possible that Jesus is not speaking of physical death at all. They may well die, but he is assuring them that they will not experience death as a loss of life, for, if they follow him as he has invited them, they will experience the saving power of the kingdom of God (compare John 11:26).

On the other hand he may be repeating what he said earlier: that the end is imminent, 'the time is fulfilled, the kingdom of God has come near'(1:15). They are about to see God's power and glory revealed in him as the suffering servant. They are about to see love revealed in his offering up his life for them.

Mark may well have understood the words to be referring to Jesus' death and resurrection. If this is the case, then we see here in Mark the beginnings of an understanding of the death of Jesus that is well developed in John's gospel; namely, that the hour of Jesus' death is the hour of his glorification. We noted, when commenting on Mark 1:14-15, that the gospel preached by Jesus was that every person is God's beloved son or daughter. Everything Jesus said or did witnessed to his conviction of this truth, and this can be said in a special way about his manner of dying. For he chose death rather than stop preaching, healing and liberating people. He gave his life for the gospel which he was commissioned by God to preach, and in which he believed. In this act of self-giving the kingdom of God did indeed come in power: the power of love offered unconditionally to anyone who would accept it. The fact that Mark follows these words with a scene portraying the resurrected Christ makes this interpretation the most likely one.

On the other hand, we know from the literature of the day that speculation linked the promised resurrection with God's final judgment. It was unavoidable that the experience of Jesus' resurrection would lead the early Christians to expect the imminent end of history and the final unfolding of God's design. Paul witnesses to this in his early writings (1Thessalonians 4:1-13), and it is not impossible that Mark may have understood Jesus' words in this way. He may have thought of the conflict between Rome and the Jews, which flared into open warfare in 66AD, as the final struggle that would bring about the ultimate intervention of God to establish the promised kingdom.

It is easy to be distracted from our heart's desire. We do not want to let go of anything that has seemed to bring us some security. We dare not put our life at risk, physically, but even more so psychologically. So we cling to anything and everything that gives us the impression of making us less dependent.

Jesus' words in this passage cut right across such thinking and such behaviour. How we need to be open to his grace to enable us to really listen and to act as he invites us to here! In the opening chapter of this book, we read Augustine's plea that we 'return to the heart'. Let us listen to him again as he speaks of his own conversion experience:

Let me know you who know me, know you even as I am known.
You are the power of my soul - enter into it and fit it for yourself.
This is my hope, my prayer.

– *Confessions* 10.1

Late have I loved you, O Beauty so ancient and so new;
Late have I loved you!
For you were within me and I outside; and I sought you outside
and in my ugliness I fell upon the lovely things you have made.
You were with me but I was not with you.
I was kept from you by those things,
yet had they not been in you, they would not have been at all.
You called and cried to me and broke open my deafness.
You sent forth your beams and shone upon me and chased away my blindness.
You breathed fragrance upon me,
and I drew in my breath and now pant for you.
I tasted you and now hunger and thirst for you
You touched me and I have burned for your peace.

– *Confessions* 10.27

Once I am united to you with all my being,
there will be no more grief or toil
and my life will be fully alive, filled with you.
You raise up the one you fill.
It is because I am not yet filled with you
that I am a burden to myself.

– *Confessions* 10.28

² Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain apart, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them,

³ and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them.

⁴ And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus.

⁵ Then Peter said to Jesus, ‘Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.’

⁶ He did not know what to say, for they were terrified.

⁷ Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, ‘This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!’

⁸ Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them any more, but only Jesus.

compare Matthew 17:1-8
Luke 9:28-36

The promised glory is revealed

Jesus has just, for the first time, expressed his own faith in the intimate connection between his suffering and his glorification by God (8:31). He has also assured his disciples that it will be the same for them (8:35). In this magnificent portrait, Mark assures his readers that Jesus’ understanding is correct. God himself tells them to ‘listen to him’.

The three disciples, ‘Peter and James and John’, have already appeared in an earlier scene, in which Jesus raised to life the daughter of Jairus (5:37), and they will be together again at Jesus’ agony (14:33). In this way also Mark establishes a link between suffering and resurrection.

A further theological reflection of major significance is represented by the presence of Moses, the mediator of the Law, and Elijah, symbolising the prophets. It is clear from a reading of Paul’s letters that the nature of the relationship between Jesus and Judaism (the Law and the Prophets) was much discussed in the early Church. A proper understanding of this relationship was made especially imperative when the Christian community was opened up to non-Jews.

Mark’s theology agrees with that of Paul. Jesus is the fulfilment of the Law (Moses) and the Prophets (Elijah). This becomes clear from a comparison of the magnificent scenes from the Old Testament which speak of the experiences of Moses and Elijah on the mountain with the even more magnificent scene painted here by Mark.

Moses encounters God on a ‘high mountain’ (Exodus 24:12,15-18; 34:3). A cloud descends and overshadows the mountain (Exodus 24:15-18; 34:5). God speaks from the cloud (Exodus 24:16). Moses becomes radiant (9:2-3; Exodus 34:29-30,35). Those who see his radiance become afraid (Exodus 34:30). This happens after six days (Exodus 24:16).

Elijah, who is mentioned first in Mark’s account, journeyed ‘forty days and forty nights’ to this same mountain in the hope of seeing God. He heard God, but it was in ‘sheer silence’ and with his face ‘wrapped in a mantle’. He was told:

Go out and stand on the mountain before the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by.’ Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence. When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave.

– 1Kings 19:11-13

On the mountain of transfiguration, Jesus is gazing on God’s face and listening to God’s voice. His whole being is caught up in God’s glory. He transcends the Law and the Prophets, for he is God’s ‘Son, the beloved’. It is to *him* that they are to listen (see also Deuteronomy 18:15). So it is that when the three disciples looked up ‘they saw no one with them any more but only Jesus’. Moses and the Prophets prepared the way for Jesus. Now, however, God’s word is revealed fully in him.

Paul treats of the same subject in a number of places. We might recall here his words to the community at Corinth (written c.56AD):

To this very day whenever Moses is read, a veil lies over their minds; but when one turns to the Lord, the veil is removed. Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit.

– 2Corinthians 3:15-18

Mark’s portrait is rich in symbolism. The glory-cloud reminds us of the cloud that was a symbol of God leading his people through the desert (Exodus 13:21). It was from within this cloud that God spoke to Moses ‘that the people may hear when I speak with you and so trust you ever after’(Exodus 19:9). Mark is portraying Jesus as the new Moses, leading his disciples to the promised land. It is to Jesus now that they must listen. The cloud reminds us, too, of God’s presence in the temple (1Kings 8:10). Jesus is God’s new temple (John 2:21). The words spoken by God recall the words spoken at Jesus’ baptism (1:11): God who brought order to primeval chaos (Genesis 1:2) is beginning a new creation with his Son.

These same themes are reinforced by the mention of ‘dwellings’, that is to say ‘tents’ or ‘tabernacles’. The Jewish New Year Feast of Tabernacles, which took place ‘six days’ after the Day of Atonement, commemorated creation, God’s giving of the covenant on Sinai, and God’s presence in the temple. Jesus’ disciples are to find in him the fulfilment of all these themes.

It is rarely possible to go behind the highly dramatised portraits of the gospel to discover, with any precision, the historical events that lie behind them. The gospels, as we noted in the introductory chapter, were simply not written to answer our modern interest in establishing exact historical data. Whatever the nature of the religious experience enjoyed by these three chosen disciples, the following passage (9:9-10) indicates that it was only after the death and resurrection of Jesus that they were able to reflect back on it and make sense of it.

Listen to him

We should, however, recall also the following words from the Second Letter of Peter:

We did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we had been eyewitnesses of his majesty. For he received honour and glory from God the Father when that voice was conveyed to him by the Majestic Glory, saying, 'This is my Son, my Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.' We ourselves heard this voice come from heaven, while we were with him on the holy mountain.

– 2Peter 1:16-18

Why must Jesus suffer?

This passage seems to reflect two areas of discussion in the early Church. The first was about the relationship between Elijah, John the Baptist and Jesus. The second was about the relationship between the Son of Man and Jesus' death and resurrection.

Mark has already made a connection between John the Baptist and Elijah (1:1-8), and between Jesus, John the Baptist and Elijah (6:14-16). Here he seems to do what Matthew does explicitly (Matthew 17:13): he identifies John the Baptist as the one discussed by the scribes in their debates about the prophecy of Malachi (3:1 and 4:5-6). Furthermore, he reminds the reader of the Baptist's violent death (9:13). Jezebel sought the life of Elijah (1Kings 19:2). Herodias brought about the murder of the Baptist (Mark 6:17-29).

In the previous scene we saw both Moses and Elijah in glory. Essential to grasping the significance of Mark's portrait is the fact that both of them suffered before being taken into glory. From the following passage we get a taste of some of the suffering which Moses had to go through in leading the people to freedom:

Moses said to the Lord, 'Why have you treated your servant so badly? Why have I not found favour in your sight, that you lay the burden of all this people on me? Did I conceive all this people? Did I give birth to them, that you should say to me, 'Carry them in your bosom, as a nurse carries a sucking child,' to the land that you promised on oath to their ancestors? Where am I to get meat to give to all this people? For they come weeping to me and say, 'Give us meat to eat!' I am not able to carry all this people alone, for they are too heavy for me. If this is the way you are going to treat me, put me to death at once — if I have found favour in your sight — and do not let me see my misery.

