

A silhouette of a woman with long hair, wearing a long-sleeved top and a skirt, holding a long, thin staff or pole. She is positioned on the left side of the frame, facing right. The background is a bright, warm glow, suggesting a sunrise or sunset, with the light source behind her, creating a strong backlight effect.

**February 2021**

# **Knowing Jesus**

## **Gospel of Mark**

**Readings,  
Reflections,  
and Prayers**

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## Monday, February 8: Psalm 147

Sometimes I can laser-focus my thoughts on a particular problem. Other times my thoughts are scattered all over the place. I struggle to keep them in check. Similarly, some psalms make logical arguments and have a clear flow of thought. Other times they are more of a smattering of impressions and ideas.

Psalm 147 is like this second kind of stream-of-consciousness psalm.

- He begins with praise (vs. 1)
- He celebrates God's care and provision for His people (vs. 2-3).
- Then he talks about God as Lord of creation (vs. 4-5).
- Then he praises God for His loving care, again (vs. 6-7).
- Then he is back on the wonders of creation theme (vs. 8-9).
- Then he talks about the ones in whom God delights (vs. 10-11).
- Then he comes back to the theme of God's faithful care for His people (vs 12-15)
- Then he returns to praise God for His lordship over creation (vs 16-18).
- Then he thanks God for providing His Word (vs. 19-20).

It's all a bit of a jumble. The key verses are the central ones, on which the who psalm pivots, 147:10-11:

*"He takes no pleasure in the strength of a horse or in human might.  
No, the Lord's delight is in those who fear him, those who put their hope in his unfailing love."*

Being honest, most of us do trust in investments and armies, plans and politicians, banks and business leaders too much. Unfortunately, sooner or later, those will all disappoint us. They are only human.

Who can we really trust? God, of course. He is the only perfect One. The psalmist urges us to "fear" Him. "Fear" of the Lord is not terror and despair. Instead, it implies reverence, awe, wonder, and worship. When we revere/worship God, when we trust in His unfailing love, then our lives are safe and secure.

Today, reflect on the truth that God – and God alone – is worthy of our trust. Celebrate the fact that God cares for you. He will provide for you. Even though the storms of winter howl around us (literally or metaphorically), our lives are safe and secure in His hands.

Honour, revere, worship, and stand in awe of Him. He is the awesome, wonder-full Lord of creation. Put your hope in His unfailing love. He is with you – and for you – always.

*You are God and I praise you; you are the Lord and I acclaim you;  
You are the eternal Father; all creation worships you.  
To you all angels, all the powers of heaven, cherubim and seraphim sing in endless praise,  
'Holy, holy, holy Lord, God of power and might;  
heaven and earth are full of your glory.'  
Throughout the whole world the holy church proclaims you:  
Father of majesty unbounded,  
Your true and only Son, worthy of all worship,  
and the Holy Spirit, our advocate and guide.  
You, Christ are the King of glory, the eternal Son of the Father.  
When you became man to set us free, you did not abhor the virgin's womb.  
You overcame the sting of death and opened the kingdom of heaven to all believers.  
You are seated at God's right hand in glory;  
we believe that you will come and be our gracious judge and redeemer.  
Come, Lord, and help your people, bought with your own blood;  
bring us with all your saints to glory everlasting.  
Amen.*

Te Deum, 4<sup>th</sup> Century

## Tuesday, February 9: Psalm 148

All of creation praises God. Stars. Mountains. Eagles. Lions. Trees. Whales.

We think of praise and worship as uniquely human responses to the care and provision of God. But Psalm 148 reminds us we are part of a vast symphony of praise including angels (vs 2), sun, moon and stars (vs. 3), clouds (vs. 4), whales and fish (vs. 7), fire, hail, snow, wind, and weather (vs. 8), mountains and hills (vs. 9), trees (vs. 9), will animals and birds (vs. 10), livestock (vs. 10) ... and – oh yes – (almost as an afterthought) people, too.

God is the One who created everything. Therefore, it should not surprise us that His entire creation responds to Him in praise and worship. Of course, Alpha Centauri, Chief Mountain, deer, and eagles don't praise God in the way we do. They honour Him in their unique ways. Interestingly, they really can't stop praising God. The sun praises God simply by shining, as it was created to do; it has no choice. Mountains praise God by standing strong and providing habitat, as they were created to do; they have no choice.

In all of creation, only human beings can choose **NOT** to worship God. Only people – us – have the freedom to respond to God with love and worship, with indifference, or with outright rejection.

- Why do some people reject God?
- Why are some people indifferent to God?
- Why do we worship God?

What can you praise and thank God for, today? Worship Him ...

*You who called me to hope in your name, which is the first of all creation,  
open the eyes of my heart that I may know you,  
who alone remains highest among the highest and holiest among the holy.  
Lord, I pray that you would give me a complete knowledge of Your will,  
spiritual wisdom  
and understanding.*

*Lord, may the way I live will always honour and please You,  
may my life produce every kind of good fruit.*

*Lord, may I grow as I learn to know You better and better.*

*Lord, I also pray that I may be strengthened with all Your glorious power  
so I will have all the endurance and patience I need.*

*Lord, may I be filled with joy, always thanking You, my Father.*

*Thank You that I share in the inheritance that belongs to Your people, who live in the light.*

*Thank You that You have rescued me from the kingdom of darkness  
and transferred me into the Kingdom of Your dear Son.*

*Thank You that He has purchased our freedom and forgiven our sins.*

*Amen*

Clement of Rome (1<sup>st</sup> Century) and Colossians 1:9-14

## Wednesday, February 10: Mark 1:1-15

I recently had to write a one paragraph biographical sketch. I talked about my faith, my job, my family, my interests, my education, my life experience, and my favourite chocolate. I didn't talk about my birth. Of course, I don't remember it. And the fact that I exist means that I must have been born, once upon a time.

Mark completely ignores the birth of Jesus, Christmas. Since Jesus exists, Mark assumes we can figure out He was born. For Mark, writing the shortest and most concise of the four gospels, the important things are what Jesus taught and did. Jesus' birth is a given. What matters are His ministry, death, and resurrection.

Having just come through Christmas, we may wonder about this. But historically, for centuries, the Christian

church's big celebration was Easter (Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection) rather than Christmas. But Easter is gritty, violent, and uncomfortable. By changing our focus to Christmas (the birth of a cute baby), the message about Jesus is made safe, tame, and domestic. A baby threatens no one. That appeals to many people, who can then dismiss Jesus as a powerless, non-offensive character in a pop-culture nativity scene.

The Jesus we meet in Mark, however, is anything but safe, tame, and domestic. This is a Jesus who battles with Satan himself. He challenges all the powers of hell, evil systems, corruption, injustice, and suffering. He comes to overthrow the kings and kingdoms of this world and establish a new kingdom, the kingdom of God. Ultimately, He will totally annihilate the power of sin. He will destroy death itself. For those who are evil – like Herod – He is anything but safe. For those who are corrupt – like the religious leaders – He is anything but tame. For the sneering devil and the leer of death, He is anything but domestic. For Mark, Jesus is a Messiah on a mission: to change everything in the world, for good. Forever.

Mark rushes us past that comfort zone of the manger to deal with real life: people struggling with guilt (needing to repent of their sins), people needing real power to deal with the harsh realities of real life (*"after me will come someone more powerful ... he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit"*), people needing forgiveness, people struggling with temptation, people looking for hope. This is the real world. This is the world we live in. And this is the rough, tough, hurting world into which Jesus – our Saviour – comes.

*"The baptism of Jesus immerses him in the life of the people. He joined the queue of people for John's baptism, wanting to share the joys and sorrows of his people. In the depths of the water he entered into the depths of his people. We could say that Jesus has entered into that part of all of us which laughs and sings, dances and cries, feels for the sick and the suffering, desires the best for self and others; nothing human is foreign to him as he was baptised into the life of his people and the God of his ancestors."* (Frank Doyle).

Through Easter, we will journey with Jesus through Mark's gospel. Be encouraged. Jesus has entered into the same life, the same experiences, the same challenges we face. He understands. We do not travel through life alone. He is with us today and always ...

*Worthy of praise from every mouth,  
of confession from every tongue,  
of worship from every creature,  
is Your glorious Name, O Father, Son, and Holy Spirit:  
for you have created the whole world in your grace,  
and by your compassion you have saved the world.  
To your Majesty, O God, ten thousand times ten thousand bow down and adore,  
singing and praising without ceasing and saying,  
'Holy, holy, holy, Lord God of hosts; heaven and earth are full of your praises.  
Hosanna in the highest.'  
May my heart and my voice worship you in Spirit and in truth today, too, O my God.  
Jesus, thank you that you do have all authority in heaven and on earth:  
Help me to be your servant and ambassador, sharing this way of life,  
instructing those I meet in the practice of all you have commanded us.  
Thank you that You are with me as I do this,  
day after day after day, right up to the end of the age.  
Amen*

Gregory of Nazianzus (329-389)

#### **Thursday, February 11: Mark 1:9-20**

What is "success"? In our culture, we see success in material terms: income, money in the bank, number of people under us, size of our home, price of our car, value of our vacations ... Maybe we see it in terms of our health; if we're well, we're successful. But we can be at the top of our demographic in all those measures, yet still not be content or fulfilled. Peter, Andrew, James and John could be successful fishermen (culturally and materially speaking) but might be missing the boat (metaphorically and spiritually speaking).

Jesus redefines "success" in this passage. For Simon (Peter), Andrew, James, and John, success would mean leaving all those cultural measures behind and following Jesus. For them, following Jesus would entail much more than setting aside their nets to go with Jesus to the nearest Tim Horton's for a coffee (OK, the 1<sup>st</sup> century equivalent thereof). For them, fulfillment would mean changing the entire trajectory of their lives – vocationally, ethically, experientially, relationally, socially, politically, spiritually. Were their lives more satisfying as a consequence? Absolutely. Were they more "successful" in the eyes of their families and friends? Probably not.

For us, being successful still means to follow Jesus. For us, that may be very different than what Peter, Andrew, James and John were called to do. However, we are also called to follow Jesus. Each of us is called to use the unique gifts, opportunities, talents, education, relationships, and skills with which God has blessed us, as well as we can. We can find contentment by using those blessings to make a difference in the world and to bring glory to God. As we do so, will find joy. We will be successful ... by God's standards.

