



March 2021
Knowing Jesus
Gospel of Mark 2
Readings, Reflections, Prayers

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Monday, March 8: Mark 10:32-34

Our prayers are adapted from www.sacredspace.ie and *The Ancient Christian Devotional* (Thomas Oden).

One year ago today, Covid-19 was just beginning to make headlines outside China. Northern Italy was just locking down. President Trump said he was "not concerned at all" about the coronavirus. There were less than 20 cases of Covid in all Canada; no one in Canada had yet been hospitalized, let alone died from it. Which of us could have predicted what the next 12 months would look like?

Jesus knows what His future will look like. He is trying to prepare His disciples. On our side of Easter, we know where this going. What do you think the first people to hear these words thought?

Frank Doyle comments, *"In his classic book, The Imitation of Christ, Thomas à Kempis urges the reader to 'enjoy being unknown and regarded as nothing.' What he means is the ability to persist through tedium, to survive without the oxygen of recognition, praise and stroking, to do some good things every day which are seen only by God. Most of us start life as the centre of the universe, being stroked and attended to. Baby's every smile and whimper is responded to and noted. It is an addictive experience, and it is hard to get used to being just one of a family, and later one of a whole class or school, barely noticed.*

"Some people, like pop stars and attention-seekers, never recover from the addiction, never climb out of those infantile lowlands. They find it impossible to survive without notice and applause, and spend their energies seeking it. They never fit themselves for the higher ground where the oxygen of appreciation is thinner, and they have to survive, as à Kempis says, unknown and hardly noticed. For all but his last three years, Jesus was happy to live a hidden life. That is where most of the good in this world is accomplished, by parents, care-givers, and all who keep going through the daily offering of their unregarded service."

There is an old expression, *"The hand that rocks the cradle rules the world."* Sometimes those who serve the most – like the Mom caring for her infant – have the most powerful influence. It's not the superstars who shape the world. It's the faithful ones. It's the selfless ones. It's the servants who are the real masters.

What is Jesus saying to you? How is He encouraging you? How is He challenging you?

*Lord, our God, great, eternal, wonderful in glory,
who keeps covenant with those who love you;
who are the life of all, the help of those who flee to you, the hope of those who cry to you;
cleanse us from our sins, secret and open, and from every thought displeasing to you.
Cleanse our bodies and souls, our hearts and consciences, that with a pure heart and soul,
with perfect love and hope, we may venture confidently and fearlessly to live for you.
May the power of God preserve us.
May the wisdom of God instruct us, and the way of God direct us.
May the hand of God protect us,
and the host of God guard us against the temptations of the world.
Amen*

Basil (330-379) and Patrick (389-461)

Tuesday, March 9: Mark 10:35-45

Actor Jim Carrey once remarked, *"I think everybody should get rich and famous and do everything they ever dreamed of so they can see that it's not the answer."*

Power. Prestige. Glory. When Jesus asks James and John, *"What do you want me to do for you?"* they basically want to be rich and famous and do everything they ever dreamed of – for all eternity.

James and John still think Jesus is coming to drive out the Romans, to re-establish the geographic kingdom of Israel, and to replace Herod as the political king of Israel. Of course, then Jesus will need a Prime

Minister and Deputy Prime Minister – who better than James and John who have been with Him from the beginning? Besides, they have been loyal followers and deserve to be rewarded ...

How does Jesus respond? For Jesus, being rich and famous is clearly not the answer ...

The Kingdom of God is not going to look like the kingdom of Herod or the Roman Empire. It will be a kingdom of the heart. Jesus – the king – is going to be completely different than Herod or Caesar ...

- The cup from which He will drink is not some-jewel encrusted golden chalice filled with the best wine. Jesus will take the cup of God's wrath spoken of by Jeremiah the prophet ([Jeremiah 25:15-38](#)). It will take the physical form of a rag soaked in vinegar ([Mark 15:36](#)).
- The baptism He will be baptized with will not be an anointing with exotic perfumes as He is crowned on some earthly throne – it will be His own brutal physical execution, burial, and resurrection (a picture Paul develops in [Romans 6:3-11](#)).

James and John don't "get it." Of course, they think, they can drink the same Burgundy or Merlot Jesus drinks. They think they could get baptized in the same Jordan River that Jesus had been baptized in. Jesus sighs, almost in despair. Then Jesus gives them a somber warning: James and John will drink the (metaphoric) cup He drinks – they will suffer for their faith – and they will be (metaphorically) baptized as He is – James will be executed, and, though John will die a natural death, he will have a hard life.