— Numbers 11:11-15

Moses is a model for the songs of the suffering servant of the Lord in the Isaiah scroll (see especially Isaiah 50:6 and 53:1-12). Elijah's mission, too, involved him in suffering (1 Kings 19:2-10). Jesus is telling his disciples that if they go back and read the Law and the Prophets they will find there the same central message that he is trying to convey to them. It is written about the Son of Man: 'that he is to go through many sufferings and be treated with contempt'(compare Isaiah 53:3).

⁹ As they were coming down the mountain, he ordered them to tell no one about what they had seen, until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead.

¹⁰ So they kept the matter to themselves, questioning what this rising from the dead could mean.

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

¹² He said to them, 'Elijah is indeed coming first to restore all things.

How then is it written about the Son of Man, that he is to go through many sufferings and be treated with contempt?

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

compare Matthew 17:9-13

¹⁴ **When they came to the disciples, they saw a great crowd around them, and some scribes arguing with them.** ¹⁵ *When the whole crowd saw him, they were immediately overcome with awe, and they ran forward to greet him.*

¹⁶ *He asked them, 'What are you arguing about with them?'* ¹⁷ **Someone from the crowd answered him, 'Teacher, I brought you my son; he has a spirit that makes him unable to speak;** ¹⁸ *and whenever it seizes him, it dashes him down; and he foams and grinds his teeth and becomes rigid; and I asked your disciples to cast it out, but they could not do so.'*

¹⁹ **He answered them, 'You faithless generation, how much longer must I be among you? How much longer must I put up with you? Bring him to me.'**

²⁰ *And they brought the boy to him. When the spirit saw him, immediately it convulsed the boy, and he fell on the ground and rolled about, foaming at the mouth.*

The necessity of prayer

The whole of this section focuses on the power of evil to inflict suffering and death; and on God's victory over evil by raising to life. This scene is a dramatic demonstration of the theme, drawing on features of all Mark's earlier healing scenes.

There are echoes of the synagogue exorcism (1:26-27). The appeal for pity picks up the feeling Jesus had in response to the leper (1:41). The presence of the crowd and the scribes reminds us of scene with the paralysed man (2:1,6). The word translated 'rigid' here, is the same word used to describe the 'withered' hand (3:5). The description of the terrible state of the boy reminds us of the deranged man of Gerasa (5:3-6). Jesus' raising of the boy back to life recalls the daughter of Jairus (5:41-42). The importance of faith recalls Jesus' words to the woman with a haemorrhage (5:34). There are echoes in the text also of the deaf and dumb man healed by Jesus (7:31ff). The boy here, in other words, is symbolic of all the ills of humankind.

The lesson taught by Jesus is that it is only God who can conquer evil; hence the necessity of prayer. The early 16th century artist, Raphael, has made a powerful comment on this scene in his famous painting, preserved in the Vatican Museum. The painting is commonly known as 'The Transfiguration', though I have heard that Raphael called it 'Faith'.

In the upper part of the painting we see Jesus transfigured and the three disciples sleeping. The main action is occurring in the lower half which depicts the scene upon which we are reflecting. The father is pleading with the other nine apostles, who are making all kinds of excuses for their inability to heal the boy. The only one who is actually looking up to Jesus is the boy himself, his arm raised and pointing to Jesus, providing the link between the upper and lower parts of the canvas. He knows who the source of healing is, even if no one else does. In the centre of the lower scene, with her back towards us, is the figure of a woman, introduced into the scene by Raphael. She is 'Faith'.

She is challenging the disciples: ‘Why do you not pray that the glorified Jesus will heal this boy through you? He has given you this power (6:7,13). Mark tells us that when the crowd see Jesus they are ‘overcome with awe’ — the same reaction that the women have at the resurrection (16:5-6).

Jesus rebukes them for their failure to believe — a rebuke that finally calls forth from the father of the boy the plaintive response: ‘I believe; help my unbelief’. We find similar sentiments in the following psalm:

Be gracious to me, O Lord, for I am languishing; O Lord, heal me, for my bones are shaking with terror. My soul also is struck with terror, while you, O Lord— how long? Turn, O Lord, save my life; deliver me for the sake of your steadfast love. For in death there is no remembrance of you; in Sheol who can give you praise? I am weary with my moaning; every night I flood my bed with tears; I drench my couch with my weeping. My eyes waste away because of grief.

– Psalm 6:1-7

Jesus can defeat evil and therefore heal the boy, because he is in prayer, his will conformed to that of his Father. This is the lesson the disciples must learn. ‘All things can be done by one who believes’, because there is no limit to the power of God to heal. But we must bring the needy person to Jesus; we must ‘believe’; we must ‘pray’.

The ‘and fasting’ which is found in some ancient manuscripts, though probably a marginal note mistakenly added into the text, is not at all out of place in this context. It takes us back to the main theme of the previous section. Nourishment for the journey and mission of discipleship comes, not from the bread we supply, but from ‘every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord’ (Deuteronomy 8:3). When Jesus healed the boy, we are told by Mark that he ‘lifted him up’ — the term used for the resurrection (16:6). Yet another reminder of the central theme of this section.

²¹ *Jesus asked the father, ‘How long has this been happening to him?’ And he said, ‘From childhood.*

²² *It has often cast him into the fire and into the water, to destroy him; but if you are able to do anything, have pity on us and help us.’*

²³ *Jesus said to him, ‘If you are able! — All things can be done for the one who believes.’*

²⁴ *Immediately the father of the child cried out, ‘I believe; help my unbelief!’*

²⁵ *When Jesus saw that a crowd came running together, he rebuked the unclean spirit, saying to it, ‘You spirit that keeps this boy from speaking and hearing, I command you, come out of him, and never enter him again!’*

²⁶ *After crying out and convulsing him terribly, it came out, and the boy was like a corpse, so that most of them said, ‘He is dead.’*

²⁷ *But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him up, and he was able to stand.*

²⁸ *When he had entered the house, his disciples asked him privately, ‘Why could we not cast it out?’* ²⁹ *He said to them, ‘This kind can come out only through prayer.’* [Some ancient manuscripts add ‘and fasting’]

compare Matthew 17:18-20
Luke 9:42-43

Jesus speaks of his suffering

³⁰ **They went on from there and passed through Galilee. He did not want anyone to know it;** ³¹ *for he was teaching his disciples, saying to them, 'The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again.'*

compare Matthew 17:22-23a
Luke 9:44

³² **But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him.**

compare Matthew 17:23b
Luke 9:45

B: Doing God's will (Mark 9:30 - 10:31)

Jesus must die and rise again (2)

This second section begins, like the first, with a statement by Jesus concerning his death and resurrection (see the commentary on 8:31-32a). The only additional features of this second statement are that Mark focuses attention explicitly on the fact that Jesus' teaching is addressed to his disciples, and introduces the idea of Jesus being 'betrayed'.

The disciples fail to understand

As in the first section (8:32b-33), so here, Jesus' teaching is met by a failure to understand. This failure is demonstrated in the following scene.

Disciples must be faithful

In the corresponding passage in Part One (8:34-37), Jesus instructed his disciples on their need to deny themselves, take up their cross and follow him. Here, this is made more precise: they are to be ‘last of all and servant of all’.

Here, for the first time in Mark, we meet the important word *diakonos*, translated here as ‘servant’. The servant is in relation not to the needy but to the master. The disciple is to be, like Jesus, a servant of the Lord. A ‘servant’, therefore, is one who faithfully carried out a commission given by God. We have met the related verb in two previous passages. While Jesus was being tested in the wilderness, ‘angels *waited on* him’(1:13); that is to say, they faithfully carried out the commission given them by God and came to care for Jesus. When Simon’s mother-in-law was healed ‘she began *to serve* them’(1:31); that is to say, she performed a sacred task, given her by God to care for Jesus and the disciples.

A *diakonos* is one who is sent by God to carry out a sacred ministry. Jesus is God’s ‘minister’: the servant of the Lord; the servant of ‘the one who sent me’(9:37). So must it be with the disciple. Obviously the precise way in which the individual Christian contributes to the mission of the Christian community will be determined by the gifts of the Spirit which he or she is given. It ought also be obvious that the ministry should be discerned within the community, be recognised by the community and be named by it; and that the community should commission the ‘servant’ to carry out his or her ministry. We share in Christ’s mission, and must learn the total obedience to God’s call that is of the essence of divine service.

Because God is the God of all, we cannot set limits to the mission on which God sends us. It extends to ‘all’. It is here that we find the link between 9:35 and 9:36-37. In Jesus’ world, a child received all the love that children receive in any culture. However, they were not yet significant in the world of religion, cult and law. Jesus takes a little child, as a symbol of the smallest and least significant of human beings, and, by the tenderness of his welcome and the respect he gives the child, instructs his disciples that they must see themselves as sent by God to the least.