Tom Wright, Oxford University Research Fellow, writes, *"We are to become people in and through whom God's grace overflows to the world around, producing a new integrity, a new truth and truthfulness, at every level from politics to university study to sexual morality to ecology ... and reaching out into human hearts and lives and imaginations with the news that there is such a thing as truth, because there is such a thing as grace, because there is such a person as Jesus, and because in him we see and know God's living word made living flesh and are summoned to become living words in living flesh ourselves ..."*

Jesus says to us, *"Follow me."* What that means in each of our lives will be unique. He has made you unique. He has uniquely gifted and blessed you. He has put you in a unique network of relationships, in a unique place and time. What is Jesus saying to you?

*O God, be all my love, all my hope, all my striving ...  
Let my thoughts and words flow from you,  
My daily life be in you,  
And every breath I take be for you.  
O God, may my life be in you, and in you alone.  
Amen.*

John Cassian, 360-435

## **Friday, February 12: Mark 1:21-45**

Stress. Worry. Tiredness. Hopelessness. Confusion. Exhaustion. Grumpiness. Know anything about those things? How are you coping? What strategies help? Which don't?

Jesus accomplished a lot in only three years of ministry. He faced challenges from people, from physical suffering, and from spiritual forces. He could have worked non-stop, 24 days a week, 365¼ days per year for years and still never healed every one, spoken to everyone, or fixed everything. He didn't.

Notice in the middle of all the swirl of hurting people, evil spirits, disease, and opposition, Jesus took time and *"went off to a solitary place where he prayed"* (1:35). The result was an ability to manage stress and pressure with a peace and calmness that is truly remarkable. Jesus' life is a rhythm of work and rest. The balance He models flows from His relationship with the Father; Jesus knows that He is not going it alone. He takes time to rest, recharge, to reconnect with God, and to keep connected with His Father.

When we try and do things on our own, here are some traps into which we can fall:

- *Pride:* we think we can manage life fine on our own thank you very much. Jesus models humility.
- *Discouragement:* when things don't go right, we blame ourselves. Jesus models trust in God. His value and identity come from God, not what others think of Him.
- *Frustration:* when we measure "success" by numbers we get frustrated. Jesus models peace. He

- isn't discouraged when things don't all work out according to other people's expectations.
- *Driven-ness*: we try to do more, work harder, work longer. Jesus models contentment. He finds a rhythm of work and rest. He always finds time for God.
- *Compromise*: we're tempted to think the ends justify the means. Jesus models integrity. **How** we do things is as important as **what** we do.
- *Comparison*: we can feel compelled to "keep up with Joneses." Jesus models self-confidence. What matters is His relationship with God ... not the opinions of the people around Him.
- *Spiritual presumption*: if things are going well we think "God is blessing me" – aren't I wonderful? If things are tough we think "God is against me" – what am I doing wrong? Jesus never makes those connections. Relationship with God is not something He measures by "success" (or other external measures); it's a heart issue.

If I am feeling any of these emotions – pride, discouragement, frustration, driven-ness, compromise, comparison, or presumption – I may need to look at my relationship with Jesus. Am I spending time with Him? Does my sense of self-worth come from Him and His unconditional love, or from other people? Am I measuring success by the wrong standards? Do I need to remember that I am His beloved child? He loves me. My true value and worth come from my relationship with Him ...

What do I need to pray about today? What do I need to turn over to Him right now?

*Lord of the ages, you are our beginning and our end.  
Everlasting God, we place our days within your care.  
We trust you and praise you for your faithfulness in the past, and for your constant care.  
We put ourselves into your keeping, to guard and guide us this day and every day;  
and we offer our lives for your service.  
Renew us by your Holy Spirit, that, while we have life and breath,  
we may serve you with courage and hope;  
through the grace of your Son, our Saviour Jesus Christ.  
May the blessing of the God of Eternity,  
the God who calls time into being and marks its passing;  
the God who enters human history in Jesus;  
the God who gives the gift of his Spirit to all, for all time; be upon us this day  
empowering us to live our time in faithfulness to the gospel, now and always.  
Amen*

Gathering for Worship (BUGB)

### **Saturday, February 13: Mark 2:1-17**

Grizzly bears live in the Rocky Mountains. In ecological terms, the mountain forests and meadows are grizzlies' "**habitat**." Grizzly bears eat berries, plants, insects, fish, and animals (especially ones that are already dead). They are natural "vacuum cleaners" getting rid of winter kill carcasses, sick, and weak animals, and berries and vegetation. This is their role or "**niche**." Ecologists can talk about any organism's **habitat** (where they live) and **niche** (what they do where they live). We'll come back to that ...

In Mark 2, the teachers of the law know very well the only one who can forgive sins is God. When Jesus tells the paralyzed man, "*Your sins are forgiven*," they hear Jesus saying what only God can say. They hear Jesus claiming to be God and doing the kind of thing (healing a paralytic) that only God can do. This is God's niche. Jesus is claiming it's His niche too. To the religious Jews, this was heresy.

Jesus knows His mission is to show and proclaim that "*The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news.*" (Mark 1:15). He lives it. With the paralyzed man's healing He **shows** the Kingdom of God is here. Jesus also **tells** the good news and calls them to repentance and a new life, following Him. Of course Jesus is God, so He has all the resources of divinity to allow Him to do anything. You and I are not God. We don't have the same abilities Jesus did. Most of us are not called to heal paralyzed people.

God has given each of us resources and abilities with which we can show and tell that *"The kingdom of God is near; repent and believe the good news."* He has given us all talents, skills, experiences, education, abilities, and resources we can use to encourage and bless others – this is our niche.

One of ways we can redefine "success" is to appreciate that God has given each of us unique blessings:

- What are your natural talents (be honest, you have some.)
- What education and skills have you acquired over the years?
- What material resources do you have?
- What spiritual gifts do you have?
- What do you really enjoy?
- What do you have a passion for?

When we find ourselves in the right niche, we feel "successful" and content – affirmed and empowered – as we serve our King. If we get ourselves in the wrong niche we can be frustrated.

This world is God's – Jesus' – habitat. This is where He lives and serves. God has put us where we are. Our town, our family, friends, colleagues, church people ... these are our habitat. Enjoy them.

What is God saying to you? How can you live for Him, right where you are?

*God of healing, God of wholeness,  
we bring our brokenness, our sinfulness, our fears and despair,  
and lay them at your feet.  
God of healing, God of wholeness,  
we hold out hearts and hands, minds and souls to feel your touch,  
and know the peace that only you can bring.  
God of healing, God of wholeness,  
this precious moment in your presence and power  
grant us faith and confidence that here broken lives are made whole.  
Amen.*

faithandworship.com

### **Sunday, February 14: Mark 2:18-28**

When there's a problem, my first reaction is to try to solve it. I like to do something. I want to fix it. If I can solve the problem, I feel great. If I can't solve the problem, well ... I get frustrated and annoyed. Yes, I am a bit of a control freak. One problem I've noticed is that when I try to solve my own problems, I tend to go back to the good old familiar way of doing things. That's all I know. That's what I assume is best.

Jesus challenges us to stop "doing" all the time. He wants us to trust God instead. Rather than going back to the same old, same old, He wants us to embrace new life in the Kingdom of God. The new life to which Jesus calls us doesn't fit into the "old wineskins" of life as we knew it. The old wineskins represent the criteria by which popular culture measures success: how much I earn, how good I look, how popular I am. Those things don't "fit" into the "new wineskins" of life as a follower of Jesus. If success by the standards of popular culture is the primary motivation in our lives, we won't find fulfillment as people of God.

"Success" or contentment that is really satisfying and fulfilling is a matter of getting in sync with God's mission in the world and with whom He has made us to be. When I use my talents, gifts, abilities, resources, and background for Jesus, I know God's approval and blessing in my life. The same old isn't enough anymore. The new wine – the new life we experience in Christ – becomes real when I lay aside other priorities and allow the Holy Spirit to change me. I become better.

Don Cousins, from Willow Creek Community Church, writes about his frustration wanting to know what God wanted him to **do** next (he was focused on doing things all the time – the old wine skins of, when in doubt,

**do** more, **do** better, **do** bigger). "One day the silence broke. I can still remember the time and place when I heard the voice of the Holy Spirit within: 'I am not nearly as concerned with what you do as I am with who you are. And who you are is failing.' ... The words didn't come as a condemnation but as words of mercy ... For three months I'd asked God what He wanted me to do; now He was saying, 'Wrong question. You've spent twenty years focused on "doing," and it's left you exhausted and empty. You've depended more on fleshly faithfulness and self-control than you have on Me. But you mean more to Me than all your "doing" does. It's time to shift your focus – to move to a new place in Me, in order to bear more fruit.'"

Mark 2:23-27 challenges us who always try solve problems, who want to do more. The Pharisees were obsessed with doing things for God (according to their hundreds of laws); the more you did (the more laws you kept) the better. Jesus' curt reply in 2:27 is telling: God calls us to a relationship with Himself. This is what "Sabbath" is all about – finding time and space to enjoy God and celebrate His new life. Benedict used a wonderful Latin term for Sabbath: *vacare Deo*. "Vacare" is the same root word as in "vacation." Think of one day in your week as a "vacation with God" – a time to rest, be rejuvenated, and enjoy His blessings.

Spend some time reflecting on who God has created you to be. Ask Him to help you understand what "Sabbath" can mean for you – how can you spend quality time with and make space for God? Yes, God may have great things for you to **do** – but first He is concerned with who you **are** and who you **are becoming**. How can you take a "vacation day with God" and enjoy His presence in your life?

*May I be no man's enemy,  
and may I be the friend of that which is eternal and lasts forever.  
May I never quarrel with those nearest me:  
and if I do, may I be reconciled quickly.  
May I love, seek, and attain only that which is good.  
May I wish for all people's happiness and envy none.  
May I never rejoice in the ill-fortune of one who has wronged me.  
May I win no victory that harms either me or my opponent.  
May I reconcile friends who are angry with one another.  
May I, to the extent of my power, give help to all who are in need.  
May I never fail a friend who is in danger.  
When visiting those in grief or suffering,  
may I be able to soften their pain by gentle and healing words.  
May I always keep tame that which rages within me.  
May I never discuss who is wicked and what wicked things he has done,  
but may I know good men and follow in their footsteps.  
Amen.*

Eusebius, 3<sup>rd</sup> century

### **Monday, February 15: Mark 3:1-12**

It's Monday. What are you going to do with your day? Do you have to have any goals? Do you have things you have to accomplish? That can be good. Or we may be obsessive compulsive ...