Ultimately when Jesus is "enthroned" – on the cross – there are men on his right and left. They are not places of honour. They are not His faithful disciples. They are two despised criminals, hanging in disgrace.

Jesus is radically redefining what is important in life. The greatest of all are not those with the most wealth or the grandest titles. Those with most prestige are not those who gain the most. Those who receive true glory are not those who accomplish the most. The greatest are those who serve the most. The greatest are those who give the most. The greatest are those who help the most other people become who God created them to be ... Jesus turns the power structures of His world inside out.

"Whoever wants to be a leader among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first among you must be the slave of everyone else." How do I respond to Jesus' comment?

*Lord Jesus, think on me.
Never let me go astray;
Though darkness and perplexity, You point the heavenly way.
Lord Jesus, think on me, that when the flood is past,
I may Your eternal brightness see, and share Your joy at last.
Let me therefore not cling to fleeting things, which slip away,
but to those which are enduring and immovable.
May I hold to these through the grace and loving-kindness of my Lord, Jesus Christ,
Through whom be glory to the father and the Holy Spirit, forever and ever.
Amen*

Synesius of Cyrene (370-414) and Chrysostom (344-407)

Wednesday, March 10: Mark 10:46-52

Way back when our kids were still in school, some days they would come home after class and hang out in the kitchen as supper was being prepared. The question we would always ask is, *"How was your day?"* The answer was almost always, *"Fine"* or *"Ok."* But we knew our kids pretty well. Some days that was true – they were fine – we left it there. Other days, whether it was an edge to their voice or something about their body language, we knew things were not fine. So, as parents, in round about ways, we probed further. Gradually we teased out what was upsetting them.

As parents you try to master the subtle art of leading your child to put words to what they are feeling, and then to trace the contributing factors that led them to this state – a problem in school, a quarrel with a friend, or a worry about an exam. Only when you get to the real issue can you deal with it.

And, as parents, you struggle to appreciate that you cannot solve your child's problems for them – and they don't want you to. But it helps just being able to talk about, put words to it, and get it out in the open.

Jesus asks the blind man, "*What do you want me to do for you?*" – the same question He had asked James and John just a little while earlier (How did they answer? [Mark 10:37](#)). How does the blind man respond?

He wants to see. At one level it's a practical, physical reality – he will have a much better life if he is not blind. At another level it's a profound spiritual reality – he wants to see Jesus ... not just the physical person of Jesus, but the deep identity of Jesus, the Son of David (a royal title, straight out of the Old Testament, reserved for the Messiah). He wants to see Jesus, His Messiah, Saviour, Deliverer, and King ...

Jesus asks us today, "*What do you want me to do for you?*" Yes, He does care about our physical needs. But He's asking us to think about the real, underlying issues in our lives: "*What's going on inside you?*" "*What are your spiritual needs?*" He may want us to see that what we really need is to see the world – and our own lives – with new eyes, through His eyes. He is inviting us to talk about it. Put words to it. Get it out in the open. Then, in partnership with His Spirit, we can begin to work things through.

When we pray, we can be honest – with ourselves and with God. We can be aware of what we are feeling. We can be transparent about our joys and sorrows, gratitudes and griefs, thanksgivings and pains. It is only when we can genuinely share what is really going on inside us – when we become aware of what we are actually feeling, thinking, experiencing, and needing – that we can grow with Jesus.

God, more than any human parent, knows us inside out already. He wants **us** to know what is going inside ourselves, too. Then we can experience the real us connecting with the real God. Then we can move forward. Except for once in a blue moon, God does not miraculously solve our problems for us. He will, however, help us talk them through, pray them through, think them through, plan them through, and work them through. He works with us to help us grow, change, and move forward ...