³³ **Then they came to Capernaum; and when he was in the house he asked them, ‘What were you arguing about on the way?’**

³⁴ **But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest.**

³⁵ **He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, ‘Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all’.**

³⁶ **Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, ³⁷ ‘Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.’**

compare Matthew 18:1-5
Luke 9:46-48

A child before God

If they are seeking true greatness, they must reverse their expectations, become ‘the last of all’ and be at God’s disposal to be sent in love to all, even to the tiniest and most insignificant child. Jesus’ religious experience taught him to identify with a little child. After all, he addressed God as ‘Abba!’, indicating that he shared the sense of absolute dependence and total trust which tiny children have in their parents.

Since each and every person is a beloved son or daughter of God, it should come as no surprise that we are meant to treat everyone, even the tiniest child, with the sacred respect and reverence with which they are treated by God. Nor should it surprise us that God, who commissioned Jesus, his Servant, to preach the good news to all, without reserve, should commission Jesus’ disciples to do the same.

When Moses approached the burning bush, he was overwhelmed by the sacred Presence he encountered there. He removed his sandals, because he was on holy ground (Exodus 3:5). We cannot be Jesus’ disciples, and we will not carry out his ministry, unless we know that every encounter with another person is an encounter with God. Only then will the love we have for them be the love of God that filled the heart of Jesus. Only then will the words we speak and the actions we do be convincing witnesses of the gospel.

Deeds done in Jesus' name

A group of Jewish Christians from Jerusalem tried to stop Paul because he was not one of their group (Galatians 2:4; Acts 15:24-25). The community at Corinth was divided, because people formed into sects that excluded others who were judged not to belong (1 Corinthians 1:12). We, in our day, witness the continuing scandal of divisions among those claiming to follow Jesus, and no doubt Mark's community had similar problems.

This scene is a powerful statement against any kind of group or institutional arrogance. John is corrected for placing his own limited measure on the working of the Spirit of God. He suffered from the very fault for which Jesus castigated the Pharisees (3:4). A tree is to be judged by its fruit. If people are doing wonderful things that draw others to Christ, we can be sure that the Spirit of God is working in them. We are reminded of a scene from the Book of Numbers:

Moses went out and told the people the words of the Lord; and he gathered seventy elders of the people, and placed them all around the tent. Then the Lord came down in the cloud and spoke to him, and took some of the spirit that was on him and put it on the seventy elders; and when the spirit rested upon them, they prophesied. But they did not do so again. Two men remained in the camp, one named Eldad, and the other named Medad, and the spirit rested on them; they were among those registered, but they had not gone out to the tent, and so they prophesied in the camp. And a young man ran and told Moses, 'Eldad and Medad are prophesying in the camp.' And Joshua son of Nun, the assistant of Moses, one of his chosen men, said, 'My Lord Moses, stop them!' But Moses said to him, 'Are you jealous for my sake? Would that all the Lord's people were prophets, and that the Lord would put his spirit on them!' And Moses and the elders of Israel returned to the camp.

– Numbers 11:24-30

Being for Christ and not against Christ is indicated by doing deeds of power in his name. It is just as truly indicated by something as simple as offering a cup of water when this comes from a heart attracted by Jesus. Mark speaks for the only time in his gospel of a 'reward'. He does not explain in what the reward consists. Perhaps the English language can help us here, for the word 'regard' is an alternative rendering of 'reward'. God's loving regard is reward enough. God looks upon Jesus with delight. What special delight must God have in someone who shares his regard for his Son? Who knows what marvellous fruit, what 'works of power', can issue from the simplest action done in such love?

³⁸ **John said to him, 'Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us.'**

³⁹ **But Jesus said, 'Do not stop him; for no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me.'**

⁴⁰ **Whoever is not against us is for us.**

⁴¹ **For truly I tell you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you bear the name of Christ will by no means lose the reward.**

compare
Luke 9:49-50

verse 41 compare Mat-
thew 10:42

⁴² 'If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea.

⁴³ If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life maimed than to have two hands and to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire.

[Some manuscripts add verse 44, which is identical with verse 48]

⁴⁵ And if your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life lame than to have two feet and to be thrown into hell. [Some manuscripts add verse 46, which is identical with verse 48]

⁴⁷ And if your eye causes you to stumble, tear it out; it is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and to be thrown into hell, ⁴⁸ *where their worm never dies, and the fire is never quenched.* ⁴⁹ *For everyone will be salted with fire.*

⁵⁰ Salt is good; but if salt has lost its saltiness, how can you season it? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another.'

Jesus condemns scandal

Jesus has just said: 'Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me' (9:37). Along the same lines he speaks here of 'these little ones who believe in me'. Being a disciple of Jesus makes a person as vulnerable as is Jesus himself. Accepting to be 'last of all and servant of all' (9:35), opening one's heart in love to all, makes one vulnerable to rejection, to abuse of trust, and so to hurt.

Jesus focuses first on those who would abuse the trust of his disciples by taking advantage of them for their own ends. This can happen in many ways. We can distort the gospel in our preaching, engaging people's longing for God and pointing them in the wrong direction. We can, wittingly or unwittingly, use spiritual power to attract others to ourselves, instead of encouraging them to be united to God. By our sinful behaviour we can cause others to doubt God's love, or to lose faith in the Christian community to which we belong. Let us not forget, moreover, that the source of such behaviour is to be found in the heart (7:21).

Jesus then goes on to warn disciples against anything in their own behaviour that is an obstacle to their communion with God. His words here are very strong. Those who behave in these ways will not 'enter life', they will not 'enter the kingdom of God', but will experience 'hell', 'the unquenchable fire', 'where the worm never dies, and the fire is never quenched'.

The word 'hell' translates the Greek *gehenna* which itself is a transliteration of the Hebrew *ge-hinnom*, the valley ('ge') of Hinnom. This valley forms the southern boundary of Jerusalem, and it was here that certain inhabitants of the city had sacrificed innocent children to the god Molech in an effort to placate the god and save the city (2Kings 23:10). This was in the years leading up to the destruction of Jerusalem (587BC). Jeremiah was horrified at their action and cursed the valley.

compare Matthew 18:6-9; Luke 17:1-2
verse 50 compare
Matthew 5:13; Luke 14:34

The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when it will no more be called Topheth, or the valley of the son of Hinnom, but the valley of Slaughter: for they will bury in Topheth until there is no more room. The corpses of this people will be food for the birds of the air, and for the animals of the earth; and no one will frighten them away.

– Jeremiah 7:32-33; see also 19:1-15; 32:35

With the destruction of the city, the fires of sacrifice in the valley gave way to the fires that burned the bodies of those who were slaughtered. The author of the final chapters in the Isaiah scroll, writing after the return from exile in Babylon (538BC), has in mind this and similar events which he uses as a symbol of God's ultimate judgment. Mark quotes part of this passage:

As the new heavens and the new earth, which I will make, shall remain before me, says the Lord; so shall your descendants and your name remain. From new moon to new moon, and from Sabbath to Sabbath, all flesh shall come to worship before me, says the Lord. And they shall go out and look at the dead bodies of the people who have rebelled against me; for *their worm shall not die, their fire shall not be quenched*, and they shall be an abhorrence to all flesh.

– Isaiah 66:22-24

We cannot pretend that what we do does not have effects, on ourselves as well as on others. Putting obstacles in the way of those who place their trust in Jesus and who accept to be vulnerable with him is destructive behaviour, with results such as those which came upon the sinful inhabitants of Jerusalem.

We will be tempted to defend ourselves, to save our foot or arm or eye; but if we do so we will stumble and cause others to stumble. Jesus has already said that nothing is worth the price of losing one's life (8:37). Here he tells us that nothing, not even an arm, a foot, an eye, is worth holding on to if it means failing to 'enter life', failing to 'enter the kingdom of God'(4:46).

Jesus teaches us that 'everyone will be salted with fire'. Just as salt, as a symbol of the covenant, is offered with every sacrifice (Leviticus 2:13), so the lives of Jesus' disciples, like his own, must pass through the ordeal of suffering, through the fire of purification.

A disciple is called to be a peacemaker. Jesus has already said: 'Those who lose their life because of me, and because of the gospel, will save it'(8:35). Here he adds that the price for bringing 'peace'(the price for 'making whole') is the suffering associated with sacrifice ('having salt in yourselves'). This is true for Jesus (8:31); it is true also for those who would be his disciples.

¹ He left that place and went to the region of Judea and beyond the Jordan. And crowds again gathered around him; and, as was his custom, he again taught them. ² Some Pharisees came, and to test him they asked, 'Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?'

³ He answered them, 'What did Moses command you?'

⁴ They said, 'Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of dismissal and to divorce her.' ⁵ But Jesus said to them, 'Because of your hardness of heart he wrote this commandment for you.

⁶ But from the beginning of creation, "God made them male and female."

⁷ "For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, ⁸ and the two shall become one flesh." So they are no longer two, but one flesh. ⁹ Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.'

¹⁰ Then in the house the disciples asked him again about this matter. ¹¹ He said to them, 'Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery *against her*; ¹² and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery.'

compare Matthew 19:1-11
Luke 16:18

Breaking the marriage covenant

Mark tells us that the Pharisees asked their question about divorce to test Jesus. The region 'beyond the Jordan' is in Herod's territory, and perhaps they are trying to force Jesus into a position where Herod will act towards him as he did towards John the Baptist (6:17-18).