Jesus routinely challenges understandings of life that are "performance" based – you have to **do** things to please God (or other people). Jesus wants us to know who we are is NOT determined by what we do, how much we do, and what we "achieve." The Pharisees measured spirituality by how well they kept all their nit-picky interpretations of the law. The Pharisees were the (spiritual) workaholics of their day: success was determined by how much they did, what they achieved, and what their life looked like to other people.

In Mark 3:1-6 (and 2:23-28), Jesus emphasizes that our focus needs to shift away from thinking our value is measured by what we do and what other people think of us. Instead, what is most important is who we are and how God sees us: we are people loved by, created for, and living in relationship with God.

Jesus is the one who brings life to the full. Knowing Him, loving Him, being in relationship is what makes us



truly human. This is what Sabbath is all about. This is what the man in this story with the withered hand discovers. He has a damaged hand, but a heart open to faith. He discovers life in all its fullness. In contrast, the Pharisees have good health but closed, hard hearts. Their lives are bitter and broken.

Like the Pharisees, we can be very successful in "old wineskin" terms – have great jobs, homes, careers, physiques. But we can miss the fullness of life that comes through authentic relationship with God and with other people. What is Jesus' response to these kinds of values? (reread the first few words of Mark 3:5)

Think about the man's withered hand metaphorically. What is your "shrivelled hand"? What part of yourself don't you like? What bit of yourself do you really not want other people to see or know about (but probably can't hide)? If we want to enjoy a rich and fulfilling relationship with Jesus, we have to be honest – even about our embarrassments or problems. God knows them anyway. He wants you to bring them into the open in your relationship. He can deal with them.

Slow down. Spend some time with Jesus. It is not as easy as it sounds. It's hard not to be driven all the time. It's hard not to go, go, go ... Stop. Rest. Pray. Enjoy.

*We want for nothing if we journey with our God,  
his footsteps leading, his hand to steady if we should fall.  
We want for nothing if we listen to our God,  
his gentle whisper breaking through the storms of life.  
We want for nothing if we rely upon our God,  
his grace enough to bring healing into broken lives.  
We want for nothing in the service of our God,  
in blessing others through our lives so we are blessed.  
We want for nothing in the worship of our God,  
his Holy Spirit the comforter will satisfy our souls.  
Amen.*

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## **Tuesday, February 16: Mark 3:13-30**

Who are the "good guys"? Who are the "bad guys"? Often it's hard to tell. No one is all good (except Jesus!). No one is all bad. Certainly, if we're talking about politics, everyone is partly good and partly bad. Realistically, dealing with real people, we live in a world of greys.

As we look through the list of twelve apostles, good and evil co-exist even here. Alongside John, Jesus' beloved disciple, is Judas, the betrayer. Even within individuals (like Peter) there is conflict between good and evil: Peter will be the one who affirms Jesus as the Christ (Matthew 16:16) and the one who will deny knowing Jesus when He is arrested.

Many of the "good" people of Jesus' day were sure He was the bad guy. He did not fit their definition of what a "good" rabbi and Messiah should look like. In hindsight, we know their narrow understanding and legalism were the real evils; these were spiritually bankrupt and cruelly restrictive (for instance, not allowing healing on a Sabbath). The spirit of the Pharisees is eerily reminiscent of the values of contemporary popular culture: workaholicism, judgmentalism, impress-others-ism, and self-centredness. It's a hard way to live. Rather than bringing joy and fulfillment it brings stress, fear, worry, despair – and ulcers.

In contrast, Jesus is the One who brings true life, hope, and healing. His way of living – the new wineskins of life in the Kingdom of God, of life in the Spirit – is radically different. Instead of rules, Jesus models freedom to enjoy rest and relationship with God; hope, peace, joy, love, and contentment. There is a quality of life that comes from living on Jesus' terms – using His blessings faithfully, following Him daily, loving others forgivingly, practicing thankfulness, living generously, and embracing His unconditional love. And, of course, there is a future hope of being with Him one day. Jesus brings joy and fulfillment.

Which way would you rather live?

Albert Einstein once said, *"Not all that counts can be counted; not all that can be counted counts."* What counts is what I REALLY believe about Jesus. Do I REALLY believe He is God Himself? Do I really believe that His Word is truth? Do I really believe that following Him is really life-giving? That living by His ethics is really best? That learning from Him is the key to joy? That serving Him brings authentic fulfillment? If so, am I living up to those beliefs?

*Christ has no body now, but yours.  
No hands, no feet on earth, but yours.  
Yours are the eyes through which  
Christ looks compassion into the world.  
Yours are the feet with which Christ walks to do good.  
Yours are the hands with which Christ blesses the world.  
Let nothing trouble you,  
let nothing frighten you.  
All things are passing;  
God never changes.  
Patience obtains all things.  
He who possesses God lacks nothing:  
God alone suffices.  
Amen*

Teresa of Avila (1515-1582)

### **Wednesday, February 17: Mark 3:20-21 and 31-35**

Families are ... interesting. Every family has some intriguing dynamics that make for some amazing blessings and some "interesting" challenges. Les Dawson quips, *"Families are like fudge – mostly sweet, with a few nuts."* Of course, your family may be the one and only totally normal one ...

Imagine if Jesus were part of your family. What would that be like? He had a complicated relationship with his family. On the one hand, He was a human blood relative. On the other hand, He is Immanuel, God Himself, God-with-us, the Messiah, the King. He is perfect, and never sinned. His relatives haven't figured this all out yet, so you can hardly blame them for thinking he is "out of his mind" (3:21).

C.S. Lewis once wrote, *"Jesus told people their sins were forgiven (Mark 2:5). This makes sense only if He really was the God whose laws are broken and whose love is wounded in every sin ... I am trying here to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about Him: 'I'm ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don't accept His claim to be God.' That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic – on a level with a man who says he is a poached egg (Mark 3:21) – or else he would be the Devil of Hell (Mark 3:22).*

*"You can shut Him up for a fool; you can spit at Him and kill Him as a demon; or you can fall at His feet and call Him Lord and God. But let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about His being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to."*

Sometimes it's good to go "out of **our** minds" in the way Jesus did. It is good to get out of our own plans, concerns, and agendas to get into the mind **of God**. Our challenge is to put on the mind and heart of Jesus, to value what He values, and to live as He would live if He were in our place.

We all have different qualities of Jesus which we admire and like: His compassion, love, conviction, faithfulness, courage, sense of justice, endurance, patience, forgiveness, mercy, devotion, sense of humour, and many more.

What is about Jesus that really intrigues and excites you? Pray that you may become more like Jesus.

*O Lord, my God, great, eternal, wonderful in glory,  
Life of all, Help to those who flee to you,  
Hope of those who cry to you,  
through your Holy Spirit cleanse me from my sins, secret and open;  
and from every thought displeasing to your goodness.  
Cleanse my body and my soul, my heart and my conscience.  
Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, create within me a pure heart and a clean soul, that,  
with perfect love and calm hope,  
I may venture confidently and fearlessly to pray to you,  
through Jesus Christ our Lord.  
Amen.*

Liturgy of St. Basil, 4<sup>th</sup> Century

### **Thursday, February 18: Mark 4:1-20**

Only a few parables are recorded in Mark, Matthew, and Luke. This is one. Clearly it made a BIG impression on those who heard it. What's it all about? It's about four types of soil. In each case, the sower (God) is the same. The seed (the Word of God) is the same. Only the soils – us – are different.

The word of God can bear fruit in each of us or:

- It may have little effect; we're not interested, too busy, or distracted. It's swept away.
- Sometimes we can get excited about a passage of scripture, a song, a retreat, a camp, an idea, or a plan ... we rush ahead enthusiastically ... but when the emotion dies and the hard work begins we lose enthusiasm, get discouraged, and quit. We enjoy the "high." But it doesn't last.
- Some of us have great ambitions to follow Jesus, but we get overwhelmed with worry, all the things we have to do, and all the things we want to get. Jesus gets squeezed out by life.

Others of us invite the Word – Jesus – into our lives. And we sincerely ask Him to help us grow closer to God – we pray that His Spirit grows in us. Life becomes fulfilling, hopeful, and worthwhile. We do become more loving, joyful, peaceful, patient, kind, good, faithful, gentle, and self-controlled (Galatians 5:22-23).

Note that, even when the seed takes root in good soil, it takes time to sprout, grow, and begin to mature. As we allow God's word to grow in our minds and hearts, it will bear fruit in our lives, but it can take time. That can be a frustrating in our rush-rush, results-now, I-want-it-yesterday culture. Part of the "new wineskins" of the kingdom involves learning patience, perseverance, and endurance.

Building qualities of heart, mind, and character and cultivating new attitudes, practices, and lifestyles that last take time and discipline. Real change takes real effort, stick-to-it-iveness and discipline. Developing Christian character is a life-long process – and hard work. Think about the fruit of the Spirit. How am I growing (or not) in each of these:

- Love? Am I becoming more (or less) loving?
- Joy? Am I feeling more (or less) joyful?
- Peace? Am I becoming more (or less) at peace?
- Patience? Am I becoming more (or less) patient?
- Kindness? Am I becoming more (or less) kind?
- Goodness? Am I becoming a better person ...or not?
- Faithfulness? Am I becoming more (or less) faithful?
- Gentleness? Am I becoming more (or less) gentle?
- Self-control? Am I becoming more (or less) self-controlled?

Pray that God would help you grow in each of these "fruit" ...