*God is with me, but more,
God is within me, giving me existence.
Let me dwell for a moment on God's life-giving presence
in my body, my mind, my heart and in the whole of my life.
What most often trips me up is my tendency to be caught up expectations
about what I 'ought' or 'should' be.
My usual automatic responses tie me down and inhibit me from exploring new areas of growth.
I ask and pray for a greater sense of inner freedom,
that I might reach the fresh and challenging possibilities that God wishes me to realize.
I thank you, God that I have been able to spend a few moments with you.
And I thank you for the insights you have given me from your word.
Amen.*

Thursday, March 11: Mark 11:1-11

This reading starts in Jericho, the lowest city on earth, 300 meters below sea level ([Mark 10:46](#)). It ends, 30 kilometres away, in Jerusalem, 1000 meters above sea level. In 30 kilometres you would trudge up an elevation gain of over a 1000 metres. It's quite a climb. In Jesus' day the track had a soft, flaky, limestone surface that eroded easily; it was often in rough shape.

The road goes through hot, dry, dusty desert for most of the journey. At the very end, at the top, on the Mount of Olives, everything changes. Lush vegetation begins. Jerusalem comes into view. Although modest by today's standards (even Roman standards), 1st Century Jerusalem was a glittering jewel. To

Jewish people of the day it was the most beautiful, breathtaking city in the world. This was the city where God chose to dwell: they believed this to be the one (and only) place on earth He was actually present.

Several times a year people from all over Israel would come up to Jerusalem for religious festivals – amazing celebrations of the great stories of God’s salvation and deliverance, stories of freedom and hope. The greatest of all feasts was Passover, when they remembered how God rescued them from slavery in Egypt and brought them into freedom in the Promised Land. They would make offerings. Through those sacrifices their sins were forgiven. There would singing, dancing, praying, feasting, drinking, visiting.

In the midst of all of this nationalistic pride and religious fervour, Jesus comes into the city. He deliberately calls on prophetic images of the long awaited, much anticipated Messiah: He chooses to arrive on a colt, fulfilling a prophecy in Zechariah 9:9 – *"Rejoice, O people of Zion. Shout in triumph, O people of Jerusalem. Look, your king is coming to you. He is righteous and victorious, yet he is humble, riding on a donkey – riding on a donkey's colt."* The pilgrims and people of Jerusalem had heard enough buzz about Jesus that they know exactly what He is saying as He fulfills all the ancient prophecies. He is Messiah.

In turn, the crowd calls out with words and phrases that echo the promises of the Messiah, too (see [1 Maccabees 13:51](#) and [2 Maccabees 10:1-9](#) – passages from other ancient texts that speak of how Judah Maccabeus, a great military leader and deliverer from recent Jewish history, had been welcomed with a similar triumphant welcome [he died in 160 BC]).

Shouting words like *"Blessings on the one who comes in the name of the Lord. Blessings on the coming Kingdom of our ancestor David."* is a revolutionary political act – recalling Israel’s deliverance from enemies. It is an act of treason against Herod and Rome. People are declaring that Jesus, as David’s heir, is the true, rightful King of Israel. They cast their coats on the ground before him – in a culture where you probably only owned one coat, you would only do this for someone really special – like royalty.

This is an interesting reading to think about in terms of our relationship with Jesus. Do I reflect on who Jesus really is? Do I seriously think about the fact that He is fully God? He is fully human? Would I risk my life for Him (the punishment for treason was death)? Would I give the equivalent of my one and only coat to praise and honour Him?

Or, have I trivialized Jesus? If He were to ask, *"What do you want me to do for you?"* would I mumble something about a new car, a promotion, better hair, or a quicker healing of my sore finger? Would I dare to ask, *"Lord, what I want is that your Kingdom come (everywhere. – you can start with me), Your will be done on earth (start in my life) as it is in heaven ..."*? Would I dare pray a BIG prayer like that?

If I were in that crowd, how would I have responded to Jesus? How do I respond to Jesus – today?

*"Be still and know that I am God."
Lord, Your words lead me to the calmness of Your Presence.
Everything has the potential to draw forth from me a fuller love and life.
Yet my desires are often fixed, caught, on illusions of fulfillment.
I ask that God may orchestrate my desires in a vibrant loving melody.
I exist in a web of relationships - links to nature, people, God.
I trace out these links, giving thanks for the life that flows through them.
Some links are twisted or broken:
I may feel regret, anger, disappointment.
I pray for the gift of acceptance and forgiveness.
I struggle with sin in my life. I can be honest about that.
I can name specific things with which I wrestle.
I pray for the gift of wisdom – to know right from wrong.
I pray for the gift of strength to resist temptation.
I celebrate the gift of forgiveness through faith in Jesus.
Amen.*

Friday, March 12: Mark 11:12-14 and 20-25

In J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, a white tree in the palace court represents the Kingdom of Gondor. But the tree is dead, symbolizing the fallen glory of the kingdom. Then a new king comes. With the return of the true king, a sapling is replanted. The new, living tree represents the rebirth of Gondor, in all its glory.