Mark includes this passage here because divorce as practised in Judaism at the time of Jesus is an example of putting a 'stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me' (9:42): the exercise of male power over women, who were left practically unprotected by law. There is no place for such injustice among Jesus' disciples.

Jesus asks the Pharisees what Moses commanded concerning divorce. Their reply demonstrates that the only command given in the Torah is that if a man divorces his wife he must have a statement drawn up and witnessed.

Suppose a man enters into marriage with a woman, but she does not please him because he finds something objectionable about her, and so he writes her a certificate of divorce, puts it in her hand, and sends her out of his house; she then leaves his house and goes off to become another man's wife. Then suppose the second man dislikes her, writes her a bill of divorce, puts it in her hand, and sends her out of his house (or the second man who married her dies); her first husband, who sent her away, is not permitted to take her again to be his wife.

– Deuteronomy 24:1-4

This says nothing about the rightness or wrongness of divorce. It is an attempt to regularise an already existing practice in such a way as to give the divorced woman some security. If her husband divorces her, she can live without fear of being accused of adultery should she re-marry, and her husband cannot call her back at whim.

Granted the concession, the male practice of discarding one's wife is judged by Jesus to be a symptom of 'hardness of heart'.

Jesus goes back behind any regulations to the very purpose of marriage, and he does so in a way that the Pharisees would have to respect: by quoting from the Scriptures (Genesis 1:27 and 2:24). In God's original design marriage is not about male rights, but about male-female communion. Human beings have no right to use human legislation to bypass God's will (10:9).

It is important to note that nowhere in this passage does Jesus enter into the question of which marriage relationships are in fact joined by God and which are not. What he is saying is that, on the assumption that a particular union of man and woman is a true marriage, men cannot claim rights for themselves that ignore the rights of women, or that cut across the very purpose of marriage, which is that man and woman be bound into an ever deeper communion of love, witnessing thereby to the fact that as man and woman they are made in God's image and likeness.

Jesus goes on to speak of a particular example of male abuse: adultery. This was defined in Jewish law as a denial of male rights over a wife. As far as Jewish law was concerned, if a man had sexual intercourse with a married woman, he committed adultery against her husband. If, on the other hand, a married man had sexual intercourse with an unmarried woman, no adultery was committed, because no male rights were contravened.

The legislation quoted above from Deuteronomy was an early attempt to give some protection to a divorced woman. Jesus goes much further, not only by stating that divorce is contrary to God's will (keeping in mind the need to discern when a marriage is indeed joined by God), but also by stating that a man who divorces his wife commits adultery 'against her'. In Judaism a woman could not divorce her husband. However, when Christianity spread into the Greco-Roman world, it encountered the practice of divorce by a woman of her husband. The principle enunciated by Jesus is applied to this situation also.

A caution is necessary here lest this passage be taken as witnessing to an absolute rule from Jesus which he intended to apply, without discernment, to any and every legal marriage, no matter what kind of communion or lack of communion is experienced by the married couple.

The earliest account of Jesus' teaching on this matter is found in Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians, written probably in 54AD, that is, ten or more years prior to Mark's gospel. Paul begins by reminding his readers of Jesus' command:

To the married I give this command— not I but the Lord— that the wife should not separate from her husband (but if she does separate, let her remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband), and that the husband should not divorce his wife.

– 1Corinthians 7:10-11

Marriage and divorce

The parallel with Mark's account is obvious. Paul, however, goes on to write:

To the rest I say — I and not the Lord — that if any believer has a wife who is an unbeliever, and she consents to live with him, he should not divorce her. And if any woman has a husband who is an unbeliever, and he consents to live with her, she should not divorce him. For the unbelieving husband is made holy through his wife, and the unbelieving wife is made holy through her husband. Otherwise, your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy. But if the unbelieving partner separates, let it be so; in such a case the brother or sister is not bound. It is to peace that God has called you. Wife, for all you know, you might save your husband. Husband, for all you know, you might save your wife.

— 1 Corinthians 7:12-16

Paul is writing to a community which included husbands who had joined the Christian community while their wives remained outside, and wives who had joined the community while their husbands remained outside. Sometimes this created conflicts within the marriage that were unresolvable. Paul admits that he has received no direct teaching of Jesus on the subject (7:12), but that does not prevent him from reflecting upon the problem in the light of the gospel. Paul's first response (7:12-14) and final plea (7:16) encourage the Christian husband or wife to remain in their married relationship. However, he acknowledges that there could be situations where this is not possible, and in these circumstances he allows for the possibility, even the need, to separate, and, if appropriate, to enter into another marriage (7:15).

Two values are highlighted by Paul. The first is faith, and the second is peace. It is obvious that an unbelieving partner — one, that is, who is not committed to the values espoused by Jesus — may make it impossible for the believing partner to live his or her Christian life. The failure to share such basic values may make living together in peace quite impossible.

It is a matter of priorities and perspective. Every culture recognises the importance of supporting marriage, for the sake of the man and woman involved, and also to provide the kind of security which is so important to a child. Jesus quotes Genesis to cut the ground from under the lawyers who were using Scripture to weaken marriage when it suited the male. At the same time there are values which transcend so-called family values. We recall Jesus' words: 'Who are my mother and my brothers? ...Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother' (3:33-35).

Family is important. Marriage is important. But they are not absolute values. Jesus is bringing in a new creation. The new wine needs fresh wineskins (2:22). Openness to God's word and a readiness to leave everything must come first. If need be we must be ready to leave 'father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself' (Luke 14:26). When ties, even those as important as marriage, are an obstacle to living as a disciple of Jesus, the Christian man or woman 'is not bound' (1 Corinthians 7:15). Each community and each married person has to enter into a careful and honest spiritual discernment in this matter. Paul's words are a warning to us not to quote Jesus' words as absolute. To do so would be an appalling abuse — the kind of abuse of which Jesus himself spoke out so strongly: using the words of Scripture and their own human tradition to 'abandon the commandment of God' (7:8).

‘Little ones who believe in me’(9:42)

Here is another group who, like divorced women, lacked the protection of the law. The disciples have to learn not only to welcome such little children (a point already made in 9:36-37), but also that to enter the kingdom of God they must welcome it the way these little children are opening themselves to Jesus’ embrace.

The greatest barrier to grace is self-reliance. As adults we have had to learn habits that are, in fact, a barrier to receiving what Jesus is offering. We have to learn again that we cannot earn grace; that we cannot make a success of life by our own efforts; that we are not meant to achieve by our own effort. Some cultures insist on just these qualities. Jesus, on the contrary, looked to God as a child looks to a parent, with total trust, and a simple expectation of receiving love. To be his disciples, we must learn to do the same.

It must also be said that in our unconverted human condition dependence has its shadow side. What defence does a child have against being treated with disrespect, hurt, humiliated, dominated and exploited? Even the most well-intentioned and loving adults can hardly avoid behaving in such ways, especially if they have not been able to deal with their own childhood hurts.

Children have no alternative but to deny or repress feelings of self-defence such as anger, and cannot but blame themselves, for they need to think of those on whom they are so dependent as ‘good’ and so as behaving appropriately. This repression and denial leads to forgetting, and so, when the children become adults in their turn, they unwittingly discharge this reservoir of stored up anger either onto themselves or onto others, thus continuing the cycle.

Jesus is saying that children need to be welcomed and to be offered the reign of God’s love. This goes, too, for the child still hurting inside the adult. It must be listened to and welcomed with love if understanding and healing are to be achieved.

Jesus, who addressed God as ‘Abba!’, knew the secret of the kingdom of God. Only when we accept with delight that God delights in us can we begin to understand the gospel which Jesus is preaching and enter into that communion with God which he enjoys.

¹³ People were bringing little children to him in order that he might touch them; and the disciples spoke sternly to them.

¹⁴ But when Jesus saw this, he was indignant and said to them, ‘Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs.

¹⁵ Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.’

¹⁶ And he took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them.

compare
Matthew 19:13-15
Luke 18:15-17
verse 15 compare
Matthew 18:3

17 As he was setting out on a journey, a man ran up and knelt before him, and asked him, 'Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?' 18 Jesus said to him, 'Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone.

19 You know the commandments: "You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; You shall not defraud; Honour your father and mother."'

20 He said to him, 'Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth.' 21 Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, 'You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.'

22 When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.

compare Matthew 19:16-26
Luke 18:18-28

Wealth as an obstacle to discipleship

Pope John-Paul II has a long reflection on this scene in his encyclical 'Veritatis Splendor' 1993, nn.6-27.

Mark places this scene in the context of Jesus setting out 'on the way'. This is the way prepared by the Baptist (1:2-3); the way which the disciple must walk (6:8). It will be called later the 'way of God'(12:14). We know from Luke's report in *Acts*, that the Christian community was called the 'Way'(9:2; 18:25,26; 19:9,23; 22:4; 24:14,22). Jesus is about to give further instructions as to what is involved in walking this 'way' with him.

In the parable of the seed, Jesus spoke of those 'who hear the word of the Lord, 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'(4:18-19). We see an example in the present scene. The man is introduced to us in a most general way, simply as 'a man. He could be anyone. He could be me and he could be you. It is only at the end, when, in shock and grieving he walks away from Jesus, that we discover that he has 'many possessions'. Jesus saw that it was these possessions and his attachment to them that constituted the main obstacle to his following Jesus, and so he asked the man to sell his possessions and to give the money to the poor.