*O Holy Spirit of greatest power, come down upon us and rule over us;  
May Your light show us the way and guide our paths.  
Father, beloved by all your creation, from whom all gifts and goodness come.  
Shine your mercy into our hearts and shield us from all harm.  
Saviour Jesus, without your grace there is nothing in us that is worthy of merit,  
But through your mercy we know the Way, the Truth and the Life..  
Your wisdom is what we need most;  
Your Word is the counsel we would best obey;  
Your presence alone makes life worth living.  
When our hearts are hard, make them soft and open to Your Spirit.  
When our ways are wandering, guide and welcome us home as our loving Father.  
When we stumble and fall, forgive our sins through Your Son, our Saviour.  
When we hurt, hold us close, O loving God, one-in-three and three-in-one.  
We put our trust in you, Father, Son, and Spirit.  
Amen.*

### **Friday, February 19: Mark 4:21-34**

Being human is a complex business. We live in a world of dark and light – and every shade of grey in between. It is hard to separate the wheat from the weeds, the Judases from the Johns, or the good soil from the rocky places. The good news is **we** don't have to make those calls about other people – we cannot make those decisions about people. We are not the judges of other people. God is.

Our responsibility is to make Jesus known: to place Jesus – the lamp/light of the world – on the lampstand of our lives so people see Him in and through us. That is all.

Jesus is the One who ultimately shows what is good and what is evil. He is the Judge. He is the One who gives us the light by which to walk safely and wisely in this crazy world of ours.

*"We do not preach ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord,"* wrote Paul (2 Corinthians 4:5). This is great news. Our mission is simply to help other people meet Jesus – He's the One who can make a difference in their lives and in the world. It's not up to me to argue people to faith. It's not up to me to save the world. It's not up to me to judge. Contrary to the old chorus, it is not up to **me** to let **my** light shine. It is up to me to let **His** light shine – to let people see who Jesus is. It's all about Jesus – it's not about me at all.

The other two parables – of the growing seed and the mustard seed – illustrate what can happen when we do let His light shine. When people see Jesus in us, good seed is sown. As in the parable of the sower, some seed may not take root, some may root only superficially, some may not mature – but some may bear incredible fruit.

Perhaps you know people who have gone on to make a real difference in the kingdom of God ... because of some way Jesus spoke through you or your life. Perhaps you may not know Jesus has done anything through your life at all; it still may have happened. The message of these parables in Mark 4 is that the Holy Spirit can do amazing things in our lives, through our lives, and in the lives others ... The Spirit does it. Not us. But the seed has to be sown; the lamp has to shine; people have to hear; we have to let Jesus' life shine in us and through us. His Spirit does the rest.

This may sound like a lot is on our shoulders. It's not. We are simply God's servants, doing what He called us to do. We show and share that *"The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news."* Paul, in 2 Corinthians 4:5, goes on to say, *"we do not preach ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and **ourselves as your servants** for Jesus' sake."* Our role is to make Jesus known. His Spirit does the work.

We can think of ourselves as agents or publicists. The publicist helps a celebrity be seen and known. But folks seldom know the name of the agent. In a similar way, we serve Jesus so that He is known. People may never remember or even know us – that's not important. Jesus is the one who changes people's lives.

Pray that we may have the opportunity to share Jesus – and His love – in and through our lives, today ...

*I give you thanks, yes, more than thanks, O Lord our God,  
the Father of our Lord and God and Savior, Jesus Christ,  
for all your goodness at all times and in all places.  
You, O Lord, have shielded, rescued, helped, and guided me all the days of my life,  
and brought me to this hour.  
I pray and ask you, merciful God,  
to grant in your goodness that I may spend this holy day  
and all the days of my life without sin,  
in fullness of joy, health, safety, holiness, and reverence of you.  
But drive me away from me and from your church  
all envy, all fear, all temptation,  
all the influence of Satan, all the snares of the wicked, O Lord.  
In your goodness and mercy, please pardon whatever sin I commit in thought, word, or deed,  
Please do not leave me, O Lord, while I hope in you;  
nor lead me not into temptation,  
but deliver me from the evil one and from his works  
through the grace, mercy, and love of your only begotten Son.  
I pray that you would bless your church, O Lord, with what is good and right.  
Through your beloved son, Jesus, our glorious Savior,  
be glory and power to you,  
in your most holy, good, and life-giving Spirit,  
now, from this day forth, and forever more.  
Amen.*

Liturgy of St. Mark, 2<sup>nd</sup> Century

### **Saturday, February 20: Mark 4:35-41**

What is the most common command in Scripture? To pray more? Praying more is always good, but it's not the most common command. To be more loving? That may be what God wants for us, but it's not the most frequent instruction. To be honest, kind, or good? Again, those are important values to God, but commands to that effect are not the most common. If pride is supposed to be the root of many other sins, are injunctions to avoid pride paramount? No, they are not the most frequent.

In fact the single most common command in Scripture is: "*Do not be afraid.*" Or "*Fear not.*" Does that surprise you? (A popular bit of misinformation is that there are 365 "Fear not" commands in the Bible – one for every day of the year. That's not true. A more accurate number is 119 times. Even so, it is a VERY, VERY common command. We should get the point.)

Why is this command so frequent? John Ortberg muses, "*I think God says 'fear not' so often because fear is the number one reason human beings are tempted to avoid doing what God asks them to do.*"

There is, of course, good fear – the fear that keeps you from doing really stupid things like playing in traffic. But sometimes we get too fearful; we play things so safely we never stretch ourselves; we never live; we become paralyzed. Ours is a culture where fear sells newspapers, magazines, and TV shows. Advertisers know that if they can get us to fear, we will react – usually by buying some gadget or insurance policy. Politicians know this, too. Notice the regular appeals to fear to motivate us to think and vote their way. Fear – of the other party, of new people, for personal safety, for economic prosperity – wins elections.

When fear becomes habitual or overwhelming we become worried to the point our quality of life suffers. It's only when we risk, wisely and faithfully – even if we don't succeed perfectly – that we gain experience, self-confidence and grow. It's when we risk, wisely and faithfully, we overcome the fear of failure. It's when we risk, wisely and faithfully, we discover the joy of doing something new and different ... even if we fail. It's when we risk, wisely and faithfully, we become available for God to use us ...

Ortberg comments, "Sometime ago I took my then ten-year-old son parasailing. The man driving the boat said he could ascend to 400, 600, or 800 feet. 'How high above the water do you want to fly?' There was a pretty big price difference, so I wanted to steer him toward 400 feet. Then my son commented on how the whole idea was a little scary. It struck me that when I was ten years old, being lifted up 800 feet in the air behind a speeding boat over a deep lake might make me swallow extra hard. And I wanted him to be free of fear. So we talked about his options. He thought it over for a few minutes and he finally decided, 'I'm gonna go up 800 feet. I might be scared when I go up there at first. But I'm going to do it because the ride only lasts a few minutes. But once it's over, I'll have it forever.'

"I think if God had anything to say to you know, it might be this: 'The ride only lasts a few minutes. "As for mortals, their days are like grass; they flourish like a flower of the field; for the wind passes over it and it is gone ..." In the vast eternal scheme of things, your life is briefer than you could possibly imagine. But whatever you do in faith, every time you trust Me, whenever you act in risky obedience and jump in response to My invitation – that jump you will have forever. Go ahead and jump.'" What are you afraid of? In faith, with Jesus, do you need to go ahead and jump?

*You are holy, Lord, the only God,  
and Your deeds are wonderful.  
You are strong.  
You are great.  
You are the Most High.  
You are Almighty.  
You, Holy Father are King of heaven and earth.  
You are Three and One, Lord God, all Good.  
You are Good, all Good, supreme Good,  
Lord God, living and true.  
You are love.  
You are wisdom.  
You are humility.  
You are endurance.  
You are rest.  
You are peace.  
You are joy and gladness.  
You are justice and moderation.  
You are all our riches, and You suffice for us.  
You are beauty.  
You are gentleness.  
You are our protector.  
You are our guardian and defender.  
You are our courage.  
You are our haven and our hope.  
You are our faith, our great consolation.  
You are our eternal life, Great and Wonderful Lord,  
God Almighty, Merciful Saviour. Amen.*

Francis of Assisi

### **Sunday, February 21: Mark 5:1-20**

I got an email today with details of a 10-day tour of Greece for a really good price. It's not until October 2021, so maybe it would be possible ... maybe??? But with Covid, who knows? Marianne couldn't go for sure, as she would be working. Sigh. Oh well. But it would be SOOOO great to go ... I love to travel. I love experiencing new cultures. But it just won't work ...

The man Jesus has just healed asks to go with Jesus. But, at Jesus' request, he stays in his own place to share the good news of what Jesus has done for him. It's a significant event. First of all, it's interesting that

Jesus encourages this man to stay put and share his faith *in his own neighbourhood*. Secondly, the presence of many pigs implies this is a region of non-Jews. Jesus is expanding His mission to include all people, not just Jewish folks. Jesus comes to all peoples, of all nations and backgrounds.

Our daily call is to share, in word and in our way of life, the good news of Jesus – in the places and among the people of our everyday lives, too. Yes, for me it would be fun to go to exotic places (like Greece) and, perhaps, to share His love there. But my call, first and foremost, is to live and share my faith among my family and friends. My first calling is to be God’s hands, feet, and ambassador right here in Lethbridge.

Going back to yesterday’s theme: for some of us, talking about Jesus is a huge fear – what if I’m rejected? What if someone makes fun of me? What if I don’t do it right? What if ...???. I can become useless – to anyone (including God) – out of fear.

What if I take the risk and share my story? I may discover a new confidence in my faith and in myself; I can make a real difference in someone’s life; I can make a new friend or move deeper in an existing relationship; I can serve God; I can find a deep sense of joy and fulfillment ... So what if it doesn’t go perfectly? – I have planted seeds that God can grow in His time in His way. Who knows what fruit they might bear?

It could be so exciting ... As we asked yesterday: ] in faith, with Jesus, do I need to go ahead and jump?

*Lord you have called us to hope in your name.  
Save those of us who are in affliction,  
have mercy on the lonely, raise up those who are fallen,  
be present to those who are in need, heal the sick,  
bring back those of your people who have gone astray.  
Feed the hungry, redeem the captives,  
lift up those who are weak, comfort the faint hearted.  
You are the highest among the highest, and the holiest among the holy.  
We hope in your name.  
Amen*

Clement of Rome (1<sup>st</sup> century)

## **Monday, February 22: Mark 5:21-43**

A wise person once told me that the greatest motivator for change is pain. Nothing drives us to make real life changes more than pain. We tend to go along with life much as usual, until something bad happens – we lose our job, our relationship gets to a crisis point, we get a serious illness. Then we change – we upgrade our education, we get the counseling we need, we start exercising, we get serious about praying ... Unfortunately, we only make those important life changes when forced to by painful circumstances.

