1. INTRODUCTION TO MARK’S GOSPEL

In these articles we look at the life and work of Jesus Christ as it is presented in the pages of St. Mark’s Gospel. Mark’s gospel might seem a strange choice, because his gospel might appear to have the least of the four to offer. It lacks the sublime teaching such as you find in St. Matthew’s ‘Sermon on the Mount’, and the beautiful parables showing the mercy and compassion of Jesus that you find in Luke, and the depth of theological reflection that you find in John.

But Mark’s gospel has this particular claim to fame: that it was the first of our four gospels to be written. Just about all the experts agree on this: that about the year 65 A.D., i.e. approximately 35 years after the death of Jesus, someone called Mark decided to compose what he called an ‘evangelium’ – a gospel – the word that he uses in the very first verse of his narrative (Mk 1: 1). He thus has the distinction of creating a completely new kind of literature: ‘gospel’, ‘good news’. There had been nothing like it before. Mark saw the need to invent this totally new literary form as his means of telling the story of Jesus.

Over this series of articles, I would like you to read this precious little book thoughtfully, carefully, prayerfully. Try to let the Lord speak to you deeply and personally through the words of his inspired evangelist. I see my task as that of providing a kind of running commentary, of trying to lead you into some new insights into Mark’s story, and of applying his message to our own lives.

But before we begin to talk about particular aspects and characteristics of this original presentation of the life and work of Jesus, it will be helpful to try to answer the question: ‘Why did Mark regard it as useful or necessary to write a ‘gospel’?’ What were the needs of people that he was hoping to meet and respond to?

From reading between the lines of the gospel, we can get an idea of some of the problems that the Christians of Mark’s time and place had to face.

We have to remember that this was the first attempt, as far as we know to tell the story of Jesus in a single, continuous form. Before Mark wrote his account of the life of Jesus, nothing comparable to it existed.

During the 30 years and more since the birth of the Church, the Apostles, and other preachers and teachers, had passed on stories about him, telling their listeners about the different miracles he had performed, recalling his parables and his teaching, and of course, telling the story of the events of his death and resurrection. Perhaps some of these stories about Jesus, and sayings of Jesus, were written down in smaller or larger collections. But for the most part, one or other particular incident would have been recalled to serve as a basis for instruction, just as preachers and teachers do today in their homilies and catechetics, without setting the incident or the teaching in its overall context.

Inevitably, different interpretations would have arisen of Jesus, his life and work, and his teaching: Jesus, the magician or wonder-worker; Jesus, the compassionate healer; Jesus, the conqueror of Satan; Jesus, the teacher of philosophy; Jesus, the innocent victim of injustice. All kinds of stories circulated about him, all kinds of portraits were sketched of him. But what—was the truth?

Mark was the first one who undertook to put the stories about Jesus together in a way that would show how they ought to be understood. And what he did was to present his material in such a way as to show his readers that everything that Christ did led up to his passion and death. For Mark, this was the key to understanding Jesus and the meaning of his life. Indeed, Mark’s gospel has sometimes been described as the story of Jesus’ passion with an extended introduction. It’s not only because 6 of his 16 chapters deal with the events of the final week of Jesus’ life, but also because so much of the material in the first chapters as well is gathered together under the sign of the cross.
So one of Mark’s purposes was to impress on his readers the importance of the cross for understanding Jesus’ whole career.

There was another problem. Ever since Jesus of Nazareth had been executed, because he was regarded as a political threat by the Romans and a religious threat by the Jews, the danger had existed that his followers would be looked on in the same light. Obviously, those who claimed as their leader one who had died a criminal’s death would be suspected of being criminals themselves.

That kind of attitude towards Christians was evidently on the increase in Mark’s time, and some of them were folding under the pressure. So Mark put to them this question: if Jesus the master had to suffer, is it surprising that this must also be the lot of the disciple? If only the followers of Jesus would understand that this suffering, painful though it was, was not their final fate – just as it had not been for Jesus himself.

Somehow, Christians had to be made aware that there was no safe or easy way of following Jesus. Before he was raised and entered into his glory, he suffered the agonizing death of crucifixion. Mark was convinced that the way of the cross was the only way to glory, that there could be no crown without a cross. ‘This gospel has also been known as ‘the martyrs’ gospel’. Mark saw that this point had to be got across. The problem of following a crucified Lord was one that had to be faced urgently.

As I have said, Mark’s novel solution was to put together a large number of stories about Jesus in such a way that his very arrangement of them would itself provide the key to understanding them. He would arrange them in such a way that the climax of Jesus’ life – the cross and the resurrection – would be seen clearly as the climax of the story about Jesus. He would tell the story in such a way that everything that Jesus said, and did, pointed, and led up to his passion. Any interpretation of Jesus that left the passion out of account or played it down would be a distortion of the truth.

And to achieve this effect, Mark had to create a new kind of literature – what he called, and we call, ‘gospel’. When he wrote his gospel, he set out to weave from the familiar traditions a tapestry of the life of Jesus that would put those traditions in their right perspective, and would also put into perspective the problems that faced the Christians of his time and place.

He puts emphasis on the passion in different ways, e.g., he repeats again and again throughout his story that the disciples simply did not understand who Jesus was. Time and time again, they were unable to grasp the meaning of what he said, and the implications of this for who he was. But it also becomes clear that this was not just the result of human stupidity or failure. Mark’s point is rather that they were not meant to understand who Jesus was during his earthly life. Mark is talking not about human failure but about God’s plan of salvation. The key to that plan is the death and resurrection of Jesus. And it is only AFTER these events that Jesus can be understood for what he really is. Only then can anyone fully understand what he has to say.

Mark’s aim, then, was to make it clear no one, not even the disciples who lived and travelled with him for months on end, could understand him apart from the passion. This is why Jesus repeatedly forbade the disciples and the crowds to publicize his miracles, and why he ordered the evil spirits not to reveal his identity. It was not so much that he wanted to prevent the danger of being misunderstood. It was rather God’s plan that it should be so.

So Mark’s gospel is a warning that any attempt to understand Jesus apart from the passion is bound to fail. The mystery of who he really was (what the scholars call ‘the messianic secret’) could be penetrated only when God Himself lifted the veil by raising His Son from the dead. Mark is saying to his fellow Christians: Don’t be confused or upset by those who say, ‘If this Jesus was really the Messiah, people would have recognised him as such during his lifetime’, or who say, ‘If this Jesus was really the Messiah, God would not have allowed him to be put to death as a common criminal’. It happened that way, because God planned it that way.
Mark makes the important point that just as the passion was the climax of Jesus’ historical life, so it is the climax and key to any attempt to understand him. If the path to glory leads through the valley of the cross, so does the path to true knowledge of Jesus. Mark reckoned this route was the only one possible to really come to know Jesus Christ.

Those who come after Mark accepted his approach. Matthew and Luke add a lot of detail, fill in some gaps, and tell the story of Jesus from their own perspective, but basically they follow Mark. From time to time during this course we will be referring to the other gospels, but mainly to illustrate Mark’s approach to his subject.

We are so used to having all four gospels that we tend to make mental cross references, and read each of them with an eye on one or more of the others. So much so, that it’s probably no longer possible for us to read one to the exclusion of the others. But it’s a fascinating exercise to try to read Mark by itself. When he wrote, there was no such thing as another gospel. So, as far as we can, we will try to resist the temptation to add to Mark’s account and fill in the gaps. This would only confuse our attempts to understand what he is saying. By concentrating on him alone, we will be better able to grasp his message.

A prayerful reading of Mark gives us the chance to study the product of one of the greatest figures in the history of religious literature. He not only created a new kind of literature – gospel – but gave a direction to the understanding of the Christian faith which lasts to this day, and will no doubt last forever. But what we are about is much more than an interesting historical study. Mark continues to speak to today’s followers of Christ, just as he spoke to the Christians of his own day. The problems he wrote about are still to be found in today’s world.

And he tells his story in terms of discipleship and ministry. He tells of one who was sent into the world by his Father with a ministry and a mission, to proclaim the good news that the kingdom of God was about to make its presence felt in a new and striking way. Jesus spent the limited time given him by the Father to accomplish his task, among his own people, God’s chosen people, in an attempt to get them to realize their vocation to be ‘a light among the nations’.

In the last months of his life, he spent an increasing amount of time with his special disciples, the twelve, the nucleus of the new Israel, concentrating on their formation, forming them to become apostles. Mark tells us Jesus appointed twelve, ‘to be with him and to be sent out’. It was their task to carry his message to the wider world. We can identify with the twelve, as we read Mark’s gospel, for clearly this is what he intended his readers to do. We can learn with them what it means to be a disciple of Jesus. We can go further and discover what is demanded of us as apostles.

And we can learn this from Mark too: after Jesus had sent the twelve out on their first missionary tour around the towns and villages of Israel, they returned full of excitement and enthusiasm, eager to tell him of the success they had achieved.

His advice and his invitation to them was that they should come aside with him, just themselves, to a lonely place and rest awhile. That is Jesus’ invitation to us also; there is a treasury of wisdom in St. Mark’s gospel. Finally, before we begin our detailed study of the gospel, do we know anything about this Mark, the author of the first gospel? (Apart, that is, from what we can know of his character from his writing.)

There is a very ancient tradition in the Church, dating from the first half of the second century, that Mark, the author of this gospel, was the secretary (or perhaps ‘interpreter’) of Peter. This tradition finds some support in the New Testament itself, for Peter in his first epistle (1 Peter 5:13) refers to ‘my son Mark’ – a phrase which indicates that Peter was responsible for the conversion of a person called Mark, and probably baptized him. Mark was with Peter when he wrote this epistle. Peter says he was writing from Babylon, but it is generally agreed that this was an early Christian name for Rome.
Earlier, in the Book of the Acts of the Apostles, in chapter 12:12, there is reference to a person called John Mark. His mother was Mary, and her home was a venue where the Jerusalem Christians used gather for prayer. When Peter was miraculously released from prison, it was to this house that he went.

Shortly afterwards, according to Acts 12: 25; 13: 5, John Mark was taken by Paul and Barnabas on their first great missionary tour, at least as far as Cyprus. Then for reasons not spelt out, he left them and returned to Jerusalem (Acts 13: 13). This evidently destroyed Paul’s confidence in him, and was the cause of a falling out between Paul and Barnabas. The two great missionaries parted company, and Barnabas took Mark back to Cyprus with him when Paul embarked on his second missionary journey (Acts 15:37-39). This Mark, we are told elsewhere, was Barnabas’ cousin (Col. 4: 10).

Apparently the misunderstanding was later patched up because we find Mark again in the role of Paul’s trusted companion. In Col. 4:10 written during Paul’s first Roman imprisonment (61-63 A.D.), Paul refers to Mark as one who has worked with him for the kingdom of God and been a consolation to him during this time of house arrest in Rome. Again in Philemon 24, Mark is named as Paul’s fellow worker and fellow prisoner. He is mentioned again in 2 Tim. 4:11.

Do all these references apply to one and the same person? We cannot be sure, but there is no positive reason against it. If they do, then Mark, the author of our gospel was first associated with Peter in Jerusalem, then with Paul in Rome, and also with Peter in Rome. A person with such a background would have been in an ideal position to know the preaching of Peter, and would also have been familiar with the preaching of Paul. Although not a disciple of Jesus during Jesus’ lifetime, he was certainly well equipped for the task of composing a gospel.

A close study of Mark’s gospel reveals that it was written for Christians of non-Jewish origin, living outside of Palestine. Several writers from the second and third centuries claim that the gospel was composed in Rome. Again we cannot be sure of this, but the persecution or threat of persecution which Mark’s community evidently faced does square well with Rome during the persecution of Nero, about the year 65 A.D.
2. SOME FEATURES OF MARK’S GOSPEL

Before the 19th Century, there were relatively few commentaries written on St. Mark’s Gospel. This lack of interest was no doubt due to the fact that all but 30 or 40 verses of the gospel are contained in either Matthew or Luke or both. Matthew and Luke are both more comprehensive than Mark and give us much fuller information. Indeed for many centuries it was presumed that Matthew’s gospel was the first to be written, and that Mark was a not too successful condensation of Matthew. St. Augustine was one who was largely responsible for the judgment of Mark, who – he said – followed Matthew and abbreviated his work. But since it has come to be recognized that Mark’s gospel was the first to be written, that it is the basis on which the later evangelists worked, and that it takes us back closer to the life and times of Jesus, there has been a renewed interest in this primitive gospel. Mark has been re-discovered.

Let us look at some of the characteristics of the gospel: first, Mark’s literary style. One writer has observed that going from the gospel of Matthew to the gospel of Mark is like leaving a cathedral to contemplate nature. There is a primitive, vivid living colour about Mark’s gospel which is a tribute to the evangelist’s skill as a story-teller.

His language is a strange mixture of originality and monotony. On the one hand, his vocabulary is limited, and this makes it at times tedious and repetitious. On the other hand, it displays a real originality and can be surprisingly powerful. He frequently begins his stories with ‘and’, which he follows up with adverbs like ‘again’ and ‘immediately’. The word ‘immediately’ occurs eleven times in the first chapter alone, and its meaning should by no means be pressed (read Mark 1: 21-31). If Jesus ever relaxed, we certainly get no hint of this from Mark! His language and style have the effect of giving us a sense of the urgency of Christ’s mission – there is a real crisis atmosphere. He uses very effectively the dramatic present tense: Jesus walks, teaches, speaks, etc.

His situation of various incidents is also extremely limited. The indications of place hardly ever vary. Particular instructions are given by Jesus either ‘in the house’ (7:17; 9:28-33; 10:10) or ‘on the road’ (8:27; 10:32).

Yet for all its poverty and its repetitiveness, Mark’s language also displays his keen powers of observation, his ability to conjure up a scene. He often achieves this by using words which the literary purists would deplore as common or vulgar – words which Luke, for example, would never use. (Unfortunately, this does not always come through in the English.) These words nevertheless succeed in conveying a sense of realism. Mark, although a gifted story-teller, was no literary stylist. His stories show little concern for style, and often come across rather as a dialogue with his audience. He pays little attention to the rules of Greek grammar.