In Mark 11, this fig-tree incident brackets Jesus upsetting the moneychangers' carts in the Temple (tomorrow's reading). Jesus does not have any particular issue with this specific tree; like the white tree of Gondor, He uses it as a metaphor for the spiritual life of the Jewish nation in His time. On the outside, from a distance, the tree looks great: but on closer inspection it has no figs, no fruit. Jesus does not "curse" the tree – He simply affirms what is already true: it isn't doing anyone any good. Like the dead tree in Gondor. This fig tree is a sad, withered tree that provides life and sustenance to no one.

That barren fig tree is a metaphor for the Temple. The Temple was the heartbeat of Jewish spirituality and religion. As Jesus had approached Jerusalem from the Mount of Olives yesterday, the Temple glistened in the evening light like a gorgeous star shining on the mountaintop. From a distance, the Temple and the religion of the 1st Century Jews looked wonderful. But on closer inspection, it was dead. The ritualized, commandment-choked religion of the scribes and Pharisees – like the gorgeous Temple – is lifeless. There is no fruit. There is no life. It is a withered, dead tree giving life to no one.

The Temple and the religion it symbolized was characterized by rules, rituals, and obedience. But, Jesus is showing us, all the rule-keeping in the world can't substitute for the life-giving nourishment of a genuine relationship with God, a relationship that comes from the heart. The Temple and rule-keeping wasn't doing anyone any good. The "fruit" of the Temple-religion were sad, barren, dead lives that blessed no one.

But there is good news. With faith in God anything is possible. Mountains can move. Barren fig trees can bear fruit. Pharisees and stodgy old religion can come alive. We can be renewed by God's Spirit. We can come alive. Our lives can bear fruit ... if we allow Jesus and His Spirit to transform us.

Are you feeling empty? Withered? Dead? Pray. *"More things are wrought by prayer than this world dreams of"* (Tennyson). Pray for our church. *"The Holy Spirit produces this kind of fruit in our lives: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control"* (Galatians 5:22-23).

Pray that we would have a passion to bear fruit in our community – and around the world. Pray that we may be inspired to find ways to bless our neighbours, to share with them the bread of life – Jesus. And then put hands and feet to that prayer by reaching out in love and compassion to the people closest to us ...

*I need to close out the noise, to rise above the noise;
the noise that interrupts, that separates, the noise that isolates.
I need to listen to God again.
I remind myself that, as I sit here now, God is gazing on me
with love and holding me in being.
I pause for a moment and think of this.
I ask how I am within myself today?
Am I particularly tired, stressed, or off-form?
If any of these characteristics apply, can I let go of the concerns that disturb me?
In this expectant state of mind, help me listen to what God is saying to me.
I believe that the Holy Spirit is present and can reveal what the passage has to say to me.
Lord, speak to my heart.
Amen.*

Saturday, March 13: Mark 11:15-19 (Time Change tonight ... set your clock ahead an hour ☺)

An author writes of a visit to a great European cathedral: *"Once I saw a cathedral weep. Yes, I am serious; once I saw a great church weep. Tears slipped from the tower lancets and splashed on the lead roofs. I*

heard a sigh from the old stone as though the whole universe groaned. But the church was full. Indeed, five tour busses stood outside, plus a packed lot of private cars. Everywhere cameras clicked, tourists marvelled at the monuments, swished along on their guided parade.

"Despite the overflow of people, the cathedral stood empty and alone. And it wept. And God in heaven – whom they all missed – wept. And the One who hung in pain for each one – whom they all missed – wept. And the Spirit who wished to fill everyone – whom they all missed – wept. But the people snapped their cameras, scoped their videos, scurried behind their tour guides, and couldn't understand why they weren't fulfilled at all ..."

The Temple in Jerusalem symbolized the heart and soul of the Jewish religion – of the Jewish people – in Jesus' day. The Temple symbolized their national pride and identity. But what did their souls look like? Their hearts were barren and without fruit (like the fig tree): there is no genuine prayer, worship, spiritual education, godly conversation, or self-giving service and compassion here ... just back room business. Like the cathedral in the quote above, the Temple was full of people – but it was dead. People missed God.