In this passage, two people are pushed to come to Jesus because of their pain. Jairus’ daughter is mortally ill. He comes to Jesus in his pain and desperation. Jesus is happy to go with him.

Where is Jesus when we are going through painful times? He is happy to be with us. He walks with us. He comforts us. He does not abandon us. Isn’t that great news?

Along the way, another woman comes to Jesus because of her pain. We can appreciate her desperation – her medical condition has been untreatable for 12 years. But her pain also affects her social life. In her culture, because of her bleeding, she is considered “unclean” – she is not allowed to be out in public, let alone touch someone’s clothing. Beyond her physical pain, she is also a social outcast – she has no life. She should not be here. But she is desperate. She tries to sneak up to Jesus, incognito, and then slip away again unnoticed. If she is recognized, the crowd might well attack her.

Where is Jesus? What does Jesus do? He stops. He has time for her. He knows her. He speaks with her. He gives her dignity and respect. And of course, He cures her pain – both physically and socially. In a very

real sense, He gives the lady back her life. Jesus always has time for us. He knows us. He is for us.

Jesus' delay, however, has cost Jairus' daughter her life. And yet Jesus still can, and does, give this girl her life back, too (coincidentally she is 12 years old, the same number of years the woman was hemorrhaging).

We would love it if Jesus cured all of our physical pains. We would be so glad if He healed out loved ones every time. Of course, in that case, none of us would ever die ... How does that work? Hmmm.

More importantly, however, Jesus deals with the spiritual and emotional pain we have in our lives. What is more critical is that He heal our sense of loneliness, loss, guilt, shame, and desperation. Physical aches and pains are bad: chronic spiritual and emotional hurt is worse. Jesus can deal with that.

What changes do you need to make in your life? Maybe you are at the place of great pain, where you know things have to change. Hopefully you are not at the painful place yet – avoid it – make real changes now.

Jesus is with you. He can help you through the process and give you back the life He created you to have.

*Holy God, make Your presence known to us today.  
We come to You as we are, called to be saints, holy ones, but so often less than our calling.  
Help us this hour to let go of those sins to which we cling.  
Help us to know that our self-worth does not depend so much on our ability to hold on to our lives,  
as on Your power to release ourselves into Your hands.  
Holy God, make Your presence known to us today.  
We come to You with our vision so often clouded by our sin.  
Clear away the mist, through Jesus, that we can catch a glimpse, now, of Your presence here.  
Help us to behold You as You are, not as we would like You to be.  
In Him, through whom we become holy,  
on the wings of the Spirit,  
we pray to You, our Father.  
Amen*

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## **Tuesday, February 23: Mark 6:1-13**

Back in junior high school, I thought I knew my friend, David. He was quiet, kind of reserved, an average student ... nothing special. Then I went over to his house and discovered that he made his own movies. This was LONG before anything digital. He had an 8 mm movie camera, all the gadgets to cut and edit ... and he made some REALLY cool, creative, and (for the day) spectacular films. Wow. Who knew?

Those who lived with Jesus thought they knew him. He fixed their tables and chairs. They ate and drank with His extended family. When He stepped outside the image they had of Him as Mary's son, a carpenter, they were dumbfounded. They thought he was just another tradesman in a world of manual labourers. Who is He? It's like they don't know Him at all. Of course, we know there is so much more to Jesus ...

All of us are much more than others can see, too. There are depths about each of us we may not even appreciate about our own selves. God can see possibilities within us that we cannot imagine. We may think, "*This is who I am; this is all I can do; I can't do anything else; I'm not capable of ...*" (whatever that dream in your heart is): "*I couldn't possibly ...*" (whatever God has inspired you to do or be). Don't listen to those voices. See yourself as God sees you – with all the potential He created you to be ...

On a scale of 1 (painfully discontent) to 10 (peacefully content) prayerfully rate yourself in these areas:

- I know I am a person loved by, created by, and called by God ...
- I know that I am serving God using my gifts, talents, abilities, and potential ...
- I know that I have found a good "niche" for myself in the Kingdom of God ...



- I feel that I am working on God-given dreams or goals ...
- I think my relationships with other people are healthy and growing ...
- My relationship with Jesus brings contentment and fulfillment in my life ...
- I am working at a job/volunteer activity that brings God glory and fulfillment in my life ...
- I am growing in the fruit of Spirit – though I’m not perfect yet (Galatians 5:22-23) ...

If you have some “godly discontent” in these areas, what changes do you need to make? Is your sense of discontentment strong enough to motivate you to change? What are you going to do about it – today?

We are just passing through this world for a short time; Jesus advises us to make the most of it for God, for ourselves, and for others.

Find a place where you can use what He has given you for His glory. That will bring you the deep sense of fulfillment, joy, and satisfaction you are searching for ...

*Be kind to your little children, Lord.  
Be kind to me, Lord.  
Be a gentle teacher, patient with my weakness and stupidity.  
And give me the strength and discernment to do what you tell me,  
and so grow in your likeness.  
May I live in the peace that comes from you with all people.  
May I journey towards your city,  
sailing through the waters of sin untouched by the waves,  
borne serenely along by the Holy Spirit.  
Night and day may I give you praise and thanks,  
because you have shown me that all things belong to you,  
and all blessings are gifts from you.  
To you, the essence of wisdom, the foundation of truth,  
be glory forever more.  
Amen.*

Clement of Alexandria, 150-215

### **Wednesday, February 24: Mark 6:14-29**

This passage brings us face-to-face with human evil. Some of our greatest literature wrestles with the horrible deeds people are capable of – from Shakespeare’s MacBeth through Rowling’s Voldemort, something about people makes us capable of inexplicable evil.

Herod Antipas, the son of Herod the Great was ruler of Galilee and Perea. Herod had great respect for John (as he would also have for Jesus later on). But in clear violation of Jewish law, Herod had taken Herodias, the divorced wife of his (still-living) brother, Herod Boethus, as his wife. Both Herod Antipas and Herodias were already married to other people, so both divorced their spouses to marry each other. John, being a devout and outspoken Jew, publicly denounced Herod’s blatant violation of Jewish law.

Herodias wanted to be rid of John. But Herod Antipas would only go as far as putting John in prison. Even then Herod loved to hear John preach. But in a scene that makes the worst treachery in any Shakespearean tragedy pale in comparison, Herodias and her daughter (from her first marriage to Herod Boethus, Herod Antipas’ brother) come up with a grisly scheme to rid themselves of John once and for all.

Who do I identify with? With Herod, torn between admiration for John, and the temptations of life (in his case, a dancing-girl; in my case, \_\_\_\_ )? With Herodias, nurturing a long-term grievance and finally getting revenge? With John, who has taken the risk of rebuking Herod, and now faces death for his love of God and truth? With the crowd, not wanting to get involved, just watching the train wreck happen ...?

Think about John. His life was not easy. He lived in poverty. He faced opposition. He became redundant

when Jesus came along. But was he content? Fulfilled? Fruitful? Of course.

John is a wonderful encouragement to me to be the person God created and called me to be. Life may be hard. I may not be the centre of attention. I am **not** called to be the Messiah (thankfully). I **am** called to take the opportunities God brings my way; to use the talents, gifts, and resources He has given me; to do right without compromise; and to persevere to the end. I may not get recognition. But I will be fulfilled.

There is much to be said for a faithful life, faithfully lived. Even if it we are "obscure." We may not have financial wealth or "success," but we may discover amazing riches in so many other ways ...

*O God of infinite mercy and boundless majesty,  
whom no distance of nor length of time can part from those for whom you care;  
I trust in you – be with me everywhere, and through all the ways in which I am to go.  
May you be my constant guide and my companion.  
May no adversity harm me, no difficulty oppose me;  
may all situations in my life turn out blessed, by your Spirit;  
that by the help of your right hand, whatever I have truly needed,  
may quickly be received with a good response;  
and that, whoever I need to be,  
I may be shaped by your guiding hand, through Jesus Christ our Lord.  
Amen.*

Gelasian Sacramentary, 5<sup>th</sup> Century

#### **Thursday, February 25: Mark 6:30-44**

Life gets so busy. There are so many demands. What is important? What's not? What ought my priorities to be? What decisions do I need to make? There are so many demands and things to do ...

People are running on foot all the way around a lake to meet with Jesus. It's extraordinary. Why are they chasing after Jesus? Mark 6:34 is a powerful verse: "*Jesus had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd.*" These were people who were searching for something true to believe in, give them hope, provide purpose, give meaning to their lives, and help them live life better ...

What did Jesus do? "*He began teaching them many things.*" We usually rush on to the miracle of the loaves and fishes, but pause ... think about the significance of Mark 6:34: "*Jesus had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd.*" And then He taught them.

Our greatest need may not be food for our bellies but nourishment for our souls. What we really need most is to know God, learn wisdom, and understand life as God meant it to be lived. Yes, God can – and will – provide for our physical needs (thus we pray, "*Give us this day our daily bread*" FYI He provides for our **physical** needs if not all our *wants*). But first He may want to speak to our **spiritual** needs. We may be bodily well-fed yet spiritually starving. We do need physical food. We desperately need spiritual food, too.

Are you searching for direction? Hope? Purpose? Do you ever feel like a sheep who needs a shepherd? Are you spiritually hungry? What do you need to learn most all?

Jesus – being God – is the expert in every field of knowledge; He is the ultimate source of true wisdom; He knows all there is to know. What do you need Him to teach you? Of course, if what you really need to learn is Avogadro's hypothesis for your Chemistry 30 exam, He is – wisely – going to let you study your chemistry textbook. If you need wisdom to work through a difficult relationship, He may direct you to a good counselor. If you need medical help, He will encourage you to see a doctor.

But sometimes He will give you direct insight through His Spirit. He may inspire you with His wisdom.