We may note other features of Mark’s style: redundancy or tautology (saying the same thing more than once): 2:18-19; 5:27-28; repetition of the same phrase by different characters: 2:5,7,9,10; 2:15ff; 6:31,32,35; insertion of explanations and observations: 2:10; 5:42. As I’ve said, the features of Mark’s style do not always come through so well in translation, for translators naturally have to tidy up and polish up the original in the interests of good English. For example, in the story of the cure of the blind man (8:22-26), Jesus asks the man if he can see, and in the R.S.V., his reply reads: ‘I see men, but they look like trees walking’ (8:24). A literal translation of Mark’s original Greek would read: ‘I see people, I see them like trees; walking’.

We could multiply examples like this, examples of Mark’s vivid and colourful style. The style is popular and conversational, rather than literary, and suggests that many of his stories and reported conversations go back very close to the eye witnesses of Jesus’ ministry. We have mentioned the ancient tradition that Mark was Peter’s secretary or interpreter. In the light of this tradition, it is tempting to think of Peter as Mark’s direct source of information. On the
other hand, one could argue that the vivid detail of many of Mark’s stories can be explained by recognizing his gift for story-telling, and his ability to conjure up a realistic scene. Certainly it would be going too far to describe Mark’s gospel as Peter’s memoirs, but a case can be made out for seeing the figure of Peter in the background, standing behind Mark’s account.

Some examples of this feature may be given here, especially when we compare the gospels of Mark and Matthew.

Compare Mark 1:32-34 with Matthew 8:16. Mark’s version of events at Capernaum that evening seems to be based on the reflections of an eye-witness recalling the events that happened at the close of that memorable day (especially v. 33); Matthew’s version is much briefer.


Mark 2:1-5; Matthew 9:1-2. These verses in Mark abound with apparent eye-witness detail: Matthew has reduced the introduction to this story to the bare essentials.

Mark 9:14-18; Matthew 17:14-15. Again Mark’s account contains a wealth of detail, based on vivid recollections of Jesus’ return from the mountain. Matthew suppresses these details.

Another feature of this primitive gospel is the portrait he draws of Jesus himself. The title of the book states clearly Mark’s purpose. In 1:1, this is expressed in a kind of headline: “The beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God”.

He does not use the title ‘Son of God’ as frequently as Matthew, but it does appear at high points of the gospel: at Jesus’ baptism (1:11), in the story of the Transfiguration (9:7), and at the very end when the Roman centurion standing beneath the cross says, ‘Truly, this man was the Son of God’ (15:39). We will say more about this title later. For the moment, we might just remark that Mark’s gospel is designed to show that Jesus is the Son of God in the strict sense of the words.

Yet at the same time, Mark’s portrait of Jesus is strikingly human, again perhaps reflecting the recollections of someone like Peter who had shared the company of the man Jesus for more than two years. In notable contrast to Matthew, Mark frankly catalogues the human feelings and emotions of Jesus.

Compare the verses from the two evangelists:

Mark 1:14 and Matthew 8:3;
Mark 1:43 (a very strong verb in the Greek) and Matthew 8:4;
Mark 3:5 and Matthew 12:13;
Mark 10:13-14 and Matthew 19:13-14;
Mark 5:30 and Matthew 9:22 (Jesus requests information);
Mark 9:25-27 and Matthew 17:18;
Mark 8:23-25 (omitted by Matthew).

Taken together, these passages show a definite development from Mark to Matthew. Matthew’s Jesus is a more majestic figure, and out of reverence, Matthew has carefully omitted any details that might be misunderstood by his readers or tend to detract from Jesus’ divine character. Any suggestion that his knowledge or power might be limited in any way is scrupulously avoided. Mark on the other hand frankly records the human emotions and physical weakness of the man Jesus, without ever calling his divinity into question. Mark’s portrait is one of a Jesus with whom we can more easily identify; the Son of God – but also a human being like us in every respect, except for sin.

As St. Mark’s gospel now stands, it is divided into 16 chapters and 678 verses. This makes it only slightly more than half the length of the gospels of Matthew and Luke. But it is worth noting that the division of our Bible into chapters dates only from the 13th Century. It was done by Stephen Langton, a famous Archbishop of Canterbury, and designed for
greater ease of reference. The division into verses was introduced much later still, about 1550.

The point about this is that the division into chapters and verses which we now have in a book like St. Mark’s gospel is not necessarily the way the evangelist himself would have divided up his material. In composing his gospel, he may well have had in mind a plan of composition and a structure which are not obvious from the traditional chapter and verse division that has been imposed on his work.

To identify the plan the author had in mind when he wrote is a most important element in the study of a gospel, as in the study of any piece of literature. From an analysis of a book’s contents, we may be able to discover the plan of the author and the way his thought develops and unfolds. There is of course a danger in such a procedure, that we may be too subjective and read our own ideas into his material. But the effort must be made.

Some biblical scholars in the past have been very sceptical about the possibility of detecting any clear plan or structure in Mark’s gospel. They have referred to a lack of order in the gospel, and seen it as a rather haphazard collection of stories and sayings not governed by any logical arrangement. But this view is not held by students of Mark’s gospel today, who acknowledge that it does contain a definite plan and structure, although they are not in complete agreement about what Mark’s exact plan was.

Certainly you can divide the gospel into sections based on geography, or on Jesus’ journeys. One fairly common division on this basis would go something like this:

1:1-13  Introduction (Ministry of John the Baptist, Baptism of Jesus, Temptations)  (N.B. There is nothing about the birth or childhood of Jesus in Mark’s gospel.)

1:14 – 3:6  First part of Jesus’ ministry in Galilee.


6:7 – 8:26  Ministry outside of Galilee.

8:27 – 10:52  Journey to Jerusalem.


14:1 – 16:8  Passion – Death and Resurrection.

The division of Mark’s material, however, while it roughly sketches the journeys of Jesus and the different centres of his activity, is not as neat as some would have us believe. I think it is very doubtful that Mark himself intended to structure his gospel on the basis of Jesus’ travels. It is better to look for a theological plan, rather than a geographical one.

What does seem clear is that Mark intended the passage 8: 27-33, to be the central point of his gospel. It serves as a fitting conclusion to the first part of his work and a fitting introduction to the second part. It occurs approximately at the half way point of the book, but, more than that, it appears as a real turning point and a kind of watershed in his presentation of Jesus’ ministry.

Prior to 8: 27, Jesus has been gradually revealing himself to his disciples as the Christ or the Messiah, and yet there has been an air of secrecy about it all (1:34-44; 3:12; 5:43; 7:36; 8:26). This would explain why Mark never uses the title ‘Christ’ in the first part of his gospel, except in the headline, the very first verse (1:1). At the same time, this whole section is punctuated by frequent mention of the blindness of people’s hearts or their failure to understand the mystery surrounding Jesus (3:5-6; 6:1-6; 8:17-21). Even the disciples understand nothing of the mystery of Jesus (4:41; 6:51ff; 8:16-21). Note how Matthew, in contrast, spares the disciples, out of reverence for those who were later to become leaders of the Christian Church. He plays down Mark’s emphasis on their failure to understand: cf. Mark 6:55ff and Matthew 14:33; Mark 8:16-21 and Matthew 16:5-12.

The passage which concludes the first major section of the gospel (8:22-26) seems to have a symbolic value for Mark; the opening of the eyes of the blind man symbolizes the opening of the eyes of the disciples. It leads directly to
the climax of the first part of Mark’s story, where Peter, on behalf of all, confesses his faith in Jesus as the Christ (8:29). The main theme of the whole section has been the question ‘who is Jesus?’, or the gradual revelation of Jesus as the Messiah.

The second major section of the gospel runs from 8:27 to the end, and follows a similar pattern to the first part. Prominent in this section are three predictions by Jesus of his passion (8:31; 9:30–31; 10:33–34), and again on three occasions the failure of the disciples to understand (8:32–33; 9:32–34; 10:35–37). So even after Peter’s confession of faith, the disciples continue to show their inability to understand. Their failure to understand no longer concerns the person of Jesus, but rather his fate. They find the idea that he must suffer and die a terrible obstacle to get round. Jesus in this second section of the gospel continually refers to himself as the Son of Man, a title we will look at more closely later.

Perhaps we could see Mark’s gospel as divided into two major sections with the following titles:

1:14 – 8:30: the mystery of the Messiah
8:31 – 16:8: the mystery of the Son of Man.

This gives us a better understanding of what the gospel is. It is not a ‘life’ of Jesus in the modern sense of a biography, but we are put in contact with a living, historical person. Even though Mark’s gospel is the most primitive of the four, it is still a theological document composed by a man of the early Christian Church, and not a reporter’s account of what Jesus said and did.

Summing up what we have said – if we take Mark’s record of events at face value and see his story as an accurate account of the historical situation, then clearly the passage 8:27–30, Peter’s confession of faith that Jesus is the Christ, is the hinge, the watershed, of the whole gospel. Up to this point, only Jesus knew that he was the Messiah; the disciples did not understand who or what he was. After this point, he shares his secret with them, but pledges them to secrecy (8:30). Only at the very end, when he is on trial before the Sanhedrin, and the Jewish supreme court, does Jesus openly and publicly proclaim his identity (14:61–62).

This situation is usually explained by the incurable blindness and obtuseness of the crowds, and the need to educate the disciples gradually and secretly, so that they might be led to grasp the real meaning of Jesus’ Messiahship. Even after Peter, on behalf of all, had expressed his recognition of Jesus, Jesus had to lead them to understand that his mission was one of suffering. For this reason he told them repeatedly of his approaching sufferings and death. The second half of Mark’s gospel is a record of this gradual education and preparation to accept a suffering Messiah.

In the early years of this century, a book was written by a German scholar called Wilhelm Wrede, and was translated into English under the title, ‘The Messianic Secret in the Gospels’. This book really threw a spanner into the works and disturbed the complacency of those who thought that everything had been said on the subject of Mark’s gospel. His little book had the effect of a bombshell, especially among those who confidently accepted Mark’s account as an accurate historical record of Jesus’ life and works.

Wrede argued that the traditional explanation of Mark’s material was quite unintelligible and impossible. He analysed the gospel in detail and stressed the following features:

1. The evil spirits recognise Jesus but are ordered to be silent (1:23–25; 1:34; 3:11–12; 5:6–7). Being part of the supernatural world, they recognise the supernatural character of Jesus, but are constantly forbidden to communicate this knowledge to men.

2. Those cured are repeatedly told not to reveal what Jesus has done for them (1:43–45; 5:43; 7:36; 8:26).

3. Even after the disciples themselves have discovered Jesus’ identity, they are forbidden to make it public, and are instead obliged to secrecy (8:30; 9:9).

4. On more than one occasion, Jesus deliberately conceals himself (7:24).
5. Sometimes even the crowd urges silence (10:48).

6. Repeatedly Jesus withdraws from the people to instruct the disciples in private (4:10-13; 4:33-34; 7:17-23; 9:28-31). Obviously this theme of secrecy is not just something incidental, or secondary, a fringe element of the gospel, but an integral part of Mark’s whole presentation. It warrants close study and consideration. Wrede found the whole business unintelligible for the following reasons:

a) If people possessed by devils were continually shouting that Jesus was the Messiah, how could this fact be kept secret? On several occasions, as Mark admits, they spoke out before they could be silenced.

b) How could the miracles be kept secret? This would be asking too much of human nature, and besides, Mark himself admits that many who were commanded to remain silent disobeyed this order and told everyone who was willing to listen what had been done for them.

c) If Jesus had given the disciples advance information about his death and resurrection, as Mark clearly says he did, how come they were so shocked by his death, and especially, so surprised and incredulous about his resurrection? How could they have been so totally unprepared for these events, if as Mark says – Jesus predicted them and warned them again and again?

Wrede argued that Mark’s whole presentation is unhistorical, not a record of the facts at all, but a theological invention on the part of the evangelist. According to him, Jesus himself did not claim to be the Messiah or Christ at all during his ministry, nor did anyone else think of him as such. Only after the disciples convinced themselves that he had risen from the dead did they come to the belief that he was the Messiah. They were then faced with the problem of explaining why people did not recognise him as the Messiah during his life.

According to Wrede, Mark’s answer to this problem was (1) to read back into the earthly life of Jesus the community’s later faith that he was the Messiah, and (2) to reinterpret and rewrite the stories about Jesus in such a way as to make it seem that he consistently and deliberately concealed his true identity. But this, says Wrede, makes Mark’s account full of contradictions. These secrecy passages do not reflect the historical situation at all. They are the creation of Mark who put certain words in the mouth of Jesus and doctored certain events. The idea of Jesus as the Messiah is not the product of history, but the product of theology.

Wrede’s approach to the gospels is much too radical to be acceptable to orthodox Christians, and his wholesale rejection of the historical value of Mark’s gospel is too much to swallow. But there are some elements in his theory that deserve consideration. His insistence that Mark’s gospel is a theological work first and foremost is correct. We may admit that Mark probably does exaggerate the blindness of the disciples. It is also true that they were changed men after the resurrection and their experience of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, and that their deeper faith and understanding would have led them to see the words and deeds of Jesus in a new and fuller light, and thus, to some extent, to colour their accounts. When they came to tell the story in the light of later events, they surely did make some sayings of Jesus more clear-cut and precise than they were originally (e.g. the detailed predictions of death and resurrection). No one need be perplexed or disturbed by the view that some elements of Jesus’ teaching as it is recorded in the gospels did arise out of the experience of the early church.

But this is a far cry from branding Mark’s whole presentation as unhistorical, unintelligible and impossible.

On the historical level alone, there is nothing impossible or unnatural that Jesus should have requested people to say nothing about miracles worked on their behalf, even though they often did not comply with his request. It is quite
understandable that Jesus did not want himself publicized as a wonder worker, or regarded as such. Perhaps Mark has generalized on particular incidents, but the situation is perfectly intelligible.

As for the disciples, it is not impossible to imagine them so committed to their own preconceived ideas about what kind of person the Messiah would be that they were simply unable to grasp the idea that suffering and death were to be his fate. The strong reaction of Peter to this suggestion (8:32) shows how alien and intolerable it was to their thinking. There is no real reason to deny that until the very end they refused to understand.