The poor are those who know that they do not have the means to meet their needs, but, trusting in God, they cry to God in their distress. At one level this man could be said to recognise his need for Jesus' help if he was to attain his desire of 'eternal life'. Jesus responds with love to his request, offering him the opportunity to be God's instrument in responding to the cry of the poor. The trouble is, he is too attached to his possessions. He may genuinely want the kind of life that he observes in Jesus and his disciples, but he is not willing to let go control of what gives him position, power and prestige. Mark is warning his community 'to a man' of the danger of wealth.

The man in our scene is proud and self-reliant and therefore closed to what can be received only in dependence upon God. He is blocked off from being moved with compassion by the poverty around him. His priorities close him off from entering the kingdom of God and from 'eternal life'.

He is 'shocked' by Jesus' response. The disciples themselves are 'greatly astounded'. They knew from their tradition that the wealthy had to act justly, but no one had prepared them for the teaching that wealth itself could be such a barrier to following Jesus. On the contrary they thought of wealth as being a sign of God's blessing. This is not Jesus' understanding. His teaching is clear and he repeats it emphatically to remove any possible misunderstanding – though we have done our best to water his teaching down. The man in the gospel story went away shocked and grieving. We are tempted to talk ourselves into thinking we are following Jesus while disregarding this teaching.

The Torah frequently commands that people use their possessions justly. The man in our scene would have agreed with this as would the disciples. Jesus goes further. The man's possessions are themselves a barrier to his entering into the grace that Jesus has come to offer. Jesus' response to his disciples once the man has left clearly indicate that this is not a private lesson for the man concerned but has general application. Possessions are so distracting and so dangerous to the ego that only a miracle of divine grace can bring about the repentance needed by the rich to enter the kingdom of God.

Mark adds to the traditional list from the decalogue the command: 'You shall not defraud'. Though the man claims innocence, he has made his wealth, it would seem, by exploiting his workers.

We are told that Jesus loved this man. This is the first time the verb 'love' has occurred in Mark. Twice God has spoken of Jesus as his 'beloved' Son: at the Baptism (1:11), and in glory on the mountain (9:7). The love Jesus has for this man is the same love which his Father has for Jesus. Mark means us to understand the challenge which is about to be given as one issuing out of love.

It is interesting to note the reference in this passage to Jesus' eyes: 'Jesus looked at him'; 'Jesus looked around'; 'Jesus looked at them'. 'Looked attentively' captures the Greek better. If Mark is relying significantly on Peter for his gospel, this mention of Jesus' eyes draws on Peter's intimate memories.

Our mind goes back to Jesus' words: 'Those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life because of me and because of the gospel will save it'(8:35). It is material possessions that are holding this man back from answering God's call. He is possessed by his possessions, and lacks the freedom to part with them.

As we shall see on the following page, the shock of Jesus' teaching is beginning to come home to the disciples. In many ways material possessions are the least problematic of all. If attachment to them can hold a person back from life, what about the more subtle and penetrating possessions like reputation, learning, positions of power? Do we really have to be ready to let go anything and everything if the call from God asks this of us? If this is the case 'Who can be saved?'

²³ **Then Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, 'How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!'** ²⁴*And the disciples were perplexed at these words. But Jesus said to them again, 'Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God!'*
²⁵ **It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.'**
²⁶ **They were greatly astounded and said to one another, 'Then who can be saved?'**
²⁷ **Jesus looked at them and said, 'For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible.'**

compare
Matthew 19:16-26
Luke 18:18-28

Jesus looks intently at them. At last they are beginning to grasp something of the 'secret of the kingdom of God' (4:11). If we cannot, of ourselves, let go of material possessions, then it is obvious that we cannot, of ourselves, let go of any security. We will need God's grace to make it possible.

This is why John of the Cross sees the dark night of the senses and of the soul as a 'sheer grace'. 'Nobody', he writes, 'is able alone to empty himself of all his appetites in order to reach God'(Ascent I.1.5). He also warns us of those more subtle 'possessions' (even quite spiritual ones) that hold us back from journeying with Jesus:

They must not so rely on their sharp intellects *nor upon gifts received from God* as to believe that their attachments or appetites will not blind, darken, and cause them to grow gradually worse.

– Ascent, I.8.6

Attachment to anything that 'possesses' us (what we call 'possessions'), no matter how small, will tie us down and prevent us answering the call to 'eternal life'. As noted earlier, John of the Cross uses the image of a bird whose leg is tied by a strong piece of string, or by the flimsiest thread. So long as the thread remains unbroken, it cannot fly (Ascent I.11.4). No more can we.

Moreover, of ourselves we need all the security we can find, and so we cannot break from these possessions on our own. We need to hear the call. We need also the grace of God to untie us and set us free. In this, as in so many other aspects of the Christian life, we find an encouraging example in Saint Paul, who was able to write:

I have learned to be content with whatever I have. I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me.

– Philippians 4:11-13

It is possible that the word 'camel'(Greek: kamêlos) might be meant to be 'hawser' (Greek: kamilos). One might be able to work a thin thread through the eye of a needle, but not the thick rope used for attaching a boat to a wharf!

The gift of eternal life

When Jesus first called Peter and his brother, Mark tells us that ‘immediately they left their nets and followed him’ (1:18). Likewise, James and his brother John ‘left their father and followed him’ (1:20). When Jesus called Levi ‘he got up and followed him’ (2:14). By contrast, the man in the scene we have just studied was unwilling to leave his possessions to follow Jesus (10:21-22).

Peter speaks up for the other disciples. As at Caesarea Philippi, he seems not to grasp the significance of his own words, for it will soon become clear that his claim to have left ‘everything’ goes well beyond the truth.

Earlier Jesus had promised that ‘those who lose their life because of me, and because of the gospel, will save it’ (8:35). Here he spells out some of the experiences that ‘losing one’s life’ might involve, such as leaving house, family and land. When a disciple does this ‘because of me, and because of the gospel’, Jesus promises a hundredfold here on earth (echoes of the parable of the sower, 4:20), and ‘in the age to come eternal life’.

The hundredfold in love that will come to the disciple does not preclude persecution for the disciple, any more than it does for Jesus himself. Furthermore, while Jesus speaks of the largesse of God, he warns the disciples not to attempt to measure it, or to imagine that they have earned it. Everything is grace. Let us be ready to leave anything that stands in the way of responding to God’s call, and then entrust ourselves to the mystery and to the mercy of God who is the giver of life, here and beyond death.

²⁸ Peter began to say to him, ‘Look, we have left everything and followed you.’

²⁹ Jesus said ‘Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields, for my sake [because of me] and for the sake of [because of] the good news,

³⁰ who will not receive a hundredfold now in this age— houses, brothers and sisters, mothers and children, and fields with persecutions — and in the age to come eternal life.

³¹ But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first.’

compare Matthew 19:27-29
Luke 18:28-30

PART C: Disciples must offer their lives for others

(10:32-52)

Jesus must die and rise again (3)

³² They were on the road, going up to Jerusalem, and Jesus was walking ahead of them; they were amazed, and those who followed were afraid.

**He took the twelve aside again and began to tell them what was to happen to him,
³³ saying, 'See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be handed over to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death;
then they will hand him over to the Gentiles;
³⁴ they will mock him, and spit upon him, and flog him, and kill him; and after three days he will rise again.'**

compare Matthew 20:17-19
Luke 18:31-34

The third and final section of Part One begins, like each of the previous sections, with a prediction by Jesus of his coming death and resurrection. The threefold repetition of the prediction is Mark's way of expressing its definitive nature. There is no way for Jesus to avoid losing his life; likewise there is no way that God will not be faithful and raise him up. In this third prediction, the tension has reached a climax.

Mark has just mentioned that Jesus was 'on the road' (10:17). Now, for the first time, 'Jerusalem' is mentioned. We have already witnessed the opposition of the Jerusalem scribes to Jesus (3:22; 7:1). Astonishment and fear overcome the disciples as they draw nearer to their goal.

The reader is referred back to the commentary on 8:31-32a. The second prediction added to the first the idea of betrayal (9:31). We now learn that Jesus will be handed over to the 'Gentiles'. The details of his suffering, written by Mark in the light of Jesus' actual experience, are then added.

We might wonder why Mark presents Jesus' teaching on suffering as Jesus' first lesson to his disciples. We might wonder, moreover, why he presents it in such a persistent and definitive way. Furthermore, when we go back and re-examine Jesus' first statement on the matter, we notice that he says: 'the Son of Man must undergo great suffering' (8:31). Why 'must'? Whence comes this necessity? After a short reflection on the place suffering plays in our psychic maturing, we will consider firstly Jesus' suffering, and then the place of suffering in the lives of Jesus' disciples.

Suffering in the life of Jesus

A superficial reading of the New Testament could leave one with the impression that God, from all eternity, had a plan for our redemption, and part of the plan was that Jesus should die on the cross. After all, Jesus did pray in his agony: ‘not what I want but what you want’ (14:36). We have also heard him telling his disciples: ‘The Son of Man *must* undergo great suffering’ (8:31). There are also texts in some later writings of the Old Testament that associate suffering with the Messiah (Ezekiel 4:1-6; Zechariah 9-14; Daniel 11:31-35; 12:1-10; Wisdom 2:12-20).