Wisdom is one of Jesus' many specialties. Perhaps He is inviting you: "*Come with me by yourself to a quiet*

*place and get some rest"*(6:31). That is for your good, not His. Find a quiet place. Rest. Spend time listening to Jesus. Learning from Jesus. Allowing His Spirit to change you ...

*How is it God, that you have given me this hectic busy life  
when I have so little time to enjoy your presence?  
Throughout the day people are waiting to speak with me,  
and even at meals I have to continue talking to people about their needs and problems.  
During sleep itself I am still thinking and dreaming about the multitude of concerns that surround me.  
I say I do all this not for my own sake, but for yours.  
To me my present pattern of life is a torment;  
I only hope that for you it is truly a sacrifice of love.  
I know that you are constantly beside me, yet I am usually so busy that I ignore you.  
If you want me to remain so busy,  
please force me to think about and love you even in the midst of such hectic activity.  
If you do not want me so busy,  
please release me from it, showing others how they can take over my responsibilities.  
Lord, help me be the person you want me to be.  
Amen.*

Teresa of Avila (1515-1582)

### **Friday, February 26: Mark 6:45-56**

Sometimes I just don't get it. I remember being in 1<sup>st</sup> year Calculus at UBC and realizing that, no matter how hard I studied, I was just not going to get it. My brain just didn't work that way. In today's reading, the disciples just don't get it. They "*had not understood about the loaves*"(6:52). What don't they get?

Look back at [Mark 6:35-44](#). It is late in the day, people are hungry, and the disciples want to send them away. The disciples don't see any possibilities. If the people stay, they will starve; there is no food. From the disciples' point of view, there is only one option: everyone must find their own supper. Jesus challenges them to add another dynamic into their thinking about life and its possibilities – Himself, God-with-us. Now the options multiply (literally). Jesus is expanding the world of the possible.

In today's reading, the disciples are out on a lake pulling on their oars against the wind; they see Jesus walking past. They consider the options: Jesus must be dead; this must be His ghost. From their point of view, there is no other explanation. Living people don't walk on water. Jesus challenges them, again, to add another possibility into their thinking about life – Himself, God-with-us. Jesus is the Lord of heaven, earth, water, wind; He can walk on water. Jesus is expanding the world of the possible.

The disciples struggle to grasp the new possibilities with which Jesus is presenting them. They profess to know Jesus. But they are just beginning to understand Him. They don't yet comprehend that they're in relationship with the King of Kings and Lord of Lords ... who can actually do things. As they come to really understand that, they will discover the world of what is possible is far bigger and more incredible than they can imagine. It's a world where the sick are healed, hope comes to the hopeless, wisdom is given to those seeking it, and life takes on new meaning, and purpose. In time, they will also discover that it is also a world where One person will die that all may live. It's a world where the dead come alive again.

Do you ever feel like you are straining at the oars of life? Do you feel the wind is against you? Do you feel you're going nowhere – fast? "*Take courage; don't be afraid.*" says Jesus (6:50) – this is one of those "Fear not" passages that occur often through Scripture. He will come into the boat of your life, and – if you are willing to allow Him to be captain – He will get you safely across the lake.

The good news for us is that Jesus is with us, always. We may find ourselves in brutal tempests. But, if we trust in Jesus, He will get us through the storm. We may walk through dark valleys. But, when we walk with Him, He lead us through. Part of experiencing all of God's possibilities may be discovering that the storm-tossed ride in the boat is an important part of the adventure. It's how we learn faith.

Do you notice why Jesus is not with His disciples in the boat? He was praying. Jesus prayed often. We know little of how He prayed, what He said, whether He sat, kneeled, or stood. It doesn't matter. How we pray is not as important as that we pray. The good advice of an early Christian writer was, "*Pray as you can, not as you can't.*" As we all go through tough times, how can you pray?

*Almighty God, before whom all hearts are open, all desires known,  
and from whom no secrets are hidden ...  
Cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit,  
That we may love you, perfectly,  
And glorify your Name, worthily.  
Bless us with gifts of forgiveness, through Jesus Christ, our Lord.  
And help us to forgive others as completely as you forgive us,  
That they may be blessed,  
And your peace may fill our lives.  
Amen*

Gregorian Sacramentary, 6<sup>th</sup> Century

### **Saturday, February 27: Mark 7:1-23**

I slipped on the ice a couple of days ago and twisted my knee. It hurts. The lingering pain is a signal that all is not yet right with the knee, so I need to take it easy. When we injure ourselves, our bodies have built-in feedback systems that tell us things aren't right; we need to do the right thing and take care of ourselves.

What about our hearts? Our souls? Our minds? It's a little trickier to know if all is well in our inner being. Certainly, sometimes our hearts ache. Sometimes we feel angry or sad. Sometimes we know guilt, shame, or regret. But it's not as easy to discern emotional/spiritual pain as physical pain, stabbing through a knee.

Jesus encourages us to look at our spiritual and emotional health. What is going on inside us? Of course, there's a lot of love in my heart – for God, my family, friends, church family, and more. But I also know there's evil inside my heart, too: bitterness, harsh judgments, holding past hurts, thoughts of greed, envy, selfishness, pride, lust, anger and jealousy ... Jesus has a penetrating way of seeing through our polished external façade to see the good – and evil – within our hearts.

We can make sure our visible actions are good and "Christian." But what about the inner emotions that drive us (the love – or evil – that really motivates us)? Is our "goodness" just an act? Are we pure in heart? Does our good behaviour flow from a godly heart? When push comes to shove, what's in our hearts will come out. So Jesus encourages us to make sure our hearts are in the right place. Then, even when challenges come, we will live consistently with integrity, holiness, and wholeness.

Prayerfully, we can ask Jesus to help us purify our hearts. We can ask the Spirit to help us see our souls, so we become more fully the person who God desires – and created – us to be. Time spent in prayer allows us to come to grips with the parts of our lives we hide from God. We can ask Jesus to cleanse our souls. We can ask Him to form us with godly minds. Then we can consistently honour Jesus in the way we live.

Don Cousins writes, "*God's will is that all His people be involved in the work of His kingdom. His will is that we know and use our spiritual gifts in serving one another. And God's will is for each of us to be a success as He defines it: we use our gifts, talents, resources, and opportunities faithfully; we are filled with His joy; we are fruitful in His service; and we make God known and give Him the glory. Any prayer for an outpouring of the Holy Spirit so that His people have His heart for serving is a prayer we know He will answer.*" That happens as I allow God's Spirit to fill me, teach me, reveal to me who I truly am, change me, and then step out in faith to serve Him.

Pray that His Spirit will lead you to serve Him – from the inside out – from a heart devoted to Jesus. Then we can live with integrity, joy, and peace ...

*Jesus said, "I am the way he and the truth and the life.  
No one comes to the Father except through me."  
Jesus, you are the way; I trust in you.  
Jesus, you are the truth; I trust in you.  
Jesus, you are the life; I trust in you.  
Come quickly to help me, O Lord God of my salvation,  
for the battle is great and the adversaries are powerful.  
The enemy is hostile, the invisible foe fighting through visible forms.  
Come quickly, therefore, to help me,  
and assist me through your holy Son, our Lord Jesus Christ,  
through whom you have redeemed us all,  
through whom be glory and power to you forever and ever.  
Amen.*

Origen of Alexandria, 185-254

### **Sunday, February 28: Mark 7:24-37**

On occasion, Marianne has said something to me; I have nodded and said, "Uh huh"; then she asks me a question about what she just said. And I have been flummoxed. While I had heard her, clearly I was not really listening to her. Yes, I admit that, on very rare occasions, I have not totally, 100% paid attention.

Several times Jesus says to us, "*Anyone with ears to hear should listen and understand*" (for example Mark 4:9, 23). Is it possible to hear Jesus, but not really listen? To hear and not understand?

One of the things we often hear, but struggle to understand, is that Jesus comes for ALL people – of all ethnic backgrounds, abilities, and social standings. Jewish people really struggled with His inclusiveness. They thought the Messiah should only come for them, and them alone.

Both of the stories in today's reading take place in Tyre and Decapolis – non-Jewish cities. These bustling commercial centres were melting pots of people from everywhere in the Mediterranean region. Certainly the woman in the first story is not Jewish (she is Greek, but born in Phoenicia); the other man, in Decapolis, is likely not Jewish either. Jesus really has come for ALL people. That's good news.

In theory, we know Jesus comes for all people, too (a good thing considering most of us are not Jewish). But sometimes it's still hard to appreciate that Jesus really does love all people equally. He loves Palestinians as much as Jews. First Nations as much as Europeans. People with addictions as much as teatotalers. People with ability issues as much as those without. Jesus comes as good news for ALL people.

Who do you know who is "difficult" to love? Who do you know who needs Jesus? Yes, Jesus loves those people, too. Pray for them. And pray for our attitudes toward some of those people we find more challenging to love. Help us to hear – and understand – that we are to love our neighbour as ourselves (everybody), whoever our neighbour happens to be.

*May God the Father,  
the eternal High Priest Jesus Christ,  
and the Holy Spirit,  
build us up in faith and truth and love,  
And grant us a place among the saints with all those who believe on our Lord Jesus Christ.  
We pray for all saints (those who believe in Jesus),  
for kings and rulers,  
for the enemies of the cross of Christ.  
And for ourselves we pray that our fruit may abound  
and we be made perfect in Christ Jesus, our Lord.  
Amen.*

Polycarp, Bishop of Smyrna, 69-155 (martyred)

## Monday, March 1: Mark 8:1-21

The disciples are not very good managers. Twice in a short period of time that they have been caught without a meal plan. Of course it's really Jesus' fault. He keeps teaching people, they keep following, and inevitably a crisis like this comes. Had the disciples "*understood about the loaves*" yet (6:52)? No ...

I don't blame them. I would have a difficult time in this circumstance, too. I like to be organized and prepared for every contingency. I don't like winging it. Most times being organized is a very good way to be. God gives us brains for a reason; He expects us to use them. Planning is good. In general, God wants us to think well, plan well, prepare well, and make wise choices.

In fairness to the disciples, in three years of public ministry, Jesus did only multiply loaves and fishes twice; the other 1000+ days the crowds found their own meals. This meal crisis is an exception, not the rule.

However, now and then Jesus will challenge us to step out in faith and trust Him – beyond the safety net of contingency planning and hard economic logic. Now and then He will ask us to really trust Him and go beyond our plans. On occasion He will ask us to jump without a safety net ...