Still on the historical level, there is a natural reason why Jesus should have instructed his disciples not to broadcast that he was the Messiah. In the Palestine of his day, violence was never far below the surface, with terrorists ready to revolt openly against Rome if they could find the right man to lead them. The claim that Jesus was the long-awaited Messiah could easily have provoked revolution and violence. It is not difficult to understand why Jesus should have wanted his disciples to appreciate his Messiahship fully before proclaiming it. Premature proclamation in that political climate would have been disastrous.

However, there was an immense gap between popular views about the Messiah and the way Jesus himself understood his mission. Mark gives the definite impression that Jesus was very wary of the title 'Christ' or 'Messiah' because of the connotations it had in the popular mind. His own messianic consciousness conflicted with the prevailing false ideas about the person and nature of the Messiah. He did not deny he was the Messiah, but he could not accept without reservations a title which, in terms of current expectations, ran counter to the way he understood his mission. His concept of Messiahship – on a spiritual level and involving suffering – would have been unacceptable to his contemporaries. And so he imposed silence on the subject, preferring the mysterious title 'Son of Man' which we will consider in our next article.

In fact, Jesus saw the influence of Satan in the contemporary Jewish concept of Messiahs hip. This explains his strong words to Peter: 'Get behind me, Satan!' Can you imagine the early Christians or Mark inventing such words and saying that Jesus addressed his chief disciple in such terms if it were not true? This is the reason why Jesus showed restraint to the very end with regard to the title 'Christ'. (Note – restraint or reserve, not rejection.) It is somewhat ironical, in view of this, that the title 'Christ' became the popular one for Jesus in Christian tradition, coming to be used almost as a surname.

These arguments on the historical level add up to a powerful case against some of Wrede's assertions. But they do not explain why Mark labours this secrecy theme the way he does. The 'messianic secret' idea underlies nearly every story in the gospel. And while it surely goes back to Jesus himself, and is not purely Mark's creation, it seems that Mark must have had a deeper theological reason for repeating this theme as consistently and carefully as he does. For, although Matthew and Luke also refer at times to Jesus imposing secrecy about his identity, it is Mark who insists most on the desire of Jesus to keep the 'messianic secret'.

The reason for his systematic presentation of the secrecy theme and of the disciples' failure to understand the miracles and sayings of Jesus has already been indicated in the opening article. Mark's intention in emphasising their weak grasp of the meaning of Jesus is to contrast the darkness of the earlier period with the later light. His aim is to bring his readers from ignorance of Jesus to knowledge of him. So the 'messianic secret' was not just a tactical device used by Jesus, but a necessary condition of his revelation. Before his death and resurrection, the full significance of Jesus could not be known to anyone. It is the Cross, and the Resurrection which fully reveal him and give the first possibility of true understanding.

So Mark develops the themes of hiddenness, secrecy, and ignorance to the full truth about Jesus. The disciples came from weak, imperfect faith to full faith only after Jesus had been crucified, glorified, and had sent the Holy Spirit to them. He could not really explain who he was
or what was the purpose of his mission until the Cross, followed by the Resurrection, had shed the necessary light on his identity and on his work. The strangeness of the 'Son of Man', and his veiling his identity as Messiah express a necessary condition of God's revelation, namely, the appeal to human freedom. Jesus' whole ministry was a continual posing of the question: 'who do you say I am?'. 
Like all the four gospels, St. Mark’s gospel is a faith-interpretation of the person, life and work of Jesus – an interpretation which, from the time it first appeared, the Church accepted as valid, true, legitimate, even inspired, and thus considered worthy of inclusion among its official list of sacred books. It is a faith-interpretation, not a biography, or a history as we understand that term. We do not expect to find in Mark – or in any of the gospels – an attempt at objective, impartial reporting of facts, – what we would expect of a conscientious modern historian. Mark made no pretence about being impartial. He makes it clear where he stands in the very first words of his book: ‘The beginning of the gospel (or good news) about Jesus, the Christ, the Son of God’. This headline statement tells us that everything that will follow in his story is designed to show that Jesus is the Christ and the Son of God, who has brought God’s good news of salvation to a sinful world.

So, far from being an impartial, detached observer, Mark presents himself as a convinced, committed Christian, and as a spokesman for the community of believers to which he belongs. He intended his gospel to be an invitation, an appeal, to faith. He wrote to draw from his readers a true faith response, to incite others to confess their faith in Jesus as Christ, Lord and Son of God, and to allow that faith to flow over into their lives. For some of his readers, it would involve kindling the flame of faith in their hearts; for others, it would involve intensifying and deepening the faith they already professed.

How did Mark understand the essence of the good news which Jesus came to proclaim? According to Mark, Jesus saw himself and described himself as the one who was sent by God to proclaim the coming, and, in a sense, the arrival, of the kingdom. We saw how Mark introduces his book with the words: The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. This ‘beginning’ of the good news comprises: the preaching of John the Baptist, sent to prepare the people for the coming of Christ by calling them to repent and ask for God’s forgiveness of their sins (Mark 1:2-8); the baptism of Jesus by John, at which the voice of the Father from heaven identifies him as His beloved Son (1:9-11); and the 40 day period of trial and testing in the wilderness (1:12-13). Having got the preliminaries out of the way, Mark then says that Jesus came preaching God’s goodness. The first recorded works of Jesus in the first of the gospels are these: ‘The time is fulfilled, the kingdom of God is at hand. Repent and believe the good news’. These words sum up everything that follows – the whole ministry of Jesus is one of proclaiming, establishing and advancing the kingdom of God, along with the call to repentance and faith as the necessary conditions for belonging to the kingdom.

Because the kingdom is such a fundamental idea for Mark, we need to understand something of what Jesus meant when he described his whole life’s work in terms of it. The idea of God as King was not, of course, something totally new. The Old Testament recognizes the Kingship of Yahweh, and traces His Kingship of the world back to the creation. The theme occurs again and again in the Psalms. Indeed, so conscious were the Israelites of the fact that Yahweh alone was their King, that there was strong opposition at the time of Saul (Israel’s first king) to the proposal that one of them should be raised to that dignity. To many, the very idea reeked of blasphemy. Israel, of course, was also aware that Yahweh’s kingship was not perfect or complete, since there were many who did not acknowledge Him as their king.

But although God’s kingship was already an accepted element of Israel’s religious tradition, the thrust of Jesus’ preaching was that something new and revolutionary was happening or about to happen. The time was now ripe, he said, for God to intervene in human history in a new and decisive way. God was about to inaugurate His reign in a way previously unknown and unsuspected. But there
is a certain ambiguity about the way Jesus used the word ‘kingdom’ – or ‘reign’, which is closer to the meaning of the actual Aramaic word that Jesus would have used. Sometimes, he speaks as though it were already present in his own person and activity. The kingdom of God is in your midst, he said. The new reign of God had begun, because Jesus had been sent by God to do something decisive about that human sinfulness, which was the obstacle standing in the way of the kingdom becoming a reality.

But sometimes, more frequently, he speaks of it as something which will eventuate only in the distant future, at the end of history, when this present world has given way to a new heaven and a new earth, when Christ will be all in all, and will hand over the kingdom to the Father (Ch. 13). Only then will the reign of God be perfect, when He is acknowledged as King by all people, and indeed by the whole of creation.

And sometimes Jesus speaks of an in-between phase, the time between his own earthly ministry and his future return in glory, the time of the Church – and, of course, this is the period of salvation history in which we live. The Church is not the kingdom, but is God’s chosen instrument for proclaiming and consolidating the kingdom, and bringing it closer to fulfilment.

Every Christian is called to play his or her part in the Church’s task of making the kingdom of God a reality in the world, and in the hearts of people. To achieve this, we need to reflect on how Jesus went about carrying out the task his Father had entrusted to him. That might seem to be stating the obvious, but it’s something we must not overlook. We have to stop and ask ourselves whether our expenditure of time and energy really matches the programme which Jesus set himself of establishing the kingdom that we are called to follow through. This is why it is so important to try to enter into the mind and heart of Jesus, to eliminate or at least reduce the risk of dissipating our energy and labouring in vain.

According to Mark and to those who followed him, Jesus carried out his programme in three main ways: (1) by working miracles; (2) by his teaching (especially in the form of parables); and (3) by revealing his Father as a God of forgiveness. That is really the essence of the good news; that our God is a God of forgiveness, and so a way is opened to man to be healed of his sinfulness, thus allowing the kingdom or reign of God to grow towards full flower.

But before looking at these in detail, let us just reflect for a few minutes on the two conditions which Jesus lays down in this programmatic statement at the beginning of his ministry: repent and believe. First, the matter of belief, or faith. We must be careful not to consider faith as something that concerns just our minds, our intellects. This over-intellectual concept of faith results in our losing a lot of the richness contained in the idea. There is more to faith, as the Bible understands it, than simply saying: I believe that God exists; I believe that in one God there are three persons; I believe that God sent His Son Jesus Christ to save the world, and so on. Faith does of course have some intellectual content, but biblical faith is a much more comprehensive human act. It embraces not only one’s mind, but one’s whole self. It means a total response, a complete surrender to what I see in God’s will for me. Faith is really obedience. Probably the most perfect act of faith in the New Testament is Mary’s response to God’s plan for her: ‘I am the servant of the Lord: let it be done to me according to your Word’.

To be people of faith demands that we be people of prayer. We have to be constantly trying to discover what is God’s plan for me, what he wants of me in this particular situation. This doesn’t mean we should be anxious, for God is not demanding a radically new navigation over and over again. But there is need of a serious and sincere ongoing effort to discover God’s will – prayer for enlightenment about what He wants at this moment or stage in my life. We have no need to be anxious if we sense and know that the path we are following is basically the one God has mapped out for us. Yet faith needs to be nourished continually, and the surrender of self to be constantly renewed. In Mark 9:24, the father of an epileptic boy says to Jesus: ‘Lord, I believe, but help me to
overcome my unbelief’. This is a prayer that I imagine strikes a responsive chord and should draw forth a sincere ‘Amen’ from all of us.

And repentance. Like faith, repentance is not a once-for-all process either. The Hebrew word behind our word ‘repentance’, the word Jesus would have used, is ‘shub’; and it means to turn, to turn again. In the Greek that Mark wrote, his word is ‘metanoia’, which means to change one’s mind. These terms give the clue to what Jesus meant when he called on people to repent, if they wanted to be a part of God’s kingdom.

It is certainly not a demand to be morbidly preoccupied with one’s past sins, or to wallow in guilt. It is simply a call to us to ask God in prayer to give us true self-knowledge and self-understanding – to know where we stand in relation to Him and to other people. Having discovered this, we must then resolve to move from where we are now, to where we learn through prayer we ought to be. It may not require of us a complete change of mind or of values – a 180° turn or u-turn. It may demand no more than a slight change of course, getting back on the right track, pulling out of some blind alley into which we have wandered through passion or weakness or stupidity – to get back on to the highway that God has mapped out for us.

Obviously, repentance is by its very nature, like faith, an ongoing process, because it is so easy to stray off course at any time. Repentance and conversion have to be worked at continually.

Mark thus begins the body of his gospel with the information that Jesus appeared in Galilee, preaching the gospel of God and saying: ‘The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the good news’. He evidently intended his readers to understand this as a summary of Jesus’ preaching. But the ministry of Jesus was not confined to preaching the good news of salvation by word. The miracles in Mark follow tumbling upon one another in almost embarrassing profusion. It has been established that in the first 10 chapters of the gospel, which take us up to the last week in the life of Jesus, about 200 of the 400 verses deal directly or indirectly with miracles. In other words, nearly half of Mark’s record of the public ministry of Jesus is taken up with the miraculous.

The question that needs to be asked and answered is: why does Mark display such interest in Jesus’ works of healing, and exorcizing, and demonstrating his power over nature? A second question is: did all these miracles actually take place? Or better, were all the cases that are reported as miracles really miraculous happenings?

To ask this latter question might appear to indicate a sceptical approach to the gospel material. But there is good reason to suspect
that many of the diseases described by Mark in terms of demon possession were probably cases of insanity or epilepsy or other mental disorders of some kind, for which people of those days had no natural or medical explanation.

At the same time there can be no doubting the fact that Jesus did perform miracles. Mark and the later gospel writers accepted the fact without question. But why would Mark devote such time and space to reporting so many miracles, at the expense of the teachings of Jesus? Is it because, as some have suggested, his faith in Jesus was mainly faith in his power as a wonder worker? Or was he trying to convince pagans that anything they claimed their magicians could do, Jesus could do better? Or do they have some deeper meaning, which caused Mark to see them as an integral and essential part of the good news?

It used to be thought by biblical scholars that Jesus worked miracles primarily to prove his credentials. By working miracles, it was said, he showed that his claims to be the Christ and the Son of God were true. His miracles proved that his teaching was credible and well authenticated, approved by God. But this was not Mark’s approach. It is true that Jesus, on one occasion at least, does seem to work a miracle to back up a claim he makes – when he cures the paralytic, to convince the sceptics that he really does have the power to forgive sins (2: 1-10). And certainly his miracles did arouse people to wonder and admiration, and led some of them to faith. But more often, he tried to prevent people from publicizing his miracles, and he often performed them away from the public eye (7:33; 8:23; 9:25). He certainly refused to perform on cue, when he was asked to perform some sign that would establish his credentials (8:11-13).

No, there must be another reason. And if Mark understands the whole of Jesus’ ministry in terms of announcing and establishing the kingdom of God, then somehow the miracles, which take up so much space in the gospel, must have a close connection with the coming of the kingdom. His miracles did have the effect of leading some to believe in him, to repent, and to accept God as their King, but I do not think this is the main link between Jesus’ miracles and the coming of God’s kingdom.

In our next article, we will explore more closely the connection between the miracles of Jesus and his summary of his whole ministry at the beginning of Mark’s gospel: ‘The kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the good news’.
4. THE PLACE OF MIRACLES IN THE MINISTRY OF JESUS

In our last article we began to consider the miracle stories in Mark’s gospel, and looked at some of the ways the miracles of Jesus have been understood in the past, e.g. as demonstrations of his powers as a wonder-worker, or as proofs to back up the claims he made for himself. We concluded that these assessments of Jesus’ miracles left something to be desired.