If, however, Jesus’ death could be described simply as God’s will, we would have to say that those who condemned Jesus to death and those who crucified him were carrying out God’s will. This would make what they did an act of obedience, and therefore virtuous. Such a conclusion obviously makes no sense. To imagine that it was God and not sinful human beings who willed the murder of Jesus can only lead to a gross misunderstanding of the place of God in Jesus’ life – a misunderstanding that it is hardly short of blasphemy. It was not God who crucified Jesus; it was the Jewish leadership, the fickle crowd, the Roman prefect and the ‘obedient’ soldiers. God’s part in what happened is seen in the resurrection. This is clearly expressed in the early sermons which we find in Acts:

This man, handed over to you according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of those outside the law. But God raised him up, having freed him from death, because it was impossible for him to be held in its power.

– Acts 2:23-24. See also Acts 3:13-15; 4:10; 13:28-30

The statement that Jesus was ‘handed over according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God’, is not to be understood as a temporal statement, for God does not exist in time. Luke is telling us to look beyond the sinful human activity to the design of God, for God can use even sin to bring about his will. Our question here is: what is the will of God that is achieved through the crucifixion? What does it mean to say, on the one hand, that the suffering inflicted upon Jesus was the sinful responsibility of those who refused to obey God’s will, and yet, on the other hand, that it all came within God’s providential design and grace?

Whatever we mean by God’s providential design, it cannot be such as to leave no room for human freedom. We are not automatons; we are not puppets of fate. We experience some freedom, however limited and conditioned. If so much human suffering results from our saying No to God’s loving design, it is also true that wonderful good results from our saying Yes. Without freedom there would be no sin. Equally, without freedom, there would be no compassion, no generosity, no heroism, no love. Freedom is at the very heart of what it means to be a person. God made us this way, and respects what he has made.

God is also constantly inspiring everyone to behave in loving ways. To the extent that we respond to God’s inspiration, knowingly or unknowingly, we behave responsibly and God’s will is done. To the extent that we reject God’s inspiration, knowingly or unknowingly, we behave irresponsibly, and God’s will is not done. Any particular decision is likely to be a mixture: we partly respond and partly hold back.

Suffering

The crucifixion of Jesus would have to be defined as an unjust act. God does not will that innocent people be sentenced unjustly to death. Paul includes the murder of Jesus with the persecuting of the Christians as acts that ‘displease God’ (1Thessalonians 2:14-15).

The Sanhedrin and Pilate condemned Jesus to death precisely because they refused to listen to God; they refused to face the truth. Their action was sinful, and so, by definition, contrary to God’s will. John has Jesus say as much: ‘You kill me because there is no place in you for my word’ (John 8:37). Stephen links the crucifying of Jesus with the persecution that was inflicted on the prophets. In behaving in this way, they were precisely ‘opposing the Holy Spirit’ (Acts 7:51). This point was made by Jesus himself:

You are descendants of those who murdered the prophets. Fill up, then, the measure of your ancestors . . . Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!

– Matthew 23:31-32,37; compare Acts 7:52

God’s attitude to sending his Son is expressed beautifully by Jesus himself in a parable which directly refers to his passion. It is about a man who planted a vineyard and kept hoping to enjoy its fruits. Everyone he sent to deal with the tenants was murdered or badly treated:

He had still one other, a beloved son. Finally he sent him to them, saying, ‘They will respect my son.’ But those tenants said to one another, ‘This is the heir; come, let us kill him, and the inheritance will be ours.’ So they seized him, killed him, and threw him out of the vineyard.

– Mark 12:6-8

God sent his Son to ‘give his life’, in the sense of making every moment a love-offering of himself to others. Jesus gave himself to the leper, and to the paralysed man; he gave himself to the sinners and prostitutes and outsiders; he gave himself to carrying out the mission of love given him by the Father. This self-giving brought him up against the resistance of those who refused to listen (3:6). When, sinfully and resisting the Holy Spirit, they tracked him down to effect their evil purpose, what was he to do?

His mission looked like a failure. The religious authorities were not listening. There was division even among his chosen disciples, who did not appear to be strong enough to carry on without him. Death must have seemed to Jesus to make no sense. He needed more time to do what he knew his Father wanted him to do. There had to be another way.

As sometimes happens to us, the sinful decisions of other people left him no room to manoeuvre. Heroically, he determined to continue carrying out his Father’s will. He determined to continue giving his life. He determined to continue to preach the good news of God’s saving love, knowing that the religious authorities did not want the truth to be spoken. He determined to remain prayerful and forgiving and patient, and to continue to take the side of the poor who were crying to God for help.

On the night before he died he gave a meaning to his approaching death. His life was all that he had left, and he made his death, as he had made everything else, an offering of love.

When it is said that his death redeemed us, we mean, rather, that it was the way he died. His death was brought about by others. The way he died, however, was determined by Jesus himself, and his manner of dying — in prayer, and faith and love and forgiveness and compassion — gave the final demonstration of the extent of his love (John 15:13). It was this love-giving, this self-giving, this life-giving that God willed. Thanks to Jesus' fidelity to his Father's will, not even the injustice and disobedience of those who crucified Jesus could thwart God's eternal design.

When we turn our attention from Jesus' relationship to his Father, and focus instead on his relationship to us, a second consideration emerges. What Jesus did stands as an example for us. He shows us how to listen to God, no matter how terrible our circumstances may be. His resurrection holds out hope for us all, that God will vindicate us just as he vindicated his Son. Jesus shows us that when people behave badly towards us, we do not have to respond in the same way. 'Love one another', he said, 'just as I have loved you' (John 15:12).

However, his example would have had little power to persuade us, had he not suffered. Suffering is very much part of the human condition, and Jesus' words and example are all the more powerful in that we see him loving even when everything was against him:

In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered; and having been made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him.

– Hebrews 5:7-9

Jesus demonstrated his faith in God's love even when nothing supported such faith. He also showed us how to respond in love even in the worst situations. It is this which makes his message so convincing. It is this which draws us to follow him.

We needed something as shocking as a crucifixion to shake us out of our lethargy, and to save us from the futility of being caught up in a meaningless way of life as we reacted to sin with more sin, till we lost all hope of finding our way to the fullness of life and love for which we all yearn. We needed to see Jesus loving on the cross, not because God demanded a crucifixion, but because nothing less could convince us that in our suffering we, like Jesus, are surrounded by the unconditional and persistent love of God. Suffering, even when unjustly inflicted, does not have to stop our loving.

Suffering

We needed to see Jesus believing and forgiving, despite being faced with ultimate rejection and the apparent meaninglessness of doing so. For now, no matter what happens to us, we are able to ‘look on the one whom they have pierced’(John 19:37), and learn from him the secret of a love that alone can free us from becoming lost in a maze of sin. His example, and the Spirit of love that he gives us from the cross, make it possible for us to give meaning to our sufferings by making an act of faith in God, and allowing the Spirit of his love to transform our cross into a resurrection like his.

If, in our human way, we are to imagine God responding to the crucifixion, we should imagine God weeping, as Jesus wept over the city (Luke 19:41). This is God’s reaction to all the terrible injustices that we humans inflict on each other by our sinful rejection of his loving inspiration.

In making us free, God takes our freedom seriously, permitting our decision to say No to love, and so permitting the consequences of such a decision. But God does not stand by as a passive observer of our folly. God is actively inspiring everyone to bring love to flower where it is absent. If we follow the example of those who crucified Jesus and refuse to listen, we must not blame God for the effects of this refusal.

Through Jesus, it is revealed to all who are willing to look and listen that God is love. Some rejected this love. Like the people in the desert who struck at the rock (symbol of God), so those who murdered Jesus struck at his heart with a lance. Just as Moses saw water flowing from the rock to slake the thirst even of those who were rejecting God (Numbers 20:11), so the beloved disciple saw water and blood flowing from the heart of Jesus on the cross (John 19:34), for the healing even of those who were crucifying him.

There in that darkest place, in that most meaningless event, in that symbol of humanity’s rejection of God, love shines forth. God did not will the unjust murder, but he did will the love-response; for it is God’s love that is revealed in the heart of Jesus. It is in this sense that one can say that the death of Jesus came within God’s providential plan, so that ‘by the grace of God, Jesus might taste death for everyone’(Hebrews 2:9). As Jesus himself said:

When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will realize that I am he, and that I do nothing on my own, but I speak these things as the Father instructed me. And the one who sent me is with me; he has not left me alone, for I always do what is pleasing to him.

– John 8:28-29

When Jesus said in his agony ‘Not my will but yours be done’(Mark 14:36), he was expressing his determination to continue, in the face of death, to carry out the mission of love given him by the Father, whatever the cost. He trusted that, in spite of the apparently meaningless death and the apparent failure it represented, his Father would see that the cause entrusted to him would succeed. When Jesus’ early disciples searched the Old Testament in an effort to make some divine sense out of the crucifixion, they discovered there a constant pattern of God’s love persisting through rejection. In this sense, his dying fulfilled the Scriptures, bringing to a stunning climax the revelation of divine love in the history of God’s people.