How do I know when it is Jesus asking me to step out in faith OR when it is me following my own selfish desires and interests? How can I know when it is God leading me and when it is my own (flawed) human nature? That is a very good question. I can make just dumb decisions. I can spiritualize things, saying, "*I think this is what Jesus is asking me to do*" when I know I'm just doing what **I** want to do.

Jesus puts His finger on this issue as He talks to the Pharisees. The "yeast of Pharisees" likely refers to the way they defined a person's relationship with God in terms of religious rule-keeping. If keeping rules is all there is to your spiritual life, then stepping out in faith is not important at all. In fact, stepping out in faith may be bad: it may put you into circumstances where the rules are not yet fully defined. Rules only work in an ordered, predictable world. Jesus is inviting us to a much more dynamic – and purposeful – relationship with God: stepping out in faith, we will be challenged to apply His principles to new situations.

If my sincere goal and ambition is that people get to know Jesus and the good news, I have a great motivation for stepping out in faith. But if my goal is my own recognition or enrichment, my heart is wrong. If the opportunity I feel God leading me to is consistent with Scripture, great. If not, it is not from God. God has given me gifts, talents, experiences, and abilities – does what I am thinking about "fit" with who God created me to be? That may be a good clue that it is the right thing to do. Pray about it. Talk with mature Christian friends about it. Then, if your heart is right, step out in faith ...

Jesus teaches us to pray, "*May your Kingdom come, may your will be done ...*" That comes to pass when we actually do things, say things, and live in such a way consistent with His Word. His Kingdom comes when we live His will to best of our ability. We may even step out in faith – out of our comfort zone – to share His love in Word and in deed. What is Jesus saying to you?

*O eternal God, King of all creation, who has brought me to this hour,  
forgive the sins which I've committed this day in thought, word, and deed.  
Cleanse, O Lord, my humble soul from every stain of flesh and spirit.  
Grant me, O Lord, to pass through the sleep of this night in peace,  
to rise from my lowly bed,  
to please your holy name all the days of my life,  
and to defeat the enemies that contend against me both bodily and spiritually.  
Deliver me, O Lord, from the vain thoughts that stain me, and from evil desires.  
For yours is the kingdom and the power, and the glory,  
of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit,  
now and forever and unto the ages of ages.  
Amen.*

Macarius of Egypt, 300-390

## Tuesday, March 2: Mark 8:22-38

Jesus not only spoke words of healing, He often did symbolic acts of healing as well. With a deaf-mute man, Jesus touched his tongue (7:33). With this blind man, He touches his eyes. In our COVID culture, touching someone with your own saliva is totally inappropriate! But in ancient cultures saliva was believed to have healing qualities. Physical touch is a powerful thing. Through these times of physical isolation, we have a new appreciation or the need to touch – a hug, handshake, whatever ...

As the disciples see Jesus in action, Peter "gets it." What exactly Peter "gets" we're not sure. He says to Jesus, "*You are the Christ.*" The Greek word "the Christ" is a translation of the Hebrew word "the Messiah" – both are titles meaning "the Anointed One," from Old Testament prophecies about a coming divine King who would save His people. "Christ" is NOT Jesus' last name. It is a title.

Most 1<sup>st</sup> century Jews expected the Christ/Messiah to be a military general who would crush the Romans, restoring the glory days of King David. They believed the enemy was the Romans. If only the Romans were driven out, paradise would be established in Israel. Peter probably thought that, if Jesus could heal deaf-mute and blind people, and if He could miraculously feed thousands, He could slaughter Romans, too.

In hindsight we know this is not what happens. The real problem was not the Romans. Even if the Romans were driven out, Israel would still be a mess because of sinful people: the Pharisees would still be demanding strict rule-following; the Sadducees would be pedaling their elitist economic agenda; people would still be sick; poverty would be crippling; there would still be crime (read any of the Old Testament prophets). The real issue is human sinfulness.

And if the Christ/Messiah were only for Israel, what about the rest of the world? Was there any good news for Greeks? Phoenicians? Ethiopians? Britons? Gauls? Celts? Romans? Is there any good news for us?

Jesus tries to help them understand that, as the Messiah, He will defeat the real enemy – the power of sin (selfishness, pride, dishonesty, violence, greed, lust, anger) – once and for all. He will die the death we all deserve. Then He will rise again. That is great news for all nations, not just Israel.

But Peter doesn't get it. He is still expecting Jesus to morph into a great soldier-general. Jesus' rebuke of Peter is the bluntest and sternest in Scripture – "*Get behind me, Satan.*" Ouch. If we think politicians, armies, or weapons are going to solve the problems of our world, we are as foolish as Peter. Political power is not the answer. Armies cannot create Eden on earth. The one with the most guns and biggest bombs doesn't win. They never have. They never will.

The issue back then was human sinfulness. The issue now is human sinfulness. Only a Saviour who can deal with our selfishness, pride, fear, greed, jealousy, bigotry, lust, and foolishness can help us.

Our call is to be willing to love God with ALL our heart, mind, soul and strength, AND to love our neighbour as ourselves. To live with compassion for ALL people. To live like Jesus and for Jesus – in our families, schools, workplaces, and neighbourhood.

We may not be as wealthy or "successful" as others. But by being the presence of Jesus, by living the love of Jesus, and by embodying the values of Jesus, we can quietly transform our homes and communities in ways so profound that people will see the Jesus' presence and be drawn Him ...

*Your light is the only light I need as I travel through life's mystery,  
Your word the only voice I hear,  
that still small voice that leads me to the place where I should be.  
Your presence is the only company I need as I walk this narrow road.  
Your fellowship the warmth I crave to help me on my way.  
Amen.*

faithandworship.com

### Wednesday, March 3: Mark 9:1-13

How good are you at listening? I was in a meeting recently where, as soon as one person began to speak, one other person immediately began to talk over top of the speaker with their own two-cents worth. They always had a better story. No one got to finish their thought. It was all quite awkward and very annoying. Listening – and really hearing what people have to say – happens so rarely ... It's a learned art.

Pastor/author Eugene Peterson was asked, *"Why do so few people who believe in God bother to know Him?"* He replied, *"The most obvious answer is that we're in a hurry and not used to listening. We're trained to use our minds to get information and complete assignments; but the God revealed to us in Jesus and our Scriptures is infinitely personal and relational. Unless we take the time to be quiet, in a listening way, in the presence of God, we never get to know him. The same question is why so few married couples really know their spouses. People get divorced after 20 years of marriage, and the rejected spouse says, 'I never knew this was coming. I thought everything was fine.' But there was not much listening in those 20 years."*<sup>1</sup>

The Jews in Jesus' day weren't listening, either. They had heard the Old Testament prophecies, but they hadn't really listened. They heard what they wanted to hear. They believed the anticipated the Christ/Messiah would come with military power. The kingdom of God would come violently. Some David-like conqueror-king would drive out the Romans legions. In Mark 9, God gives us two glimpses of the kingdom of God coming with power – but not at all as first-century Jews might have expected.

In today's reading, Jesus is revealed as fully God. God, the Father, affirms, *"This is my Son, whom I love"* (9:7). But Jesus is not a great general. Like Moses and Elijah, He brings God's truth. He does come in real power, but not military power. He will defeat sin, evil, and death – for all peoples – once and for all. He will set everyone free from the stranglehold of sin. He will overcome and destroy death. That is the kingdom of God, come with power – real power. Am I listening? Do I hear what God is saying?

How do we respond? I love the little phrase (in the original, Greek only two words): *"Listen to Him."*

- Listen to Him ... What is Jesus saying to you? Teaching you? How is He correcting you?
- Listen to Him ... How is Jesus challenging you? Encouraging you? Empowering you?
- Listen to Him ... To whom is Jesus sending you? Who can you encourage? Who can you inspire?

*My eternal Savior, you alone are Almighty.  
You are the Lord, the God of all beings, and the God of my fathers.  
You, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob,  
are merciful, compassionate, long-suffering, and rich in mercy.  
To you every heart is opened, and every secret thought is revealed.  
My soul cries out to you; my hope rests confidently in you.  
You have created the world to be a battlefield, where my faith will be tried.  
Yet you have also opened to me, and to all the gate of mercy, and made clear that  
just as the possession of riches is not everlasting and just as beauty will not last;  
strength and power are likewise easily gone.  
Only the fruit of true faith will last:  
the only thing that will last and take us to heaven,  
is the possession of a life of true faith.  
Lord, strengthen my faith.  
Lord, hear my prayers as I battle on.  
You know, too, the prayers I have not spoken, for your Spirit reaches even into my heart,  
and your all-seeing gaze searches my thoughts, Lord.  
Lord, have mercy on me.  
Amen.*

Apostolic Constitutions, 4<sup>th</sup> Century

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.thehighcalling.org/articles/essay/interview-eugene-peterson-why-cant-i-hear-god>



## Thursday, March 4: Mark 9:14-32

"What about people who sincerely set apart time, read the Bible, stay still, and hear nothing?" the interviewer asked author/pastor/professor Eugene Peterson. "They ask themselves whether God's voice is anything more than their own thoughts."

Peterson responded: "We're not good at this. We've had no practice doing it. No wonder we only hear our own thoughts. This is why the church is so insistent that we do this whether anything happens or not. Supported by 2000 years of history, we know that God does commune with us in our listening. But because we're so unused to this way of communion, we don't hear it. So it takes time.

"I would say: Get your Bible and find a place. If you can't do this daily (some people can't because of their life circumstances; mothers with young children are obvious instances), try for at least 20-30 minutes, two or three times a week, or four. Don't make demands on yourself too high. Don't ask questions about, 'How long is this going to take?' Believe that something does happen in that silence – usually through Scripture, but not always – in prayerful, attentive listening, knowing that you're in the presence of God. I ask for a commitment of six months; don't come back in three weeks and say nothing's happened.

"I've never had anyone who's done this at least six months who came back to me and said, 'I did it and nothing happened; I'm going on to something else.' Not many who give this a fair test ever say that nothing happens. Also, I also ask them to worship regularly. This is a place where the whole community is gathered and listening and being in the presence of God."