It is better to understand Jesus’ miracles as one way which he chose to reveal the character of the God whose kingdom he had been sent to proclaim. This is certainly true of the healing miracles. Mark mentions on more than one occasion that Jesus was moved to pity and compassion at the sight of sickness and suffering. His willingness and eagerness to heal clearly show that the God he represents is a God of love and mercy – and forgiveness – a God who cares. This is certainly a valid understanding of the miracles of Jesus. But there is more to them still.

Some of the miracles in the gospel are no doubt intended to be seen as symbolic actions – certainly by Mark, and probably by Jesus himself. One perfect example of this can be seen in 8:22-26, where Mark describes the cure of a blind man. He sandwiches this story in between two other stories which describe the slow, painful growth of the disciples to faith in Jesus. Immediately before the healing story, in 8:21, Jesus concludes a frustrating discussion with the disciples which describe the slow, painful growth of the disciples to faith in Jesus. Immediately before the healing story, in 8:21, Jesus concludes a frustrating discussion with the disciples about the true meaning of the miracles of the loaves and fishes with an expression of exasperation: ‘Do you not yet understand?’ Immediately after the miracle story, he asks the disciples at Caesarea Philippi to tell him who they think he is. At long last, Peter speaks up on behalf of the group, and reveals at least the first signs of faith with the words: ‘You are the Christ’ (8:29).

In between comes the cure of the blind man, a healing which Mark describes as taking place in stages, and not without some difficulty. Unlike many miracle stories, where Jesus heals instantaneously with a mere word of command, here he leads the blind man out of the village, makes spittle, puts it on his blind eyes, lays hands on him, and brings him to the stage where he can say: ‘I can see people but they look like trees, walking’. Only after Jesus puts his hands on the man’s eyes again, and he peers intently, is he able to see clearly. The opening of the blind man’s eyes is a symbol of the spiritual sight produced by faith in Jesus – a growth process, which in the case of the disciples, is long and laborious.

Mark is no doubt reminding his readers, ourselves included, that faith, although a gift from God, is not something to be taken for granted, but something we have to work at, persistent in our efforts to penetrate the darkness with which the world is continually trying to enshroud us.

There are other symbolic miracles in Mark’s gospel. The multiplication of loaves (6:30-44; 8:1-13) as well as showing Jesus’ compassion for the hungry crowd, is a symbol of the Eucharist and especially of the kingdom, which is so often described in the Bible in terms of a banquet hosted by the Messiah. The calming of the storm at sea (4:35-41) probably has symbolic overtones as well. Often in the Psalms, Yahweh is pictured as one who comes to the aid of His faithful ones, when the stormy waters of tribulation threaten to overwhelm and engulf them. And the miraculous withering of the fig tree (11:12-14; 20-25) certainly comes into the Category of ‘symbolic miracle’. The fig tree is a common Old Testament symbol for Israel, and this miracle obviously symbolizes the rejection of Judaism.

So there are some miracles in Mark’s gospel, whose primary purpose would appear to be symbolic, and intended to teach us about different aspects of the kingdom of God.

But we have still not discovered the main purpose of miracles in general, for Mark and for his original readers. And to do this, we have to try to put aside our more scientific and sophisticated ways of thinking, and to enter
into their mentality and outlook. The effort will be worthwhile, and will help us to gain a deeper insight into what it means to be a disciple of Jesus. What is the real link between the miracles of Jesus, and his stated intention of proclaiming the kingdom of God in the world? How are the miracles a part of God’s revelation of his coming kingdom? We must remember that God reveals Himself in deeds as well as in words. Jesus’ ministry is the perfect illustration of this truth, and Mark was very well aware of it. Jesus’ miracles, at least as much as his teaching, must be seen as means which Jesus employed to establish the kingdom of God. They are the weapons he used to overcome Satan and the power of evil.

Let us go back to the beginning of the gospel. Mark prefaces his account of the public ministry of Jesus with a very brief account of the trial of Jesus in the wilderness (1:12-13) – brief, but most significant. Its importance in Mark’s eyes must not be overlooked. The very setting is noteworthy, because in biblical thinking, the idea was very common that the wilderness or desert was the home of evil powers. Mark also notes the presence of wild beasts, which may suggest the loneliness of Jesus’ struggle, but are surely meant to typify hostile, evil powers. In the psalms and the prophets, lions, wild bulls, serpents and so on are frequently associated with the powers of evil. Mark does not explicitly say at this point that Jesus emerged as the winner in this opening battle with evil powers, but he implies it by saying that the angels came and ministered to him or served him. Their presence and their service are a sign of Christ’s victory. (See Psalm 91:11-13). Mark aims to show at the very beginning of Jesus’ ministry that the coming of the kingdom must involve tremendous struggle with Satan.

And if the triumph of Jesus in this initial encounter is not explicitly stated here, it is clearly indicated later in 3:27. There Jesus ridicules the charge of the scribes that he is in league with the devil, ‘casting out demons by the prince of demons’. ‘No one’, he says, ‘can enter a strong man’s house and plunder his goods, unless he first binds the strong man; then indeed he may plunder his house’. Jesus is the one who has bound Satan, the strong man. This is why he can now plunder Satan’s house by liberating those who are held fast in Satan’s grip.

But it is a victory only in principle. For Satan is not prepared to give up his dominion over man and nature without a fight. Even a casual glance at the early chapters of Mark’s gospel shows just how important for him is this theme of confrontation with the powers of evil. We must not be embarrassed by this, and certainly we cannot ignore it, for it would mean throwing out one of the key ideas of Mark’s gospel. We must come to terms with it, and reflect on its implications for our following of Christ.

The very first miracle described in the gospel is the cure of a man with an unclean spirit in the synagogue at Capernaum (1:21-28). The unclean spirit cries out: ‘What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us?’ This shows its recognition that the ministry of Jesus involves a fight to the death between two kingdoms, two powers, that of God and that of Satan. The onlookers express their admiration with the words: ‘With authority he commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him’.

Still in Ch. 1: vv. 32-34 describes Jesus curing those possessed by demons, casting out demons, forbidding demons to speak. This activity of exorcism is repeated again in v. 39. Then in Ch. 3, in v. 14, the twelve disciples are given authority to preach and cast out demons. I have already mentioned Jesus’ debate with the scribes on the subject, later in the same Chapter 3, vv. 22ff. In Chapter 5, there is a lengthy and vivid description of the Gerasene demoniac (1:20), one of the most mysterious incidents in the gospel. Here Jesus overcomes a particularly violent and destructive case of demonic power, and the fact that this takes place on pagan soil shows that Jesus’ conflict with the powers of evil has implications beyond the boundaries of Israel. In Ch. 6 Jesus sends out the twelve on a missionary tour, and again, their authority over unclean spirits is singled out for special mention (in v. 7). what we might call the ‘demonic element’ does taper off in the latter part of the gospel, which is concerned mainly
with Jesus’ instructions to his disciples about suffering and the events leading up to his passion.

We should note, however, the lengthy story of the healing of the possessed boy in Ch. 9 (vv. 14-29). But the stage has been set in the first half of the gospel, to show the importance of this theme for Mark’s overall understanding of the ministry of Jesus. He sees Jesus’ mission of proclaiming and establishing the kingdom of God as necessarily involving a direct assault on the kingdom of Satan.

God’s reign can be fully effective in the world only when Satan’s dominion over the world is destroyed. Since the first sin of our first parents, Satan has enjoyed a certain dominion over man and nature. Now, as Jesus comes to establish the reign of God, the frontiers of Satan’s empire are pushed back further and further. And the miracles are the chief weapons which Jesus employs to do this.

Mark stresses demonic possession because this is the most obvious sign of Satan’s dominion, and exorcism is the most obvious sign of God’s mastery over him. The expulsion of demons is a clear sign of the coming of the kingdom and of the breaking of Satan’s grip on creation. But there is more. Notice how Mark combines so closely two aspects of Jesus’ activity, exorcising and healing: ‘all who were sick or possessed with demons’ (1:32). ‘He healed many who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons’ (1:34). It seems clear that Mark sees the cure of sickness as another aspect of the war against Satan, for sickness too is part of Satan’s realm.

Jesus did not hold the view that sickness or misfortune was the direct result of one’s personal sins, but he certainly did subscribe to the biblical belief that human suffering is one of the consequences of original sin. His whole attitude towards sickness implies that it is closely connected with sin and belongs to the realm of evil. The very language which the gospels use to describe illness and healing suggests a view of sickness almost as evil personified. Mark tells us frequently that Jesus rebuked demons: in Luke 4:39 we read that he rebuked a fever! And so the idea of the gospel miracles as an invasion of Satan’s kingdom and a means of establishing God’s dominion is not restricted to exorcism as such, but extends to healing miracles as well.

The ultimate expression of the miracle as the triumph of God’s kingdom over Satan is found in Jesus’ restoration of life to the dead, as in the case of the raising of the daughter of Jairus in Mark 5:35-43. Death was seen as a particularly strong element of Satan’s dominion. Paul calls it ‘the last enemy to be destroyed’ (1 Cor. 15:26). By restoring the 12-year old girl to life, Jesus revealed a particularly strong intervention of God’s power. And of course that revelation reached its climax in the resurrection of Jesus himself, as a result of which death no more has the victory and has, indeed, lost its sting. (See 1 Cor. 15:55.)

The same understanding of Jesus’ ministry and mission surely underlies even some of the nature miracles in the gospels: they too can be seen in terms of God’s dominion replacing that of Satan. Because it is also a part of the biblical mentality that man’s sin is responsible for certain elements of disorder in the world of nature.

Just as God made man lord of all creation – so as a result of man’s sin, Satan has established a certain dominion over nature. This is how Paul can speak of all creation groaning in labour until the time of final redemption when it will share man’s experience of liberation (Rom. 8:19-22). The evangelists have the same outlook when they describe Jesus exercising his power over the elements of nature, as part of his proclamation of the kingdom of God.

Mark’s description of the calming of the storm at sea in 4:37-41 is particularly instructive. We have only to compare how similar in form and language this story is to the story of the cure of the man with unclean spirit in 1:23-27. Just as he rebuked the demon in the earlier story now Jesus rebukes the wind! He commanded the demon to be silent; he says to the sea ‘Be still!’ – the same personal command. The crowd reacted to the exorcism by exclaiming ‘He commands even the unclean spirits and they
obey him’. The disciples in the boat voice their astonishment too: ‘Who then is this, that even the wind and sea obey him?’

Not all of Jesus’ nature miracles can be interpreted this way, but we can say with certainty that some of them at least can be associated with the miracles of exorcism, healing and raising the dead to life – as revealing the triumph of God’s kingdom and the destruction of Satan’s power over man and nature. The miracles, then, were instruments used by Christ to reveal, proclaim, and establish the kingdom of God. Most of the miracles were actions by which he actually established God’s dominion over man and nature. A few of them he intended to be seen more as symbols, teaching us important truths about the kingdom rather than directly bringing the kingdom about.

This is an important aspect of the good news which is often overlooked. There can be no doubt of its importance in Mark’s understanding of Jesus and his work, the earliest faith-interpretation we have of the career of Jesus. But must our consideration of this aspect of the gospel be just an interesting academic exercise? Or can we find in this theme some implications for our own Christian vocation? Surely there must be some, because Mark did not write his gospel to provide his readers with interesting information or to satisfy their curiosity. His aim was to present the ministry of Jesus in such a way as to challenge them to faith and action. But perhaps his emphasis on demons and their powers reflects a dated and out-moded world-view which cannot seriously say much to modern man. It would be a devastating blow to the value of the gospel as God’s inspired word if we were forced to take this view because the theme is so much a part of Mark’s whole presentation of Jesus.

I cannot hope to spell out in detail what I think are all the implications for us. It must be your task, by prayerful reading and reflection on the gospel, to discover your own insights. But perhaps we can make a few suggestions and pin-point a few key ideas which seem to emerge from this particular way of looking at Jesus’ ministry.

The battle was won in principle at the very beginning of Jesus’ ministry, in the wilderness – but the battle had to continue to be fought throughout his ministry to allow God’s kingdom to take shape – it was a battle on which the death and resurrection of Jesus had an even more decisive impact. But that battle still goes on, and will continue until the coming of God’s kingdom in its final phase, ‘when all things are subjected to Him’, when ‘every rule and every authority and power have been destroyed and all enemies have been put under his feet’ (1 Cor. 15:24-28). Since the victory has in a sense been won for us in advance, we might imagine our role in the world, in the middle phase of the kingdom, to the one of carrying out ‘mopping-up operations’. But although a philosopher might describe evil as merely the absence of good, the power of evil is very real. Satan is not going to go down without a fight.

As people called to follow Christ and carry on his work, we have to be involved in the struggle against evil in all its forms. Only then can we claim to fulfilling our vocation to carry the kingdom of God forward towards its consummation. So any compromise with the forces of evil, or even apathy and indifference towards them, can have no place in the disciple of Christ.

What are some of the forms of evil which continue to rear their ugly heads in our society? Structures and situations which really betray the presence and the power of evil? I suppose each of us could compose his own list, but how’s this for starters? The fact that one marriage in every five in the country ends in the divorce court. The fact that for every four live births in Australia, one abortion is performed, and therefore one human life destroyed. The increasing prevalence of hard drugs in our country, and the spread of hard-core pornography, both designed to sap the physical, mental, moral and spiritual fibre, especially of our youth. The materialism which has become so much a part of the Australian way of life. The racism of our society reveals in the negative response of many of our people to the plight of
Asian refugees, and to our own aboriginal people. The poisoned climate in industrial relations in our country, with sectional interests being placed above the nation’s good. The economic exploitation of the poor by the rich. The serious state of unemployment in the country. The suppression of civil liberties. Matters affecting the environment – remember Jesus’ miracles worked’ on nature. No doubt you could think of many more.