Jesus' way of dying, and God's taking him into his embrace in the resurrection, are at the centre of the Christian faith, revealing as they do God's love-response to human disobedience. Our disobedience matters. It matters that we sin, and that our sin has such terrible effects on ourselves and on other people. God cannot pretend that things are other than as they really are. Sin, however, cannot change the truth that God is love. This love, demonstrated in the way Jesus died, is the source of all our hope. If we believe it, we may dare the journey out of sin. If enough people believe it, there is still hope of realising Jesus' dream of God's will being done on earth as in heaven.

Suffering in the life of the disciple

Speaking of the cross, Paul has this to say:

Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block [scandal] to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength.

– 1Corinthians 1:22-25

It is natural to find suffering hard to accept. If we keep our eyes on Jesus, however, it is possible to glimpse in suffering a meaning that would otherwise evade us. We have a basic need to value ourselves, and we experience a natural urge motivating us to become a person who is worthwhile. We desire to be of value in our own eyes and, since we are social beings, we experience the need and the urge to be recognised and respected also by others.

However, we have an even more basic need. The need which is at the very core of being human is to be entirely reliant upon God, the giver and sustainer of our being. The problem is that we do not experience a correspondingly natural urge to rely on God. Even our 'religious experiences' tend to be drawn into and understood in terms of our natural urge to be someone in our own right. So it requires a grace from God that is above and beyond our natural gifts (a 'supernatural' grace) to make us aware of our need for complete dependence on God and to motivate us to do whatever is needed to attain this transcendent good. Seeking this good demands a letting go of our reliance on our natural urges. It is here that suffering plays its irreplaceable role.

It is suffering which forces us to recognise the basic inadequacy of our natural urges and the basic flaw in our perception that we are meant to be self-reliant. It forces us to face our dependence and it invites us to trust, for we cannot reach the goal of our human fulfilment except in dependence upon and communion with God.

Without suffering, there is a tendency to stay fixed in a situation that works, that feels comfortable, and in which we feel affirmed. Suffering threatens this equilibrium, and psychic energy is engaged which drives us to face whatever it is that is causing the suffering and the effects it has upon us, and to listen at every level to what is going on in our psyche as well as in our body.

Suffering

We may choose simply to hold on, to stay put, and to defend our position. However, when we listen, we hear ourselves being asked to let go, and to allow to die something that has seemed good, and perhaps has in fact been good, and to entrust ourselves to the grace that is being offered us in and through the suffering. We are free to choose to avoid the pain of 'dying', or we can cry out in pleading prayer to God on whom we depend, entrust ourselves to God's grace, courageously endure whatever suffering is involved, and allow ourselves to 'die' believing that God will raise us up.

Death is the ultimate situation in which this happens, but all along the road of life there are 'dyings': the ordinary psychic stages of maturation; any occasion which requires that we leave someone or something we value; coming up against our own or other people's limitations which require us to let go our self-image or our image of others and our unrealistic hopes and dreams and expectations. The pain of 'dying' can sometimes be in proportion to the success and duration of the adaptation we have made to whatever it is that is being threatened.

Each time we accept to 'die', we experience a deeper communion with God who loves us through our dying, and who raises us up to a fuller life of deeper intimacy with him. Our fidelity, generosity and courage enable God to keep offering us a fuller life, beyond our experienced horizons. But each acceptance of the offer requires a new dying. This will involve suffering until all roots of resistance to God's love have been burned (purified) away by God's Holy Spirit, the living flame of love.

The truths contained in the above have been communicated by God to human beings in every culture and in every generation, for everyone in every situation is graced. However, the lesson is difficult to learn, and God chose that his Word would become flesh in Jesus to show us the pattern. By sharing his Spirit with us, Jesus encourages and enables us to follow him along the path of letting go, the path of suffering.

We are called to be human. To be human means to be finite, to be dependent, to receive all we are and have as a gift. As human beings, we are not immortal. Once life has been given to us as a gift, the only life we ever know comes through dying. The whole process of maturing is one of accepting the 'dyings' that the human condition, and our own and other people's sinful decisions, inflict upon us. This certainly does not mean submitting inactively to injustice. But it does mean that even when a 'dying' is laid on us unjustly, we must come to an acceptance of the reality of the dying, if we are to find a deeper life through it. In our weakness and suffering, we experience a special strength that is not our own:

The Lord said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness." So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong.

– 2Corinthians 12:9-10

Much pain in our world results from our reaction to unjust suffering inflicted on us by others. We tend to hurt back. Or, when we do not do that, we store up the hurt and pass it on to others. In either case, the pain goes on and on.

If, however, we can bear suffering in love; if we can continue to offer love ('offer the other cheek'); if, while working against injustice, and while working to alleviate suffering, we are hated, excluded, reviled and defamed because of Jesus — then indeed we are blessed, for the suffering stops with us. What is more, it exercises an extraordinary power for the conversion of those who cause us the suffering. It can give courage also to those who suffer and who do not know how to bear it.

For the disciple of Jesus there is a profound sense in which suffering can unite us to him. Truly, love is the greatest gift. But if we love the way Jesus loved, it will not be long before suffering enters our lives as it entered his. If, like Jesus, we are to love the outsiders, we, like Jesus, will become outsiders. If, like Jesus, we are going to take the part of the oppressed, we, like Jesus, will be oppressed. This was Paul's experience. However, he could write:

I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.

– Galatians 2:19-20

If we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.

– Romans 6:5

We are heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ-- if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him. I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us.

– Romans 8:17-18

Perhaps the most wonderful thing about suffering is that, through it, Jesus invites us to join with him in redeeming the world. It is this truth that caused Paul to find joy in his sufferings:

I am now rejoicing in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am completing what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the Church.

– Colossians 1:24

It seems true that, to experience Christ as exalted, we have to experience him as crucified. To know the power of God's redeeming love, we need to look upon the one we have pierced (John 19:37). We need to put our hand into his pierced side and our fingers into his wounds (John 20:27) — the wounds of his brothers and sisters with whom, as the Son of Man, he still identifies. The amount of good that is in our world, as a result of suffering that is borne in love, is immeasurable. Both Paul (Philippians 1:29) and James (1:2) consider such suffering a privilege. There is a mystery here that goes beyond our understanding. But our life-experience will not allow us to ignore it.

Christianity has no answers to the meaninglessness of suffering brought upon ourselves and others by our failure to listen to God. It does, however, show us a way to integrate suffering into our lives. At the same time, it is apparent that there is excessive suffering in our world. People are dragged down and degraded by it. Christianity lays upon us the duty to work against suffering and its causes.

Suffering

Like Jesus, we are to act as instruments of God, bringing healing and liberation to the sufferer.

Discernment is necessary, and the causes of suffering need to be named and opposed. But it is not for us to sit in judgment, to look for culprits or to apportion blame. We are to work for just institutions and just structures. But we cannot wait for this to happen. We are called upon to feed the hungry now. We are called, now, to give drink to the thirsty, to visit those in prison and to work to heal the sick.

Finally, we need to remember that death necessarily sets limits to any possibilities we have of alleviating suffering. There can be no solution short of the resurrection. In the words of Peter and Paul:

In accordance with his promise, we wait for new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home.

– 2Peter 3:13

Our citizenship is in heaven, and it is from there that we are expecting a Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ. He will transform the body of our humiliation, that it may be conformed to the body of his glory, by the power that also enables him to make all things subject to himself.

– Philippians 3:20-21

While we strive, in response to God's grace and call, to be faithful 'servants' of the Lord in bringing about the reign of God here on earth, we recognise that our ultimate homeland is in heaven (Philippians 3:20). In a future life we are assured of being finally and totally embraced by the Father of Jesus (2Corinthians 4:16 - 5:10).

If we think that whatever suffering exists in this world is willed by God (either directly intended by God or permitted by God), then we will see our task as one of accepting suffering in all its forms. We will see such submission as doing God's will, while trusting in God's wisdom and love.

If, on the other hand, we recognise that whatever the circumstances God's will is that we love and be faithful to love; if we recognise that suffering is part of life and that its causes are complex and sometimes quite contrary to God's will, then we will see our task as accepting the suffering which we are unable to prevent. We must not let suffering deter us from loving faithfully. We may even draw so close to Jesus through suffering that we embrace the opportunity to share with him in revealing God's love in this special way to those for whom Jesus gave his life.

We are called to believe that suffering comes within the loving and wise providence of God. We are called to believe that God's will is to heal us and to liberate us from suffering. Ultimately this will happen when we share his glory with his Son in heaven; but we can experience liberation here on earth when love heals, and when to be healed leads to greater love. If we continue to suffer, let us continue to believe in God's love. Let us keep hoping for God's redemption. Let us remain faithful to loving. Then suffering itself will be experienced as a grace, deepening our love and bringing about our purification and redemption.

Suffering is part of every life. Let suffering be a cross for us who are disciples of Jesus, for then we can embrace him who died there, knowing that he is embracing us.

If we or others continue to suffer, let us continue to believe in God's love. Let us keep hoping for God's redemption. Let us remain faithful to loving. Then suffering itself will be experienced as a grace, deepening our love and bringing about our own purification and redemption, as well as the purification and redemption of others. If the cross must be part of Christian living, let us embrace him who died on it, knowing that we are never beyond his embrace.

³⁵ James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came forward to him and said to him, 'Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.'