The kingdom of God comes with power: Jesus heals a boy. This is not some great military conquest. But it is much more significant. Jesus demonstrates – unequivocally – that He is more powerful than evil. The kingdom of God, come with power, is about compassion and love. "This kind," says Jesus, "can come out only by prayer." Prayer, the central spiritual practice in our relationship with God, is important if we want to know Jesus and participate in his kingdom. Prayer is one way the kingdom of God comes with power.

So, as Peterson encourages us, persevere in your prayers. Keep at it. The kingdom of God is coming with power. As you pray, the Holy Spirit will work within you, helping you know Jesus more and more. And the Holy Spirit can work through you – with compassion and love – to be and to bring the kingdom of God; to make a difference in a person's life. Ultimately as people of the resurrection, we know that Jesus is capable of doing immeasurably more than we can possibly imagine.

Paul prays for us that, "you will understand the incredible greatness of God's power for us who believe him. This is the same mighty power that raised Christ from the dead and seated him in the place of honor at God's right hand in the heavenly realms. Now he is far above any ruler or authority or power or leader or anything else – not only in this world but also in the world to come" (Ephesians 1:19-21).

*Who do we follow ... a teacher?  
You were a good teacher, full of wisdom,  
a moral compass, guidance for the journey.  
Who do we follow ... a prophet?  
You were indeed a prophet,  
bringing God's word of love, justice, and freedom for the journey.  
Who do we follow ... a friend?  
You were certainly friend to outcast and sinner,  
feeding the weak, lightening the load for the journey.  
Who do we follow ...? All of these. None of these.  
For as this world's Saviour, you are all of these and so much more,  
As you take the very least of us and make the very most of us.  
Who do we follow? Jesus Christ, our Saviour.  
Amen*

faithandworship.com

## Friday, March 5: Mark 9:33-50

*"In your writing and speaking," the interviewer said to Eugene Peterson, "you must have seen moments when a person realizes, 'Yes, I want more and I want God.' What turns on the light for people?"*

Peterson answered, *"Often the motivation is that people are tired of the way they're living. They think there's got to be more than just the motions they're going through and the work they're doing. There's a craving and hunger that they identify with God. There's enough pain or boredom or something to motivate them to do something that the culture's not telling them to do."*

*"I got a letter recently from a friend of 40 years. She had been a parishioner of mine for a long time. Then she was ill, and divorced; and she quit, just gave up. She quit reading the Bible, quit going to church. Six months ago she wrote me a lovely letter that she was sitting with a group of friends and, in her words, 'a rooster crowed' – it all came back and she was a Christian again and aware of the presence of God. Isn't that a wonderful phrase? 'A rooster crowed.' Who knows what went into that statement of hers? Twenty years of unhappiness, pain, suffering, disillusionment ... but still there was the need. She would have said during that time she didn't believe in God. But the rooster crowed."*

In the topsy turvy world of the kingdom of God – *"If anyone wants to be first, he must be the very last, and the servant of all."* How do you feel about that (honestly?) To accept what God is doing in our lives and in the world requires a few "a rooster crowed" moments from all of us.

We tend to think of "the first" in grand spiritual terms: those who pray the most, quote Scripture the most, sacrifice the most. In fact, God simply asks us to use the resources, gifts, and talents He has given us faithfully. If you have the gift of service – use it. The gift of generosity? – use it. The gift of mercy? – use it. The gift of teaching? – use it. The gift of administration? – use it. The gift of prayer? – use it. The gift of encouragement? – use it. Among "the first" are those who:

- Give a cup of water in Jesus' name (Mark 9:41; Matthew 25:35).
- Feed those who are hungry (Matthew 25:35).
- Provide hospitality (Matthew 25:35) (in our CVOID era, simply call people!).
- Give generously to provide for others' needs (Matthew 25:36).
- Have compassion on those who are sick or unable to get out (Matthew 25:36).

To quote the old Nike slogan, *"Just do it!"*

*We can never match your perfection, Lord.  
Try as we might we stumble and fall,  
grasping for that which we feel is unobtainable.  
We are nothing if not consistent in our falling from your grace,  
For you are perfect love and we most certainly are not.  
Perfect love casts out fear and we are fearful –  
fearful of the unknown, fearful of failure,  
Yet you say, "Son, I never ask for the impossible.  
I never set a goal that cannot be reached,  
a mountain that cannot be climbed.  
All I ask is that you come to me as you are at this moment in time  
and accept me as I AM.  
There is no part of you that cannot be made clean, renewed, restored.  
Don't stumble.  
Hold out your hand instead.  
That's not too much to ask is it?"  
Lord, help me love as you love.  
Amen.*

## Saturday, March 6: Mark 10:1-12

In any war, progress is made one step at a time. One trench at a time. In Jesus' role as Christ/Messiah/Anointed One, He is establishing the kingdom of God. The kingdom of God advances one person at a time. One heart at a time. The kingdom of God advances as one new person lets Him rule in their hearts and lives. His kingdom, of course, is not a political state defined by geographical boundaries. It is a kingdom of the heart, made up of people who allow Him to rule, guide, and direct their lives. The kingdom of God advances as Peter names Jesus as the Messiah: "*You are the Christ*" (8:29), as Jesus heals a woman with a hemorrhage, a 12-year old girl, a deaf-mute man, a blind man, a boy with an evil spirit. The kingdom of God advances as person after person, like you and I, responds to God's love in and through Jesus.

One of the most challenging battlegrounds for the kingdom of God is our families. It can be tough to live our faith in the most intimate of relationships. Our nuclear families – especially our marriages, but also our relationships with kids, parents, and siblings – can be hotly contested skirmishes where our selfishness and "hard hearts" (the evil part of us) wrestles with our call to love God, to be servants of one another (Mark 9:35), and to submit to one another (Ephesians 5:21). Sometimes we do right. Sometimes we fail.

Rather than focusing on the negative parts of this passage (divorce), I would like to focus on what Jesus says **positively** about marriage. Jesus says great things about marriage. He goes back to the ideal in Genesis 1-2. He calls us back to wide-eyed excitement at what marriage is meant to be: the inseparable coming together of two persons to become something new and infinitely more wonderful and valuable than the two were separately. Like two chemical elements combining together to become some new, wonderful – inseparable – compound, two people become one new – glorious – inseparable, creation. It's a miracle. That is what marriage, in the kingdom of God, ought to be. Celebrate the wonder.

Remember, God also honours singleness and calls some people – including Jesus – to single lives. This passage in no way suggests that marriage is better than singleness.

Sometimes marriages fail. We lose the battle. In our fallen world, that happens. The good news is that our God is the God of forgiveness and new beginnings. Celebrate that. Move on with new resolve and humble trust in His strength.

- If you are married, give your relationship and love for your spouse to God – ask for God's help. Pray for single friends, that they may find God's strength and blessing in their singleness. Being single is a gift from God, too. We are often not good at affirming singleness.
- If you are single, that's great, too (Jesus was single). God doesn't call everyone to marriage – both singleness and marriage are gifts from God. In the church we can affirm both.
- We can all pray for those who find their marriages difficult or are close to breakdown.

In all our relationships – with friends, parents, kids, relatives, coworkers, spouse – may God help us follow His example of grace, mercy, forgiveness, and unconditional love.

*Be a bright flame before me, O God  
a guiding star above me.  
Be a smooth path below me,  
a kindly shepherd behind me  
today, tonight, and forever.  
Alone with none but you, my God  
I journey on my way;  
what need I fear when you are near,  
O Lord of night and day?  
More secure am I within your hand  
than if a multitude did round me stand.  
Amen.*

Columba (521-597)

## Sunday, March 7: Mark 10:13-31

"What must I do to inherit eternal life"? It's a very important, very practical question ...

The contrast between the call we have to "receive the kingdom of God like a little child" (10:13-16) and the choice the wealthy young man makes is jarring.

Little children – in faith, full of hope, with straightforward love – come to Jesus and allow Him to simply bless them. They bring Him nothing other than loving hearts. He gives them His love, grace, and blessing in return. Little children hold loosely to things like money or status; they know that Jesus, friends, family, and relationships are what matter most.

The young man is searching for meaning. He runs up to Jesus and falls on his knees before Him, asking a deep question about the purpose of life, with implications for now and for eternity. His actions and his question demonstrate that he is not just some academic Pharisee spoiling for an abstract theological debate, he has burning issues that are nagging at his soul: "What must I do to inherit eternal life"?

He tries to bring Jesus his life of obedience to religious rules. Is that enough? Jesus affirms keeping the commandments is great; it's important; it's essential. When we read this passage we may think Jesus belittles the fellow for keeping the commandments, but Jesus doesn't do that. A life of faithful obedience to God's basic principles is a very good thing. But on its own it's not enough. We don't earn our way into God's favour by following the rules. Jesus looks at the heart behind the obedience.

What Jesus looks for is a heart open, loving, and coming with nothing to bargain with. Like the little children, we come to Jesus simply with faith, hope, and love.

Those qualities – faith, hope, and love – are just not there in this man. His faith is in his bank account. His hope is that he can buy happiness, fulfillment, hope, contentment, and salvation. His greatest love is his money. "He went away sad, for he had many possessions," is one of the saddest sentences in Scripture.

Mother Teresa advises: "It is not how much we really 'have' to give but how empty we are – so that we can receive fully in our life." Her point is **not** that we think of ourselves as worthless worms. She urges us to see everything we have – all that we are – as gifts from God. We are not self-made people. We are God-blessed people. We can be generous with the blessings God has given us (it truly is more blessed to give than to receive).

What do I do with today's reading? What do I love, most of all? What is my passion? What fires me up? Is it Jesus? Or is it something else? What am I going to do about it?

*Lord Jesus Christ, King of Kings:  
you have power over life and death.  
You know even that which is not clear, but hard to understand.  
Even what I think and feel is not hidden from you.  
Therefore, cleanse me from my hidden sins,  
for you have seen the wrong I have done.  
You, Lord, my Creator, know how feeble I am:  
in my weakness, strengthen me;  
when I suffer, uphold me;  
in my worry, give me peace.  
I give ALL things over to you.  
I give ALL my life over to you.  
and I will glorify you, my Lord and my God.  
Amen.*

Ephraem of Syria (306-373)