It’s not a case so much of identifying and doing battle with the people responsible, though this may sometimes be necessary. We must always be conscious of the distinction between the sinner and the sin, as Jesus himself was. Luke’s story of the woman accused of adultery is relevant here! At any rate we are often not in a position to identify the persons responsible. Maybe sometimes there is no question of personal moral responsibility, but I think you would agree that in most of these instances I mentioned we do have an evil situation. We are dealing with forces and powers that are obstacles in the way of the growth of God’s kingdom. And as disciples of Jesus, we have a responsibility to carry on the struggle which he began and called on us to continue.
5. THE PARABLES: THE GOD OF FORGIVENESS

According to Mark, Jesus’ ministry can be summed up in terms of proclaiming the coming of the kingdom of God, and calling on people to repent and believe this good news, so that they might be worthy candidates for admission to the kingdom. Mark describes Jesus performing his mission in three ways: (1) by working miracles; (2) by teaching in parables, and (3) by revealing God as a God of forgiveness. We have spent a lot of time on the miracles, showing how they are connected with the coming of the kingdom. We did this because so much of Mark’s gospel deals with the miracles of Jesus. Mark, as we have said, is a gospel of action, giving us little information about the actual content of Jesus’ teaching. The gospel contains only a few parables.

Some of them are more evidently parables of the kingdom than others – for example, those in Mark Ch. 4-, vv. 26-29 and 30-32. Jesus introduces them with words like ‘the kingdom of God is as if a man should scatter seed’, and ‘with what can be compared the kingdom of God, or what parable shall we use for it? It is like a grain of mustard seed’. This is how he introduces the parables of the seed that grows secretly (vv. 26-29), and of the mustard seed … which becomes a great tree (vv. 30-32). These parables deal explicitly with the origin, the growth and the nature of the kingdom of God.

But there is a real sense in which all the parables of Jesus reported in the gospels are kingdom-parables, because (like the miracles) they are all means which he uses to announce the coming of God’s kingdom, or some characteristic features of that kingdom.

A parable is a short story which is fictitious, but true to life. The important thing about a parable is the lesson of the story as a whole: the details of the story are for the most part just stage setting or background scenery. They do not necessarily have any significance in themselves, but serve only to highlight the main point (or points) of the story. That at least is the theory. There is a difference between parable and allegory. In an allegory, every character and every detail in the story has its own importance and its own meaning, e.g. in St. Paul’s description of the armour of salvation in Ephesians 6:13-17. There, the helmet, the breastplate, the shield, the sword, all represent particular virtues.

But in practice it is not always easy to maintain a hard and fast distinction between parables and allegory. Often, allegorical details are found woven into parables. So, while a parable does have one or two main points, it may be that some of the details or characters in the story are meant to have their own meaning. At least, we cannot overlook this possibility, when we are interpreting the parables. At the same time, we must be careful not to force the meaning too far, and find meanings in the parables which neither Jesus nor the gospel writers intended.

In the whole of Mark’s gospel, there are only two parables of any length: Mark 4:3-9 and 12:1-11. In the latter, the story of the wicked tenants of the vineyard, there are several characters, and each one or each group can be identified. Some New Testament scholars, pressing the distinction between parables and allegory too far, claim that when Jesus told the story, he intended to teach just one broad, general ideal. The allegorical details would then have been added during the development that took place when the parable was told and retold by the early Christian preachers and teachers, before it was recorded in the gospels.

But this seems to be stretching one’s credibility too much. Surely, in the original form of the story as Jesus told it, he intended the servants sent to the vineyard to stand for the prophets, and the son whom the tenants killed to indicate himself. Certainly the main point of the parable is God’s rejection of Israel, but this does not rule out the possibility of other detailed teaching in the original form of the story. The parable of the wicked tenants seems to be one where we should not force the theoretical distinction between parable and allegory.
The same problem arises when we try to interpret the other major parable in Mark’s gospel, the parable of the Sower (Mark 4:3-9). Here, Jesus first tells the parable to the crowd, and then later explains it to his disciples in private. In his explanation to them, he interprets the fate of the different categories of seed: in other words, he gives an allegorical explanation of the people. Must we say, as some claim, that this explanation was a later interpretation by the early Christian preachers of Jesus’ original parable, which contained just one general teaching? Again, there seems no real reason for concluding that Jesus himself could not have included some important allegorical teaching in this parable of the Sower.

An important point to be made about the parables of Jesus is that they posed a real challenge to his hearers, as they do to the readers of the gospel. This is the key to understanding them. He challenged the people with the imminent arrival of the kingdom of God. We might call them crisis parables: they call for a decision to be made here and now. This is important, because we would be wrong to see them just as simple, moralising stories. Jesus was not a moralist, someone who merely taught timeless ethical truths like the fatherhood of God, the brotherhood of men, and the primacy of love. Important as these truths are, Jesus intended his parables, like his miracles, to be part of a vigorous, all-out plan of attack occasioned by the entry of the kingdom of God into human history. The element of challenge – challenging his hearers to repent, believe, and accept God’s reign – is therefore vital for a correct understanding of the parables.

Parables can vary in length. We have said that there are only two lengthy parables in Mark’s gospel, but there are others. The word ‘parable’ occurs only three times in the gospel, and its first occurrence is in 3:23, where it introduces such brief sayings as ‘if a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand’, and ‘no one can enter a strong man’s house and plunder his goods, unless he first binds the strong man’.

In Chapter 4, Mark’s chapter on parables, the so-called parable of the kingdom, those in vv. 26-29 (the seed growing secretly), and vv. 30-32 (the mustard seed), are also briefer than what we are accustomed to; but they are true parables. But let us consider now in some detail the opening parable in this chapter, the parable of the Sower – keeping in mind what we have said about the interpretation of parables.

The main point of the story is the abundance of the harvest at the end, a symbol of the rich and marvellous fruitfulness of the kingdom of God. It is Jesus’ way of assuring his listeners that the kingdom will surely prevail in the end, despite the obstacles it encounters along the way. But the details of the story, which describe what happens to the seed that does not produce, are not to be neglected either, because they contain an important lesson and message for us.

We can imagine the people, or many of them, listening intently to Jesus telling this tale, and nodding their approval as he described the fate of the different classes of people who heard the word of God but did not respond: those who were like the seed which fell by the wayside, or like the seed which fell on rocky ground, or like the seed which fell among thorns and was suffocated. They probably nodded approvingly, and concluded they did not belong to any of these categories. Like the Pharisees in another story Jesus told, they thanked God they were not like the rest of men. The parable was told for others, not for them.

What about us? Can we honestly say that parables like this one speak directly to us, or challenge us? When we hear or read parables like this, do we seriously consider the possibility that we might be included in one or other of these groups? Or do we assume the parable is directed at others? When we read a parable like this, do we feel uncomfortable? Do we feel anything? Before we deplore the blindness of the crowds who listened to Jesus, do we at least entertain the possibility that we might be somewhere in there among the scattered seed?

This story told by Jesus certainly represents a challenge to every hearer and reader. Let us look
at it more closely. Some seed, he said, fell among thorns, representing those who yield no fruit because they are choked with the cares and riches of this world, and neglect God. Is this the class we belong to? Hardly. We can feel fairly secure up to this point because nobody could seriously accuse us of being choked with riches. Although we do have our cares and anxieties, we do our best to give God His due.

Some seed fell on rocky ground, representing those who hear the word of God, approve of what they hear, but then after a little while fall away. Again, this can hardly be where we fit in. We have kept the faith. Certainly there have been rough spots and tough times, but we have not fallen away.

Then there was the seed that fell by the wayside, representing those who never did believe or accept God’s word. Obviously this is not our class. So we conclude with satisfaction, like so many of Jesus’ original listeners that we must be among those happy few who earn the Lord’s praise, because we have heard the word of God, kept it, and produce fruit in abundance.

But are we perhaps deceiving ourselves? When the better things are put before us, things that mean saying ‘no’ to our own comfortable will; challenges that involve doing away with worldly things which, though not sinful in themselves, can still be something of a barrier between us and God – how easily we can find a dozen reasons for deciding these are not for us. Or when we hear the great ideals of the gospel placed before us, do we not often hear the word with joy, applaud the ideal, admire from a distance the saint who embodied this ideal in his (or her) life – but again decide it’s not for ordinary mortals like ourselves?

Or suppose we do heed the call. We may resolve that the easy-going life we have been living will be a thing of the past, and that we will give ourselves more seriously to following the master, who sacrificed himself for us, and really put ourselves at the service of others, as he did. But do the resolutions last long? Or do they wither and die like the seed on stony ground, because they can find no nourishment in the rocky soil of our souls? And let’s not forget even the seed that fell by the wayside. Perhaps we never did really believe deep down in the need to take up our cross daily to follow Christ. Perhaps we even started our journey with the idea that, whatever might be the aspirations of others – for us, at least, something less than the ideal would have to do.

We must reckon with the possibility that maybe it is to us that Jesus is addressing himself in this parable and in all his parables, and not to other people we know. We must learn to recognize this parable, as in all the others, the voice of the Lord trying to stir us out of our apathy and complacency, so that we might hear the truth and do it in love. It’s the difference between being self-centred with Christ in the background, and Christ-centred with self in the background.

Before we move very far into St. Mark’s gospel, we encounter the notion of God’s forgiveness. The opening episode in the second chapter is the cure of a paralytic (2:1-12) but Mark’s presentation shows clearly that the dominant interest in the story is that of the forgiveness of sins. Four times the refrain occurs: the words of Jesus in v. 5: ‘My son, your sins are forgiven’; the scandalized reaction of the Pharisees in v. 7: ‘Who can forgive sins but God alone?’; Jesus’ defence of his claim to have power to forgive in v. 9: ‘Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, “Your sins are forgiven”, or to say, “Rise, take up your pallet and walk”?; and finally the decisive statement in v. 10: ‘the Son of man has authority on earth to forgive sins’. The point might be laboured, but the message is clear: Jesus’ authority to heal and to forgive means that in him the grace-filled nearness of God’s kingdom is making itself felt.

This incident is followed immediately by two short stories which develop the same theme. Jesus calls Levi, a tax collector, and he responds immediately (2:14). Tax-collectors were classified as ‘sinners’ by the pious Jew, not only because they worked in the service of the hated Roman government, but also because their association with Gentiles in business made them ritually unclean. Tax collectors were scrupulously avoided by the Pharisees. The Pharisees have received something of a bad
press in the gospel records. They were not evil
men; if anything, their problem was that they
were too religious. Everyone who failed to
measure up to the standards of rectitude on
such matters as ritual purity was branded
automatically as a sinner. Consequently they
reacted against Jesus with disgust, because he
did not keep the rules. Not only did he invite a
despised tax collector to be one of his disciples;
worse still, he proceeded to dine with him and
his impious friends. Mark again spells out ‘the
point of the story with something of a sledge-
hammer approach: three times in two verses
(vv. 15-16) the phrase ‘tax collectors and sinners’
recurs. In reply to the challenge of the shocked
Pharisees, Jesus states that he has come ‘not to
call the righteous but sinners’.

The statement needs to be correctly understood,
since it could appear to mean that sin, when
followed by repentance, is more acceptable to
God than virtue. A very similar expression
occurs in the parable of the lost sheep, more
clearly in Luke’s version of the parable (Luke
15:7; but also Matthew 18:13), where the moral
of the story is that ‘there will be more joy in
heaven over one sinner who repents than over
ninety-nine righteous persons who need no
repentance’. Does this amount to an
encouragement to sin and subsequently repent,
in order to be a candidate for the kingdom of
God?

One needs to notice that in both situations,
Jesus is defending himself against the criticism
of the Pharisees for associating with people
whom they regarded as sinners and
undesirables (cf. Luke 15:1-2). The point that
Jesus is making and addressing to them, in an
attempt to break through their pride and self-
righteousness, is that there is no such animal as
a righteous person who has no need of
repentance. Jesus’ call to repentance was
addressed to all. It is the self-righteous, those
who consider themselves as virtuous and as
having no need to repent, that not even Jesus
could do anything with. Those who claim not to
be sinners barricade themselves off from
hearing God’s call and experiencing His mercy.
Such is the price one can pay for being too
‘religious’.

Implicit in Jesus’ response to the Pharisees, both
in Mark 2:17 and Luke 15:7, is the claim that the
God whose kingdom or reign he had come to
proclaim is a God of forgiveness above all else,
and he invites them to open their minds and
hearts to such a God, rather than the kind of
God who is enclosed within their narrow vision
of things.

The question, ‘Who is your God?’ or ‘what kind
of God is your God?’ is a fundamental one.
Even within the Christian family of faith, one
encounters a variety of answers to the question,
and therefore a variety of emphases in the ways
people understand God and approach Him. To
some degree, this depends on a person’s
temperament, environment, upbringing and
life-experiences; but it is also true that the
portrait of God which emerges from the pages
of the Bible is one of a God of many faces. It is
most important that we try to get the details of
this portrait in the right perspective and avoid
damaging distortions, for this has vital
implications for our own relationship to God.

The God whom Jesus has revealed to us is above
all else a God of forgiveness. The forgiving love
of God is a feature of the Old Testament as well,
but this aspect of God’s character becomes so
much more tangible in the life, ministry, and
deadth of Jesus. His death, the cross, was the
ultimate expression of God’s forgiving love, but
if Mark has anything to teach us, it is surely that
the death of Jesus cannot be considered in
isolation from his life. The cross was simply the
crowning and the natural, even inevitable, end
of a life so transparent in its compassion for
weak and sinful man. Mark directs our
attention to numerous encounters between
Jesus and individuals in spiritual and physical
need – like the paralytic. He introduces the
notion of forgiveness very early in his story, to
show that Jesus wanted to impress on his
readers this aspect of God’s character right from
the start.

However, although Mark does emphasize in his
own way this feature of Jesus’ ministry, he does
not develop it to anything like the same degree
as Luke, who came after him and filled out
Mark’s account with beautiful samples of Jesus’
parables and additional stories of his activities –
all designed to highlight this truth that the God who sent His Son into the world to proclaim the kingdom was indeed a God of forgiveness. It is not without reason that Luke’s gospel, with its parables like the lost sheep and the prodigal son, has been called the gospel of mercy.

A parable like the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-32) certainly contains a challenge, but also an appeal and an invitation – an appeal and an invitation to surrender to the God of forgiveness.