What would symbolize the heart and soul of Canada today? The Houses of Parliament? The Scotiabank Arena? Bay Street? Tim Horton's? I doubt we would think of any place of prayer, worship, spiritual education, godly conversation, or service and compassion as epitomizing the heart of Canada. At least we have the integrity not to claim a cathedral or religious temple as the soul of our country.

Spiritual renewal never comes top down from the "Temples" of the world. Renewal and spiritual passion always come up from the grassroots. Real life comes as individual people – you and I – genuinely welcome God into our lives, get to know Him, and choose to live for Him. The kingdom of God comes, and His will is done, as individual people welcome Him and follow Him as Lord of their lives – one heart, one life at a time.

Our community, country, and world will only be renewed as each of us allows the Spirit of God to change us. You cannot legislate authentic faith. Genuine spirituality is a matter of the heart – your heart and my heart.

Do pray for our world. Do pray for our country. Do pray for our city. But don't expect some government or power-that-be to somehow "make" us Christian. We need to look within ourselves. We need to ask God to deal with the rough edges in our own lives and help us to be more and more like Jesus. We need to be the people of God, living our faith in our own homes, schools, workplaces, neighbourhoods, and church. That is how the Kingdom of God really comes and the will of God is really done on earth as it is in heaven ...

Pray that we might be "fruitful" people. Pray for our church. Pray for genuine faith to transform our hearts, minds, and lives to be more like Jesus. Let's see if barren fig trees can bear unexpected fruit.

*O Lord, holy and true, who opens doors which none can shut;
as you have set before your church an open door into the world,
strengthen us to boldly enter into the world and to declare your Name.
May those who oppose you come to worship you and know you love your church and the world.
Grant us patience and strength to keep your Word with diligence and integrity,
and keep us from the hour of trial which is coming upon the whole world.
Encourage all Christians in every land to hold fast to the faith which you have given them,
that they may stand before you as pillars in the temple of God and bear your name, O Christ our God.
Father, we give into your care all who are joined to us by natural ties and bonds of love:
the children dear to our hearts, our parents and friends,
our church family, and all who for our sakes daily deny themselves.
May all whom we love, having the Holy Spirit as their helper,
be at peace and have unity and love amongst themselves.
Grant us, O Lord, sufficient for the needs of this present life,
and the assurance of eternal life for those who love you.
Amen*

Columba (521-597)

Sunday, March 14: Mark 11:27-33 (Time change last night - spring forward)

Author J.K. Rowling, speaking at Harvard University, reflected on the mess she made of her life in her early adulthood. *"Failure,"* she said, *"meant a stripping away of the inessential. I stopped pretending to myself that I was anything other than what I was, and began to direct all my energy into finishing the only work that mattered to me. Had I really succeeded at anything else, I might never have found the determination to succeed in the one arena I believed I truly belonged. I was set free, because my greatest fear had already been realised, and I was still alive, and I still had a daughter whom I adored, and I had an old typewriter and a big idea. And so rock bottom became the solid foundation on which I rebuilt my life.*

"Failure gave me an inner security that I had never attained by passing examinations. Failure taught me things about myself that I could have learned no other way. I discovered that I had a strong will, and more discipline than I had suspected; I also found out that I had friends whose value was truly above rubies. The knowledge that you have emerged wiser and stronger from setbacks means that you are, ever after, secure in your ability to survive. You will never truly know yourself, or the strength of your relationships, until both have been tested by adversity. Such knowledge is a true gift, for all that it is painfully won, and it has been worth more to me than any qualification I ever earned."

Jesus is back in the temple courts: after the previous day's theatrics, the priests and teachers of the law are not pleased to see Him. He is overturning their orderly – if spiritually starved – little world. In their framework, where your relationship with God is defined by rule-keeping and ritual, the key issue is, *"Who gave you permission?" "By whose authority?"* They are appealing to the law.

Jesus turns the tables (not literally like yesterday, but figuratively), asking them a question about John's baptism. Remember John's baptism ([Mark 1:1-8](#))? People didn't come to be baptized by John because Rabbi So-and-So said you had to do it in a certain way on a certain day. People came to John because he spoke to their deep spiritual yearning. They knew they felt short of God's will for them. They knew they needed the authentic touch of God's Spirit. They longed for a genuine relationship with God. John's baptism spoke to these people who yearned to experience real forgiveness, who craved a personal relationship with God, who were searching for purpose, who needed genuine hope.