³⁶ And he said to them, 'What is it you want me to do for you?'

³⁷ And they said to him, 'Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your *glory*.'

³⁸ But Jesus said to them, 'You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?'

³⁹ They replied, 'We are able.' Then Jesus said to them, 'The cup that I *drink* you will drink; and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized; ⁴⁰ but to sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared.'

⁴¹ When the ten heard this, they began to be angry with James and John.

compare Matthew 20:20-24

The twelve fail to understand

Mark is dramatically stating that the disciples persisted (it is the third time: see 8:32b-33 and 9:32) in their failure to grasp Jesus' message. In the first section (8:31ff) the focus was on suffering (the Cross). In the second section (9:31ff) the focus was on the social life of the community of Jesus' disciples. Here in the third section, the focus is on leadership. The disciples are still thinking in terms of 'saving' their life rather than losing it. They are still thinking in terms of reward and of power, rather than of 'service'.

Jesus speaks of the 'cup' that he must drink: a theme that will recur at Jesus' final meal (14:24) and in his agony (14:36). He also speaks of his suffering as a 'baptism', for he is being overwhelmed by evil. The allusion to Baptism and the Eucharist should not be missed.

Unaware, like Peter (8:29; 10:28), of the significance of their response, James and John, the 'sons of thunder' (3:17), express their intention to follow Jesus whatever the cost. Later in the gospel it will emerge, ironically, that the places which they so eagerly sought on Jesus' right and left in his glory were occupied by crosses (15:27). Jesus accepts their willingness, but insists with them that whatever God gives them cannot be earned, but is always a grace. Just as Jesus, the Son, accepts his Father's will in this matter without question, so must they. Leadership in the Christian community is not a prize for self-interested ambition. The angry response of the other ten apostles shows that their mentality is no different from that of two brothers.

Giving our lives like Jesus

Greatness, for a disciple, is measured by willingness to do the will of God; that is to say, to be God's 'servant' (see commentary on 9:35). Doing God's will, being God's servant, places us in a special kind of relationship to others. It is a call to be the 'slave of all'; that is to say, to give one's life to be at the disposal of others in total dependence on God's will.

Mark sums up the whole message of Part One of this second half of his gospel in Jesus' statement: 'The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many'. This is what it means to be the Messiah, and this is what is asked of anyone who would be a disciple of Jesus. As the Son of Man, Jesus identifies with all who are oppressed and who cry out to God (see commentary on 2:20). Jesus' mission is to do God's will (to 'serve'), and God's will is that he 'give his life a ransom for many'.

When we read the word 'many' in English, we tend to distinguish it from 'all'. It is important to understand that the Semitic idiom carries a different significance. 'Many' may or may not mean 'all'. It is essentially an assertion that those involved are not 'few'. As the 'Son of Man', in other words, Jesus is not giving his life for a sect, or for a remnant. Those who are meant to benefit from his gift of self are many.

Paul came to see that it was God's will to embrace all, and he understands the 'many' as excluding none, and as potentially embracing 'all'. This is clear from the following statement taken from his Letter to the Church in Rome:

Just as one man's trespass led to condemnation for all, so one man's act of righteousness leads to justification and life for *all*. For just as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience *the many* will be made righteous.

– Romans 5:18-19

It is of interest, also, to note the only other passage in the New Testament where the word 'ransom' is found:

Christ Jesus, himself human, who gave his life a ransom for *all*.

– 1 Timothy 2:6

⁴² So Jesus called them and said to them, 'You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers Lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them.

⁴³ But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant

⁴⁴ and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all.

⁴⁵ For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.'

compare
Matthew 20:25-28
Luke 22:24-27

True greatness

There is also an allusion to the fourth song of the Servant of the Lord:

Yet it was the will of the Lord to crush him with pain. When you *make his life an offering for sin*, he shall see his offspring, and shall prolong his days; through him the will of the Lord shall prosper. Out of his anguish he shall see light; he shall find satisfaction through his knowledge. The righteous one, my servant, shall make *many* righteous, and he shall bear their iniquities. Therefore I will allot him a portion with the great, and he shall divide the spoil with the strong; because he poured out himself to death, and was numbered with the transgressors; yet he bore the sin of *many*, and made intercession for the transgressors’.

– Isaiah 53:10-12

Jesus’ mission is to deliver (‘redeem’) all those suffering from any kind of slavery. The cost of doing so is the offering of his life, and, as he has already stated on three occasions (and so persistently and definitively) in fact he will lose his life because of his unwillingness to compromise the good news. However, like the Servant spoken of in Isaiah, he will be vindicated by God. Whatever may happen in the short term, ‘after three days’, that is to say when God’s ultimate judgment is declared, he will appear in glory as the Son of Man with all those who have put their trust in him.

This powerful summary of this central theme is something that the disciples cannot grasp, any more than they could grasp the message of the loaves. And so Mark concludes this Part as he concluded the previous one with a miraculous act in which a person who is blind is healed by Jesus and enabled to see.

Following Jesus – a miracle of grace

Jesus is leaving Jericho. He is therefore on the last section of his journey to Jerusalem. Will the disciples ever learn to ‘follow him on the way’? Again and again he has spoken of suffering as an essential part of his mission. Again and again they have failed to understand. In this last scene the disciple is symbolised by a blind man. He is needy, and knows his need for he is a ‘beggar’. He is not on the way but beside it.

He cries out to Jesus using a Messianic title, ‘Son of David’, reminiscent of Peter’s confession at Caesarea Philippi when he acknowledged Jesus as the ‘Christ’ (8:29). That Mark’s focus of attention is on the blind disciples in his own community is reinforced by the following dramatic detail: Jesus does not call the man himself, but does it through the mediation of the community, for, since the death of Jesus, this is how he calls us.

The man throws off his cloak. He is willing to let go the protection that he wears before the world and entrust himself to Jesus. We are meant to contrast this with the unwillingness of the rich man to let go his possessions (10:22). Indeed ‘the first will be last and the last first’ (10:31).

Jesus, with typical respect, does not presume to know what the man wants, but asks him: ‘What do you want me to do for you?’ The man, though now blind, had seen in the past. It was the same with the disciples. They saw when Jesus called them; they saw when they watched him heal; they saw when he fed the crowds and when he walked on the sea; and when, on numerous occasions, he took them aside and healed their sight, they even ‘saw everything clearly’ (8:25). But they kept forgetting; they kept being distracted; they kept losing the clarity of their sight.

Now, in this blind beggar, they acknowledge Jesus as their ‘Teacher’, and themselves, therefore, as his disciples. If they are ever going to understand his teaching, it will have to be he who gives them sight. Jesus assures the blind beggar that it is his ‘faith’ that makes it possible for him to be healed and so to see.

⁴⁶ They came to Jericho. As he and his disciples and a large crowd were leaving Jericho, *Bar-timaeus son of Timaeus, a blind beggar, was sitting by the roadside.*

⁴⁷ When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to shout out and say, ‘Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!’

⁴⁸ Many sternly ordered him to be quiet, but he cried out even more loudly, ‘Son of David, have mercy on me!’

⁴⁹ Jesus stood still and said, ‘Call him here.’ And they called the blind man, saying to him, ‘Take heart; get up, he is calling you.’

⁵⁰ So throwing off his cloak, he sprang up and came to Jesus.

⁵¹ Then Jesus said to him, ‘What do you want me to do for you?’ The blind man said to him, ‘My teacher, let me see again.’ ⁵² Jesus said to him, ‘Go; your faith has made you well.’ Immediately he regained his sight and followed him *on the way.*

compare Matthew 20:29-34
Luke 18:35-43

Jesus restores sight

The only sight the disciple can have is the seeing of faith: the seeing of a mind and heart that knows its own powerlessness, and that cries out for grace, trusting in the mercy of God revealed in Jesus. It is this faith, and nothing else, that makes it possible for the disciple to ‘follow him on the way’ — the way to Jerusalem, and so to death: the way through death to the resurrection and fullness of life as God’s beloved.

In the silence of prayer, let us contemplate this scene, and be the blind beggar. Let us taste our experience of being blind, of being alone, by the side of the road, missing out on life. Let us cry out for help. Let us anticipate a response, and listen for it. Let us be willing to cast off whatever it is that gives us our security, little though it may be, and let us run to him.

Mark wants us to do the same in each of the scenes in this and other sections, for the gospels are born of reflection, and capture the essence of the relationship with Jesus which his early disciples came to experience.

We are to identify with the disciples in their folly, but also in their staying with Jesus and wanting to learn. We are to identify with the epileptic boy, a victim of the evil that invades and surrounds us. We are to identify with his desperate father, incapable of helping the one to whom he has given life, but willing to believe with whatever little faith he finds in his heart. We are to identify with the Pharisees, as we try to secure our own positions in a world that Jesus keeps upsetting, and as we put him to the test and resist his grace. We are to identify with the rich man, keen to live more meaningfully, but unwilling to pay the price.

And so it goes on. For the people of the gospels are each part of us, and Jesus’ way of relating to them all is always a grace: disturbing, encouraging, welcoming, threatening, warning, but always loving, and never content to see us where he found the blind beggar. He wants us, all of us, and every bit of us, to ‘follow him on the way’, because it is the only way to life.