It is not possible in the course of these articles on Mark to do a detailed treatment of the contents of the other gospels. But a parable like the prodigal son really reinforces the message contained in the words of Jesus in Mark 2:17. These words remind us that we can easily set a greater price on virtue than God Himself does, because we forget that we are all equally dependent on the mercy of God, some in one way, some in another. Although he does not develop the concept to the same extent as Luke, the God to whom Jesus introduces us in Mark’s gospel is certainly a God of forgiveness. This is the God whose kingdom he has come to proclaim.
6. DISCIPLESHIP AND MINISTRY

One of the most important themes in Mark’s gospel is discipleship – what it means, what it takes, what it costs to be a disciple, a follower of Jesus. Mark’s view of discipleship, with its high cost, was certainly occasioned by the needs and circumstances of his community at the time, especially their experience of persecution or the threat of persecution. It is an attempt to respond to those needs. But that does not make his understanding any less valid or relevant for us today.

It has long been recognized that Mark planned his gospel in such a way that it falls neatly enough into two almost equal parts. The dividing line comes in 8:29 with Peter’s confession of faith, ‘You are the Christ’, in response to Jesus’ question: ‘who do you say I am?’ This incident, involving the Lord and his leading disciple, marks a turning point and a kind of watershed in the gospel. Everything that Mark has reported up till then is built around the question: ‘Who is Jesus?’ In Ch. 4:41 the disciples ask, ‘Who then is this, that even wind and sea obey him?’ In Ch. 6:2-3, his fellow townsmen reveal their scepticism, ‘Is not this the carpenter? Where did he get all this?’ Even Herod has his ten cents worth (6:16): ‘John the Baptist, whom I beheaded, has risen again’. Mark also reports popular speculation, and among the popular guesses are: John the Baptist, Elijah, or one of the prophets (8:28). Peter brings the first phase of the enquiry to a close with his statement, ‘You are the Christ’. (Mark himself has of course already identified Jesus as the Christ in the very first verse of the gospel, but this – as we saw – is just a kind of headline or title to the whole book, the word ‘Christ’ does not appear again in the gospel on anyone’s lips until Peter’s confession.)

For Mark, however, even after Peter’s confession there remains a long way to go. There is no lavish praise of Peter by Jesus for coming to this conclusion, such as we find in Matthew’s gospel (Matthew 16:17-19). In fact, just the opposite. What immediately follows shows that Peter has not really understood what he has said. Because when Jesus goes on to announce that he must suffer (8:31) Peter’s negative reaction betrays his true situation: that of satanic opposition to the will of God. This is the meaning of Jesus’ strong rebuke: ‘Get behind me, Satan’ (8:31). Poor Peter is lined up with the forces of evil and the human opposition to Jesus as one more obstacle in the way of the Kingdom of God.

But let’s start at the beginning and follow Mark’s presentation through on this theme of discipleship, and see how the disciples figure in his scheme of things. Their importance can be seen from the prominence which he gives to the call of the ‘big four’, the ones who will make up Jesus’ ‘inner circle’. After the introduction of the gospel, and the first public appearance of Jesus announcing the coming of the kingdom (1:15), Mark immediately describes the call of the two pairs of brothers, Simon and Andrew, and James and John (1:16-20). This is the first episode he reports in the public life of Jesus. The way he describes Jesus’ call and their response is surely significant. There is no suggestion at all that they have ever met Jesus before, or even heard of him. He sees them fishing, and repairing their nets, and says simply ‘Follow me’. Without any discussion, without any questions, they drop everything, leave their boats, their nets, their businesses, their families – everything – and throw in their lot with him. One might well ask whether it could have happened just like that – so suddenly, so dramatically. Probably it did not; but Mark tells it this way, because he wants to emphasize what following Jesus must involve: total, absolute, unconditional commitment – which nothing must be allowed to interfere with. Perhaps Mark’s little touch, ‘they left their Father … with the hired servants’ (1:20) is meant to underline the point: the true disciple can have nothing in common with the mercenary – he must be free of any mercenary spirit.

These four privileged disciples accompany Jesus to the synagogue at Capernaum. They watch
him cure the man with an unclean spirit, and bask in the reflected admiration of the crowds for the teaching and authority of their new leader. When they see how his fame spreads throughout the countryside (1:28), they must be congratulating themselves on the decision they have made to follow him. But they are about to learn the first of many lessons which – according to Mark – they digest only with the greatest difficulty. In the midst of the enthusiasm aroused by Jesus’ numerous acts of healing and exorcism (1:32-34), they are amazed when he slips away quietly before daybreak to be alone with his Father in prayer (v. 35). Surely this is a tactical blunder! Surely this is the time when he should cash in on his popularity, and so they go after him anxiously. ‘Everyone is searching for you’, they tell him (v. 36). We are reminded here of how crucial and vital prayer is for the followers of Jesus. We can so easily deceive and lose sight of this. It need not be a matter of deliberate or culpable neglect of prayer: the demands and the pressures of a busy life can cause us to get our priorities out of focus. We can get into a situation where something’s just got to give, and all too often what gives is the time we should and must devote to prayer.

Although the disciples are not mentioned explicitly by Mark for a while after this (1:40-45), we presume that they were in Jesus’ company when he cured the leper and the paralytic (2:1-12), and made the astonishing claim that he had power to forgive sins. They enjoy the ever growing fame of Jesus – but they also experience the beginnings of opposition to their master from very influential quarters. It gradually begins to dawn on them that following Jesus may not be such smooth sailing after all. As yet it’s only a case of a small cloud on the horizon, but still enough to make them feel a little uncomfortable.

Mark then describes the call of another man to discipleship. Again it’s a matter of a peremptory command ‘follow me’, and an unquestioning response: ‘He rose and followed him’ (2:14). This time, though, Levi, the person called, is one of the class of despised tax collectors, and this leads to another clash with the scribes and Pharisees. In fact, the disciples now find themselves singled out as, targets. Jesus is challenged about why they do not fast (v. 18), and again why they break the Sabbath law by plucking grain on the holy day (v. 24). Next, the disciples see Jesus heal a man with a withered hand on the Sabbath and again the hostility of the Pharisees is noted; this time, though, their opposition is described in far more ominous tones: ‘They deliberated about how they might destroy him’ (3: 6). The shadow of the cross is already making itself felt.

After a summary in which he mentions more acts of healing and of exorcism (vv. 7-12), Mark describes the formal appointment of the twelve and gives their names (vv. 16-19). Mark’s exact words are that Jesus appointed twelve to be with him, and to be sent out (v. 14) to preach, and to have authority to cast out demons (v. 15). His choice of words warrants close attention. The twelve are called first to be disciples (‘to be with him’) and then to be apostles (‘to be sent out’). The point: one cannot be an effective apostle without being a sincere and devoted disciple. All our efforts and enterprises will bear little fruit unless we remain with Christ, unless we remain close to him, united to him in faith and prayer.

So, what the disciples were privileged to experience was seeing and hearing – at first hand Jesus carry out the programme entrusted to him by his Father, and setting up God’s kingdom. He did this by his works of healing and driving out evil spirits, and by preaching. In his preaching he reveals to the crowds: the kind of God who sent him to proclaim the kingdom – a God of love and forgiveness; the nature of the kingdom itself; and what they must do to belong to it (repentance and faith). Jesus did this mainly by using parables, of which Mark gives us only a couple of samples. The first major parable reported by Mark is the parable of the Sower (4:1-8), and Mark tells us the disciples fail to understand. When they ask Jesus about it, he explains it to them privately. In fact Mark says explicitly that it was Jesus’ custom to take them aside, and to explain everything to them privately (4:34).

They then received further enlightenment about what was involved in the promotion of God’s kingdom by a succession of spectacular
miracles: he overcame their fear by calming the
violent wind and the stormy sea, and rebuked
them for their weakness of faith (4:37-41); he
calmed the equally violent spirit of the Gerasene
demoniac (5:1-20); he cured a woman of a
particularly persistent illness, which she had
suffered from for twelve years (5:25-34); and
he allowed Peter, James and John the special
privilege of seeing him conquer even death
itself in the person of the 12-year old daughter
of Jairus, the synagogue official. But they also
suffered with Jesus the sadness of his being
rejected by his own townspeople (6:1-6).

Having undergone such a process of formation
at the hands of such a master, the twelve
disciples were then sent out by Jesus on a
missionary tour through the towns and villages
of Israel (6:7). They had been with him; now
they were sent out. And they were authorized by
their master to do what they had seen him
doing: 'They went out and preached that men
should repent. And they cast out many demons,
and anointed with oil many that were sick and
healed them' (6:13). They were to reproduce the
work of Jesus himself. And at the top of the list
of instructions given to them, they were told to
take with them no food or money (6:8). Again,
the point is clear. Jesus demands of them
complete detachment from material supports,
and complete trust and confidence in him.

When they return, they are full of enthusiasm
for what they have achieved, and they cannot
wait to share with him their excitement. We see
almost a repeat performance of what we saw
earlier – and the same lesson is impressed on
them. Just as Jesus himself withdrew from the
crowds to be alone with his Father, at the very
moment when his impact on the crowds seemed
to promise so much, so now he gently tells them
– without throwing cold water on their
enthusiasm – to come away to a lonely place
and rest a while (6:30). We must always beware
of the danger of an activism which is not
accompanied by prayerful reflection, and
evaluation of what we are about. We can’t
always take the time off to spend long periods
in prayer and reflection, but we must try to
grasp the opportunities that arise and create
opportunities to retreat into the solitude of our
own hearts, to rest in God’s peace.

Their time of retreat was interrupted by the
pressure and the persistence of the crowds
whom Mark describes as being like sheep
without a shepherd. Their presence and the
need arouses the compassion of Jesus, and he
proceeds to feed them with just a few loaves
and a couple of fish. Once again, the disciples
play a prominent part in the incident, and the
miracle of the loaves is presented by Mark as
part of their ongoing education. Note how it is
they who point out to Jesus the loneliness of
isolation of their surroundings, and suggest that
the people be sent off to buy food for
themselves. His reply is that they should attend
to the needs of the hungry crowd. When they
protest that they simply don’t have the
resources at hand to make anything more than a
token contribution towards meeting the
people’s needs, Jesus gives them a few loaves
and the couple of fish to distribute among the
crowd. And they discover to their amazement
that when they gather the left-overs, they need
twelve baskets to collect the scraps. The lesson
is what we can achieve when we let the power
of Christ work through us.

Their astonishment must have increased even
more with the next incident which Mark
reports. We are told that after dismissing the
crowds, Jesus went up into the hills by himself
to pray, while he sent his disciples off in a boat.
In the middle of the night, when they were
struggling against a strong wind on a choppy
sea, he came to them walking across the surface
of the water. They were understandably afraid,
but he told them there was no need for fear,
stepped into the boat with them, and the wind
died down. Mark tells us not only that they
were utterly astounded, but also that their
hearts were hardened. And he joins the two
miracles of Jesus together by observing that
they still did not understand about the loaves.

These two miracle-stories seem designed to
carry the self-revelation of Jesus to his disciples
on to a further stage. Like Yahweh Himself in
the Old Testament, he is able to provide food
for his people in the wilderness. Like Yahweh,
He can tame the chaotic "forces of nature, and
protect His people from the stormy waters of
tribulation when they are in danger of being
overwhelmed. But still they fail to recognize
him and fail to understand. And the phrase ‘their hearts were hardened’ suggests that more than human inability is in question. Even when they witness events which point so clearly to who Jesus is, they cannot see. Even sharing in such marvellous displays of power is not enough for them to be able to recognize him. Mark is hinting that a true appreciation of Jesus is just not possible for them – apart, that is, from the cross; and that experience is still ahead of them. The true significance of Jesus can be grasped only by those who have knowledge of his suffering destiny, and who are prepared to follow in his footsteps.

Jesus no doubt performed this miracle of multiplying bread for the people on only one occasion, but Mark chooses to include a second version of it in Ch. 8, with only a few details changed. Again the disciples figure prominently in the discussion about how the crowd is to be fed, and again it is they who distribute the food. Their failure to understand is emphasized even more this time.

Jesus then expresses his disappointment and astonishment at their anxiety about being short of bread themselves after what they have just seen him do. And indeed how they could be worried about such a problem is incomprehensible. But this is Mark’s point, or the point he is leading to in his story. That section of the gospel is about to begin in which Jesus will concentrate even more on their instruction, devoting himself almost exclusively to their formation, in an attempt to make clear to them who he is, and what their response as disciples must be.

And Mark indicates the new direction by his setting of the miracle-story of the healing of the blind man. The way the cure is described points to the difficulty which Jesus experienced in curing the blindness of the disciples about who he was, and what they had to become. And it is then followed immediately by Peter’s acknowledgment of Jesus as ‘the Christ’, in reply to the question: ‘Who do you say I am?’ Peter, acting as spokesman and representative for the twelve, is able to answer Jesus’ question in a way that represents some advance on any degree of understanding they have shown previously; but really, as I’ve said, the sequel to Peter’s confession shows that the disciples’ sight is still very weak.

They have come so far, but they still have a long way to go. Peter has not understood what he has said, because such understanding is not possible, unless and until the idea of Jesus as the suffering Son of Man has been grasped. So if we can describe the first half of Mark’s gospel as a progressive attempt to answer the question, ‘Who is Jesus?’ – climaxing in Peter’s statement, ‘You are the Christ’, we will see that the second half of the gospel poses and answers the question: ‘Yes, but what kind of Christ?’.

To accept anyone else’s answer, even the answer of an inspired evangelist like Mark, is to accept a second hand experience. We must ask and answer the question for ourselves. The same question confronts us every time we take up the gospels and read and reflect on the remarkable story of Jesus, the carpenter’s son from Nazareth. Only when I can answer this question can I discover what kind of disciple I must be, and what form my ministry must take. And it has to be an on-going process of discovery. Jesus Christ may be the same, yesterday, today and tomorrow, but my capacity to know him is not. And which of us would dare to claim our capacity for knowing him is exhausted? (And I’m using knowledge not in the intellectual sense, but in the rich biblical sense which you find in a statement like this from St. John: ‘This is eternal life, to know the one true God and Jesus Christ whom he has sent’ – knowledge that will only grow if nourished by prayer.)