But the Pharisees completely missed all that. They didn't want to deal with the truth of who John was or was not. Or who Jesus is. They are stuck on the Law. The Law, and only the Law, matters.

It's right and good to care about things that really matter. But Jesus wants us to know that the Law – while important – isn't what matters most. What matters most is Jesus. What matters most is recognizing that, without Jesus, we hit rock bottom. What matters most is coming through adversity and finding hope, peace, love, and joy in Jesus. Like John's baptism, what matters most are hearts and lives changed by authentically knowing God. We can emerge wiser and stronger from setbacks when we allow them to draw us closer to the people we love – and, most of all, closer to the Saviour who loves us, always, and unconditionally.

*Lord, we would grow with you,
New shoots reaching out, hands stretched upward,
Like leaves newly formed, Soaking up your light and warmth.
Lord, we would grow with you
Lord, we would grow with you,
In sunshine and rain, in darkness and light,
In cold days and summer days, from Springtime to Winter.
Lord, we would grow with you
Lord, we would grow with you,
And bring forth fruit that is pleasing to you,
Fed by your living water, giving sustenance to others.
Lord, we would grow with you.
Amen*

Monday, March 15: Mark 12:1-17

In 46 days, your income tax is due (April 30). How are you feeling about that? Let's be honest, most of us are not really excited about paying tax. And yet ...

- I **REALLY** appreciate and enjoy the services our taxes provide (from health care to roads, from national security to garbage collection, from education to emergency services). When I really think about the blessings I enjoy as a Canadian, I think I get pretty good value for the taxes I pay (oh, I can grumble and complain, but I need to get over it and be grateful for my blessings).
- I also reflect on the fact that I earn enough to have to pay taxes. I'm thankful that I have enough income that I'm not below the minimum cutoff point. If I didn't pay any tax it would mean that my income were considerably lower than it is ...

Israelites in Jesus' day didn't like paying taxes either. Their grumpiness was better founded than mine. Most of the tax revenue from Israel went directly to Rome (though some went to fund the Roman legions occupying their country – that was galling). Taxes did not go to local, regional, or national services. Also individual tax collectors could add "service fees," as exorbitant as they wanted, cruelly gouging people.

One issue for Jews was that, in their opinion, the Roman coins used to pay taxes were sacrilegious. At the time of Jesus, Tiberius was the Roman emperor. On the front of his coins was the inscription "*Tiberius, Caesar, Son of the Divine Augustus.*" The back has the inscription, "*High Priest.*" Tiberius' father, Octavian, called himself "*Augustus*" (literally meaning "*great*"/"*venerable*"/"*worthy of worship*"). Augustus had been declared a god by the Roman Senate. As well as being "High Priest" of the Roman world, Tiberius claimed to be the "*Son of God.*" Do you see how loaded this discussion about paying taxes to Caesar is? Caesar claims to be "*God*"/the "*Son of God.*" Do you pay taxes (financially support) a cult of the Roman emperor? With coins with Caesar's claim to be God clearly stamped on them? Is that not blasphemy?

How does Jesus answer? What is He saying? What is the relevance today?

Jesus is not overly concerned about the words on the coins: they are just part of the material world. We live in it. We function in it. But it is not the be-all and end-all to get all bent out of shape about. The more important thing – the **most** important thing – is our relationship with God. In Matthew's version of the same event, Jesus says, "*Give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar (money) and give to God what belongs to God (worship)*" (Matthew 22:15).

What belongs to God? Everything. "*Love the Lord your God with ...? All your heart, all your soul, all your mind, and all your strength*" ("strength" includes our physical assets including our finances and possessions). Yes, we pay our taxes (in our society we are thankful for the income to do so and the services they provide).

But, even more importantly, we give the FIRST part of our lives – heart, soul, mind, body, and blessings – to God ... How do I feel about that? How do I do that? What does that mean for me today?