Mark’s answer to the question ‘Who is Jesus?’ is not the only possible answer. But what his gospel does is act as a warning that there can be no knowledge of Christ without the cross, and no true knowledge of him without the readiness to accept the cross as he did. Jesus will emphasize in the next section of Mark’s gospel (8:31 – 10:52) that we are justified in calling ourselves his disciples and his co-workers in promoting God’s kingdom, only if we share with him the desire to sacrifice self for the sake of others.
We come now to the section of Mark’s gospel which is particularly instructive: the important section which runs from 8:31 to 10:52, and takes us up to the last week of Jesus’ life. In this part of the gospel, Mark shows us how Jesus patiently brings the disciples to a deeper understanding of his own identity and of his mission, and at the same time enlightens them on the nature of their commitment. This section is built around three separate predictions by Jesus of his approaching passion and death. And we will see how each time he tells them this unpalatable truth that suffering and death are the route mapped out for him by the Father – (the way he must discharge the mission which the Father entrusted to him of making the kingdom of God a reality) – he immediately follows with instruction to them and to us on what true discipleship is all about – on what following him is going to demand of them – on the form their ministry must also take.

We have seen how Mark carefully arranged his material so that his gospel falls into two fairly well-defined parts. The first part, up to Ch. 8 deals with the question ‘Who is Jesus?’, and reaches its climax with Peter’s confession of faith – ‘You are the Christ’. But it immediately becomes evident that, while this insight of Peter’s represents a definite step forward, his understanding of the Messiahship of Jesus is still a long way from Jesus’ own understanding of it. Immediately after Peter’s confession Jesus predicts his approaching passion and death (8:31ff), and in doing so, deliberately avoids taking up Peter’s identity-tag, the Christ, and instead refers to himself as the Son of Man. Mark thus introduces the second major section of his gospel which deals with the kind of Messiah or Christ Jesus is the suffering Son of Man.

When speaking of his destiny and fate he consistently refers to himself as the Son of Man. Why? He borrowed this title from the book of Daniel, where in the seventh chapter, Daniel has a vision of one like a son of man (i.e. someone with the appearance of a man) coming in glory on the clouds of heaven as judge of the world. But later in the chapter, when this vision or dream is explained, it becomes clear that the ‘one like a son of man’ is not any one individual person, or not only an individual, but because he stands for ‘the saints of the Most High’, that is, the people of God. The son of man is really a collective figure, a symbol of a group, rather than an individual. I think that Jesus referred to himself as the Son of Man because he wanted to present himself as the representative of the new people of God. Sometimes he uses the title with the same significance as it has in Daniel, to refer to his role as glorious judge at the end of time, but in the majority of cases in Mark’s gospels where this title occurs, it appears in the context of suffering and self-sacrifice. What Jesus has done is combine the title ‘Son of Man’ with another Old Testament figure, God’s suffering servant, who appears in the book of Isaiah, especially Isaiah Ch.53. And it is generally believed that the Suffering Servant too was understood by the prophet as a collective figure. Probably the prophet used this term to designate the faithful remnant, that blessed minority from among the people of Israel who would emerge purified from the ordeal of Exile (which was when the book of Isaiah was written) to be the bearers of salvation to the people as a whole.

Now, if Jesus is using the title ‘Son of Man’ to describe himself, and in associating it with the idea of God’s suffering servant had that collective connotation of both concepts in mind, some interesting ideas emerge. By speaking of himself as Son of Man and referring to his life’s work in terms of God’s suffering servant, he was thinking of himself not in isolation, but as embodying the new community that he was creating, his church of which the twelve were the nucleus. And so, when Jesus says the Son of Man must suffer before entering into his glory, he is saying that his disciples must walk the same path, that there is no crown without the cross, for them or for him. When he says the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, he is saying that they
and we too must see our ministry in terms of service to others, and be prepared to sacrifice ourselves as he did. This interpretation of the mind of Jesus in describing himself as Son of Man and suffering servant is more than confirmed by the way Mark arranges the material of the whole section. Let us take a closer look at it.

When Jesus predicts his passion and death for the first time, Peter who has just confessed him to be the Christ, reacts strongly against the very thought of suffering and death as a possible fate for his master – and for his trouble receives one of the strongest rebukes ever delivered by Jesus: ‘Get behind me, Satan, for you do not appreciate the ways of God’. Jesus puts his leading disciple in the same category as those powers of evil which are an obstacle to the coming of God’s kingdom – and as the human opponents of Jesus ... (like the Pharisees) who are scandalized by the kind of kingdom he has been proclaiming. He then proceeds straightaway to address to them all these words: ‘If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will save it’ (8:34--35). Jesus’ words are primarily a call to be prepared to follow him to the cross, to be prepared for martyrdom. But the thought includes more than physical suffering and death. Just as Jesus’ own sacrificial offering was not restricted to the crucifixion, so the disciple must make his goal the constant dying of self, breaking out of that small world with its population of one, to go out to others in loving service. The same sacrifice of self which was the motivating drive of Jesus’ ministry must also be characteristic of theirs and of ours.

A little later on (9:31), he predicted his death for the second time, as he and his disciples are walking along the road to Capernaum. Mark tells us they did not understand and were afraid to ask him, probably because of the reception Peter got on the previous occasion. On arriving there, he asked them what they had been talking about on the way. They were ashamed and lost for words, because they had been discussing who was the greatest among them. Which prompted Jesus to say: ‘If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all’ (9:35).

The same pattern is reproduced after Jesus’ third and final prediction of his passion (10:33). Again their failure to comprehend, and their obtuseness is revealed by the fact that immediately afterwards James and John come forward and request that they be given the positions of honour in the kingdom. ‘You do not know what you are asking for’, Jesus answers, no doubt with a sigh of exasperation. And he goes on to tell them instead that they must share his cup and experience his baptism of suffering, and says: ‘Whoever will be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave to all’. And he concludes with the beautiful words no doubt intended to recall the Servant of Yahweh in the book of Isaiah: ‘For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many’ (10:45).

This section in Mark’s gospel that runs from 8:31 to 10:45 is punctuated by other incidents too, which contribute to the instruction of the twelve about the cost of discipleship. There is, for example, the transfiguration (9:2-8) where the privileged three, Peter, James and John, are given a glimpse of the glory of Jesus, which will strengthen them for the ordeal ahead of them, when they will be asked to accompany him in a very different atmosphere in Gethsemane, the night before his death. Again Peter shows his failure to grasp the true meaning of being a disciple of Jesus. We can certainly sympathise with him, for his reaction is a very natural one. ‘Master, it is good for us to be here. Let us make three tents, for you and Moses and Elijah’. Peter did not want to leave, and who could blame him? But the lesson is that we cannot stay on the mountain indefinitely. We are grateful for those moments in our lives when the pressure of God seems very close, and it is not wrong for us to want to multiply such moments, and prolong them in prayer. Such precious moments alone with Christ away from the crowd are necessary for our survival, but they cannot release us from having to get our hands dirty, and go down again and out again to a confused, sinful world, in service and sacrifice, because that is what our call to follow Jesus is
all about. Our normal, regular meeting place with Christ is not on the mountain but in the person of people, Christ’s little ones … (Matthew 25).

There is also instruction in this section of Mark about the need for them to avoid at all cost giving scandal to Christ’s ‘little ones’ – and not only children. There is instruction about the kind of childlike trust and humility which is necessary for anyone who aspires to be a candidate for God’s kingdom (10:14). The disciples were showing a misguided concern for Jesus’ welfare by hunting the children away and he let them know it. And then there is the incident involving the man who wanted to become a disciple, and received the sobering advice that first he would have to sell the many possessions he had, and distribute the proceeds among the poor (10:21).

Only then would he be fit to follow Jesus. For while his interests were absorbed and preoccupied by material wealth and possessions, he could not give his mind and heart in total commitment to Jesus – which is what true discipleship demands. This prompted Peter to remind Jesus that they had left everything and followed him – so what was in it for them? Surprisingly, Jesus took his question seriously and did not rebuke him, but promised them a hundredfold even in this life, with eternal life as their ultimate reward. But included in the hundredfold promised to the disciples for following Jesus, is a gift that Peter would probably have been happy to do without – namely, persecutions. This is very much a Markan touch.

Before we leave this remarkable and important section of Mark’s gospel, I just want to point out one other feature that could easily be missed. The whole section is enclosed by two miracle stories; two instances of Jesus healing the blind. I’ve already mentioned the first of those miracles (8:22-26), which led directly into Peter’s confession of faith, ‘You are the Christ’. We saw how Mark describes Jesus as healing the blind man with some difficulty and separate stages, and I suggested that Mark’s intention was to present this healing as symbolic of the slow and laborious growth of the disciples into faith. But Peter’s faith response, although inadequate, showed that they had made some progress in their understanding of Jesus. But now, after the crucial instructions which Jesus had given them about how the way of service and sacrifice and suffering is God’s way of bringing in the kingdom, Mark reports the healing of a blind beggar near Jericho (10:46-52). This time, there is the simple plea: ‘Master, let me see’, and Jesus’ answer: ‘Go your way, your faith has made you well’. And Mark concludes his account of the ministry of Jesus, prior to his arrival in Jerusalem for the last week of his life, with significant words: ‘And immediately he received his sight and followed him on the way’ (10:52).

I always find a great deal of comfort and consolation from the incidents involving Peter in the gospels. He is hardly ever mentioned in Mark’s gospel, except in terms of rebuke and disgrace – comparative disgrace, anyway. He is rebuked by Jesus as a tool of Satan; he is continually putting his foot in his mouth; asking Jesus what he and the others are going to get out of their loyalty to him – boasting that he will never deny his master, whatever about the others. He falls asleep in the garden of Gethsemane when Jesus needs his company and support most of all, and his self-confidence is exposed as being without foundation when he denies Jesus three times. Peter was the head of the Church when these stories were being told, but he allowed them and no doubt encouraged them to be told. It is almost as though he wanted to say to those who would listen: ‘Look what I was, and he still loved me. Look what I was, and see what his grace has done for me’. Peter wanted to show himself as the best possible advertisement for the power of the grace of God. When we see how Jesus was able to make such a silk purse out of a sow’s ear – with all due respect to the leader of the apostles – then we have grounds for comfort. There is hope for all of us.

In Chapter 11 of his gospel Mark begins his catalogue of the events that occupied the last days of Jesus’ earthly life. I mentioned earlier that he presents his story of Jesus almost as a passion narrative with an extended introduction. So, what might seem a
disproportionate part of the gospel as a whole, devoted to the events leading immediately to the passion, is deliberate – on Mark’s part – to convey his understanding of the true meaning of Jesus. Now Jesus comes to Jerusalem (11:1-11) and the Old Testament references in Mark’s account show that he wants to describe Jesus making his appearance as Messiah in the Holy City. But again, Mark makes the point subtly that those who take part in welcoming Jesus, do not fully understand. They cry out ’Hosanna’ (help us, save us), but are quite unaware that he will do this by his death. The irony is that the death of Jesus will cause many of those who now celebrate his arrival in Jerusalem to fall away at the very moment when God’s help and salvation are offered to them.

Mark next combines two stories (11:12-25): the cursing of a fig tree and the cleansing of the temple, and the combination is deliberate, making the point that the fate of the fig tree and the temple are the same. Jesus’ ‘curse’ means that both will die. The temple has outlived its usefulness. It has not become ‘a house of prayer for all the nations’, as God planned it to be. Just as it was not the season for figs, so the temple’s time is also past. It has been found barren. Jesus himself replaces the temple in God’s plan. Jesus, crucified and risen, is now the only way to God, and his words about faith and prayer and forgiveness remind us again of what is involved in walking that road (11:23-25).

Mark then groups together five stories of conflict between Jesus and various religious authorities, that reveal the steadily mounting opposition as his enemies close in for the kill. Inevitably, the temple authorities (probably it was an official deputation from the Jewish Sanhedrin or high court) demand that he state his authority for his high-handed action in the temple. But the way he puts them to confusion shows that only those who approach Jesus in faith can understand his authority (11:27-33). He then carries the attack back to them by means of a parable (12:1-12). This is only the third, and the final use of the word ‘parable’ in the whole gospel, and only the second example of the kind of parable we are used to. Note how again, the parable of the wicked tenants is addressed by Jesus to opponents, still in appeal, but with the note of rebuke now more prominent as time runs out. Some have pointed out that the details of the story are not logical. Why would the tenants have reacted to the owner’s servants in so brutal a way? And how could they expect to get away with it? And why would the owner take the risk of sending his son to confront men who had proved so ruthless and unscrupulous? But to ask such questions is to miss Mark’s point. For who would claim that rebellion against a loving God is ‘logical’? Or that God’s grace, His forgiving love, is a ‘logical’ response to human rebellion and sin. Revealing the character of God who sent him as a god of forgiveness has been integral to Jesus’ work of proclaiming the kingdom, and this parable fits perfectly with the overall thrust of the gospel. It’s a story of the strange illogical relationship between sinful man and a merciful God, a relationship which in the passion of Jesus is about to be revealed at its illogical, rebellious worst, and its triumphant, gracious best. Mark notes (v. 12) that they tried to arrest him, well aware that he was directing the parable against them. The net is being drawn ever tighter.

Next it is the turn of some Pharisees and supporters of Herod with their trick question about payment of taxes to Rome (vv. 13-17), and then the Sadducees make their only appearance in the gospel with their riddles about the resurrection (vv. 18-23), which Jesus shows to be absurd and pointless. Finally, a scribe approaches him with a question, the only instance in the gospel where a scribe or Pharisee shows a positive attitude of Jesus (vv. 28-34). In answer to his question about the greatest commandment, Jesus combines the two divine commands to love God and to love one’s fellow human beings. Neither of these commandments was new. What is important is not so much that Jesus answered the scribe’s question in this way, but that his own life had been the living out of these commands. He had accepted as fellow human beings, as neighbours, those whom others despised, and he had obeyed the will of his Father right to the foot of the Cross. Jesus concludes with a stunning statement, that no one but God himself could make: ‘You are not far from the kingdom of God’. Perhaps this was why no one dared to ask him any more
questions (v. 34). Then there is the puzzling little comment by Jesus about the Messiah being the son of David (vv. 35-37), followed by a combination of those who are full of spiritual pride (vv. 38-40), and a story about a poor widow who put her last coins in the temple treasury (vv. 41-44). It is very fitting that Mark should make this final episode of Jesus’ public ministry a story of one who ‘gave her all’. It marks a perfect transition to the story of the passion where Jesus will give himself for us.

But before Mark begins his passion account, he records the Lord’s farewell address, easily the longest speech of Jesus to be found in the gospel. In it he speaks of the coming destruction of the temple and the end of the world, but is careful to separate the two. This farewell speech is in the form of an apocalypse, a kind of writing that was aimed at comforting people in times of distress by assuring them that what was happening was part of God’s plan for His world. We can see reflected in the sermon at different points the experience of the Christians of Mark’s time who were being persecuted for their faith. Two points that are made about their suffering in vv. 9-13 are:

1) that in spite of appearances, God has not abandoned them. His Spirit will help them in critical moments;

2) persecution gives them the chance to witness to Christ before people they would otherwise never encounter.

And so they play their part in helping God’s plan of having the gospel proclaimed everywhere, and of thus spreading God’s kingdom further afield. The conclusion to the whole speech (v. 37) is the command to ‘stay awake’ and this indicates the main point of the whole discourse. Jesus’ own life and work are a sign that God’s future has already cast its shadow over the present. But this is not the same as trying to pinpoint or predict accurately the date of future happenings. Mark’s point is: be ready. ‘Watchful waiting’ is the appropriate posture for the disciple of Jesus.

Mark begins his story of the passion with an account of an unknown woman anointing Jesus (14:3-9). Her great sacrifice, considering the value of the precious ointment she used, points to the importance of Jesus. But again those around him fail to appreciate the significance of her prophetic action of anointing his body. Preoccupied with their own concerns, they do not grasp the importance of the events of which they are a part, and they miss this further announcement of Jesus’ approaching death. In contrast to her loving action, Mark mentions the treachery of Judas (v. 10). The hour of Jesus’ death is now at hand and the climax of Mark’s story begins.

It is the Passover and Jesus makes preparations to eat his final meal on earth with his disciples. Mark again combines his story of Jesus instituting the Eucharist with references to the failure of the disciples: not only Judas, but Peter and the others as well. The saving death of Jesus is thus placed in the starkest possible contrast with the faithlessness of his closest followers. We know from 1 Corinthians 11:23-25 that long before Mark’s time, the description of this last meal was part of the Church’s Eucharistic liturgy. The way Mark presents it (vv. 17-27) is designed to stress that Jesus is introducing a new covenant between God and man by shedding his blood. The Eucharist also anticipates the return of Christ, when he will preside at the banquet of his followers in the final and perfect phase of kingdom.

By combining the institution narrative about the infidelity of the disciples, he also reminds us that fidelity to Jesus demands more than brave words and resolutions. It requires more than human strength is itself capable of. It depends on the grace of God, and the Eucharist provides a continual reminder of this.
We come finally to look at Mark’s account of the final hours of Jesus’ earthly life. So many of the threads and strands we have found running through his gospel now converge to complete his understanding of Jesus and his understanding of what it means to be a disciple of Jesus.

We follow Jesus, with his leading disciples, Peter, James and John, into the garden of Gethsemane, where we witness his fearful agony at the prospect of suffering and death that await him (14:32-42). We see and hear him at prayer, addressing his Father as ‘Abba’ a form of address that would have been offensive to the Jews, because it was so intimate (14:36). It was the form by which a little child addressed its father. With childlike trust he prayed in his agony of spirit that his Father might, if it were at all possible, release him from the obligation of having to go through with the terrible ordeal. But at the same time, he placed himself entirely in his Father’s hands and surrendered himself entirely to his will. Mark also continues the contrast between the brave words of the disciples and their actual performance. He pointedly exposes their unreliability, especially that of Peter, who had been boldest in professing his loyalty; but also in the case of James and John, who when the going had been easier (back in 10:38) had no hesitation in saying they were capable of sharing Jesus’ ‘cup’ and ‘baptism’. If Jesus was able to fulfil God’s will for him, it was not because he was fortified by human companionship. In his time of agony, he had to stand alone – but despite this, he resisted the temptation to abandon the course God had set before him, just as he had withstood Satan’s temptation at the beginning of his ministry. He rose strengthened within, after his communion with the Father, to face the final climatic events.

Mark goes on to describe the arrest of Jesus by the mob (14:43-50), led by Judas who betrayed his master with a kiss. He records a pathetically ineffective and misguided attempt to defend Jesus, which is followed by the mass desertion of the disciples, the last act recorded of them as a group by Mark. Their later prominence in the community was certainly not achieved by such natural character strengths as loyalty and bravery. As with all of us, their hope lay solely in God’s forgiving grace.

Mark proceeds to describe the trial of Jesus before the Jewish authorities (14:53-65), not so much a trial perhaps as a kind of preliminary hearing to secure grounds for bringing Jesus before Pilate. As Mark tells it, the purpose of the proceedings was to justify a verdict they had reached a long time before. They achieved this end by patently trumped-up charges. Jesus’ answer to the High Priest’s question about his Messiahship is his only open confession of this kind in Mark’s gospel. Again, as when Peter identified him as the Christ, Jesus pointedly changes the title to Son of Man (14:61-62), though this time he describes himself as Son of Man not in the context of suffering, but looks ahead, beyond the Cross, to the time when he will return in glory as judge. Mark links this trial of Jesus with the denials of Peter (14:66-72), and contrasts Jesus’ determination to acknowledge the truth whatever the consequences with Peter’s complete loss of self-respect in denying the truth even with an oath.

Peter’s sin was every bit as serious as that of Judas. But what saved Peter was the fact that he had learned at least one of the important lessons that his master had taught – namely, that God is a God of forgiveness, and that Jesus shared his Father’s readiness to forgive. The unfortunate Judas had not imbibed even that lesson. He despaired, having no faith in the power and the desire of God to forgive. He denied the mercy of God – and there is no greater sin than that. But Peter ‘broke down and wept’ (14:72). He became the leader of the apostles not by his strength of character or moral integrity, but by God’s forgiving grace.

Meanwhile, for witnessing to the truth, Jesus is sentenced to die. After being abused and reviled, he is taken before Pontius Pilate, the Roman procurator, for his official trial (15:1-15).
Mark’s account of Jesus’ trial before Pilate is full of the deepest and most tragic ironies. Jesus is sentenced for being what in fact he was, the King of the Jews, but king in a way neither the Jews nor Pilate understood. Barabbas, a murderer, is set free, and the innocent Jesus is condemned to death (vv. 6-15). The supreme truth about Jesus is thus revealed: though sinless, he dies that sinners may live. But neither Pilate nor the Jews intended it this way. They were actors in a drama who were supremely unaware of the events they took part in, and even caused: events which, for those with eyes to see, disclosed the true meaning of Jesus. It is thus, Mark tells us, that God fulfilled his plan, using the decisions and actions of free human beings, even when they intended something quite different by those acts and decisions. This is the supreme irony of the Cross, and the irony continues with the mockery of the Roman soldiers, as, in spite of themselves, they acknowledge in word and deed the truth about Jesus (15:16-20).

Mark’s description of the actual crucifixion of Jesus is brief, and remarkable for the simple and straightforward tone of his narrative (15:22-25). There is no attempt to elicit sympathy for Jesus, or to arouse hatred against those who destroyed him. Jesus refuses to drink the drugged wine, indicating his desire to experience to the utmost the Father’s will for him. The words of derision that are directed against him (vv. 29-32), suggesting that his failure to save himself will prove his claims to be false, are particularly ironic in the light of God’s will for him, and, in the light of his own words to his disciples demanding that to follow him, it is necessary to take up one’s cross. The mockery from all sides stresses the total abandonment of Jesus. Mark makes no mention of any disciple or any member of Jesus’ family being present at the end. More awful still, there is the sense of abandonment even by God, expressed by Jesus’ cry ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’ (v. 34). Thus did Jesus draw his cup of suffering to the dregs. And then death came, mercifully (v.37). The curtain of the temple was torn, indicating the desecration of the temple – for the veil had protected the inner shrine from contamination from the outside world; and a Gentile soldier confessed that this man was indeed God’s Son. Only a few women remained when Jesus’ body was laid in a tomb, but of his closest followers there was no sign.

From Mark’s description of Jesus’ passion and death, I think the main lesson he meant to teach was that of fidelity – for Jesus’ whole career, and in a special way, its end, was one of complete and utter fidelity to the will of his Father.

The whole question of Jesus’ self-awareness is a complex theological problem. At what point in his life did he fully comprehend the way he was to fulfil the mission the Father had entrusted to him? It has been suggested it was at his baptism, when Mark described the heavenly voice addressing him as Son, in words recalling God’s commission to his Servant in Second Isaiah, the Suffering Servant, that Jesus realized his vocational path was to lead to his passion and death. But if we are to take seriously the humanity of Jesus and its limitations, I don’t believe one can imagine a blueprint of his ministry being laid out before him even then. I suggest that only as he sensed the mounting hostility of his opponent, and after continual prayerful communion with the Father, and after reflection on passages of the Scripture like those concerning the Suffering Servant, did Jesus come to realize that it was through his death that he was to bring life to people. And no doubt, the progressive realization of this brought with it intense agony of spirit.

I imagine too that Jesus was plagued throughout his ministry by the temptation to avoid this path of renunciation and suffering. We have seen how temptation reached its climax in Gethsemane just before his arrest, but it would be hard to imagine that this was the first time it raised its head. We saw how he invited his three disciples for human company and support, yet Jesus was never more alone than then, as his soul cried in protest against what lay before him. Alone, that is, except for the Father, who answered his agonized prayer not by removing the cup, but by reassuring Jesus of His own continuing faithfulness, and by giving His Son the courage and the strength to be faithful to his vocation. The agony of Christ in the garden was
not the kind that has anything in common with bitterness and frustration; rather it was an agony of love. He was able to cry out ‘Abba Father’, in a situation that seemed to give the lie to that word. He was able to address as ‘Friend’ one who was betraying him with the kiss of friendship. He was able to forgive what was unforgivable. Christ’s lesson to us is that even when we are surrounded and persecuted by enemies, we can and must still go on loving.

But as I’ve said, his greatest ordeal, more terrible than the betrayal by Judas, or the desertion of his disciples, or the scourges or the nails – is that ordeal we know about from his cry from the cross: ‘My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?’ Some would like to explain these words by referring to their source (Ps. 22), from which they are a direct quotation. This psalm as a whole sums up the situation of the innocent and virtuous man who turns to God when faced with hostile opposition and afflicted by depression. It is argued that Jesus, in quoting the first verse of this psalm, was not expressing the feeling that his life’s work had failed and that God had in fact deserted him. Rather he was identifying himself with the biblical precedent of the persecuted righteous man who trusted Yahweh and found in him the source of his consolation and an assurance of victory. But, while it would be too much perhaps to take the words of Jesus literally as a cry of real despair or dereliction, I feel Mark is telling us that he was called to experience the ultimate consequence of that ‘emptying’ process that Paul mentions in connection with the Incarnation (Phil. 2:7) – when the Father asked his Son to suffer this most awful human experience of the removal of God’s presence. Of course, victory and vindication were at hand, when a faithful Father would reward his Son for life of unwavering fidelity.

Listen to Mark’s description of what happened on the morning of Jesus’ resurrection (16:1-8). That’s all we have of what Mark himself wrote about the events of that marvellous morning. The last 12 verses were added later to make a smoother conclusion. Could Mark possibly have finished his gospel so abruptly? It would seem odd if he were to conclude simply by saying that the women who found the tomb empty said nothing to a soul, ‘for they were afraid’, – instead of recording one or more joyful meetings between the risen Christ and his disciples, such as you find in the later gospels.

The scholars have proposed various theories in an effort to explain this abrupt ending. Some say the original manuscript must have been damaged – and the original ending lost. Very few believe that Mark actually meant to end his story that way. But I think it is possible that this is exactly how Mark left his gospel, to make this deliberately unfinished Easter story a challenge to his readers’ faith. It is just because the story is left hanging that we are drawn into the picture. It is Mark’s invitation to them and to us to write our own endings, and that is what we must do when we make the discovery and reach the conviction in faith that Jesus lives.

Without any attempt at eloquence or artistry, Mark simply tells it as it was. He names the women who had seen the body of Jesus placed in the tomb (15:47), and tells us that when they returned after the Sabbath for the anointing, the body was no longer there. A mysterious young man told them Jesus has been raised from the dead, and would meet his disciples and Peter in Galilee. That’s all Mark says, except to add that they were terrified, frightened out of their wits. This certainly has the ring of truth. We are so used to thinking of the joy of the disciples when they knew that Jesus was alive again that we forget how terrifying the first reports must have been.

Mark delivers the news, calmly, realistically, and leaves others to draw the conclusions. He does say the tomb was empty, and there is tremendous power in that statement. For the dead body of Jesus represented the defeat of all he stood for, and the triumph of his enemies. But the Church was not built upon the corpse of a martyr, but on the living Christ. I read once of a Mohommedan who said to a Christian missionary: ‘You must admit there is one thing we Muslims have that you Christians do not. When we Muslims go to Mecca, at least we know where the body of our prophet is buried’. Which is a classic example of missing the point.
The very heart of Christianity is an experience of friendship with the living Christ who comes to us and unites himself to us in Word and Sacrament. He can be to us all he was to those who knew him in the flesh, and more. But Mark may have left the story unfinished because it never will be finished until, as Paul says, 'every tongue confesses that Jesus Christ is Lord'. From our point of view, it's not finished unless and until we are in it and really a part of it, not just accepting the truth of the reports, but really responding in faith to what happened on Easter morning, and living out the implications of that event.

The New Testament as a whole, and the gospels in particular, are an appeal to faith, an invitation to us to make the same response as the original believers – and Mark's resurrection account is a particularly striking appeal.

Unless we see this invitation as addressed to us personally, we finish up becoming just reporters of the religious experience of others, whether it be of Abraham, of Saint Paul, or whoever, instead of coming into personal, vital contact with the living Christ, and conveying the joy and excitement of life in the Spirit. We run the risk of being satisfied with a kind of second-hand experience worshipping someone else's God, honouring someone else's Jesus, keeping the good news once removed from the centre of our lives.

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