*I want to set aside time to focus my life - both temporal and spiritual.
I try to imagine Jesus is sitting beside me, and I talk over with Him what is going on.
I attempt to understand that in a myriad of ways, Jesus,
you enter the everyday circumstances of my existence.
But life is fast and full. Often, pressures and commitments drown out the little voice at my core.
I know that. And I want to do something about it.
For now, I try to become still and open to what Your Spirit might want to tell me.
At any time of the day or night I can call on You.
You are always waiting, listening for my call. What a wonderful blessing.
No phone needed, no e-mails, just a whisper.
I try to let go of concerns and worries that may be dragging me down.
I place any concerns I have in God's hands.
Amen*

Tuesday, March 16: Mark 12:18-27

The Sadducees were Jews who did not believe in a resurrection/heaven. They ask Jesus a question they are sure will stump Him. Their hypothetical problem was not hypothetical at all – the Jewish law of levirate marriage required just such a progression: if a man died, his brother must marry the dead brother's widow and, hopefully, have children ([Deuteronomy 25:5](#)). The children would be treated as the children of the oldest brother. Marriage, for the Sadducees, was not about love, but about legal responsibilities – ensuring an heir to keep property in the family. How could there be a resurrection then? If there were a heaven this woman would have seven husbands. "*Moses wrote*" (Mark 12:19) this law – if Jesus really believed the Bible, how could He believe in resurrection? If Jesus read the Bible literally, He had a problem.

(We often get sidetracked by the question, "*What does Jesus mean when He says that those who are resurrected will neither marry nor be given in marriage?*" This gets many happily married people nervous. Can heaven really be all that good? Jesus is **NOT** answering that question here.)

Jesus **IS** answering the Sadducees' question about **whether or not there is a resurrection at all**. The Sadducees (not Jesus) present heaven as a continuation of life as we know it: you get married; you have children to inherit your property, you continue the same kind of life in heaven ... etc. **Jesus** emphasizes heaven is completely different from life as we know it now – after all there is no longer any death, pain, suffering, and so forth. So, the purpose for marriage – **as the Sadducees understood it** (to have children to inherit property and continue your family line) – was no longer relevant. Their argument falls apart because they do not understand what heaven is like – it's different than this life (we don't *need* to have children to continue the family line). Jesus quotes the Bible to prove His point (12:26-27).

The Sadducees took one bit of the Bible (about levirate marriage) and tried to make a theology of heaven/resurrection from it. They were yanking a verse about **earthly marriage** and inheritance out of context and building a doctrine about **heaven and eternity** from it. Even many of the teachers of the law, who were usually opposed to Jesus, were pleased with His answer (12:28). There is a resurrection.

There is so much about resurrection, heaven, and eternal life (and marriage!) we don't know. Bruce Barton writes, "*Jesus was not teaching that people will not recognize their spouses in heaven, thereby dissolving the eternal aspect of marriage ... Little can be learned about sex and marriage in heaven from this one statement by Jesus. His point was simply that people must not think of the next life as an extension of life as they now know it. Relationships in this life are limited by time, death, and sin; in the new heaven and new earth they will be different from here and now.*"

Theologian Millard Erickson adds, "*The experiences of heaven will far surpass anything experienced here.*" It will all be a huge surprise – but a surprise far better than we can even begin to imagine or comprehend.

*Lord, I draw near to you, acknowledging my unworthiness,
and I ask that all the mistakes and sins of my past
may be freely pardoned and entirely done away
through the precious blood of your dear Son, Jesus Christ, my Lord.
Rouse me, O Lord, from the sleep of apathy and from tossing to and fro in my thoughts,
that I may no longer live as in a troubled dream
but be awake and resolved to finish the work you have given me to do.
By your humble birth, root out of my heart all pride and haughtiness,
that humble ways may content me,
so that I may serve You in humility.
May I have compassion for those who labor and are heavy laden.
Teach me to be concerned for others and to bear other's burdens.
By your holy and most bitter anguish on the cross,
help me to worship you, and love you, and follow you, O Christ.
Amen*

Brigid (460-528)

Wednesday, March 17: Mark 12:28-34

Don't you appreciate a good, honest question? Don't you appreciate someone who really wants a good, honest answer? Isn't it great when a person is willing to listen? Is open to learning? Is open to change?

Many people who come to Jesus have an agenda. They want to trick Him. They want to prove Him wrong. They don't want to listen. They don't want to change. Unlike other teachers of the law, this man seems to be genuinely seeking wisdom, not an argument. He asks a BIG question: *"Of all the commandments (100's of them) which is most important?"* Imagine you DON'T know Jesus' answer ... what would say?

- Would you say something about having to pray a prayer, confess your sins, repent, and accept Jesus as your Saviour? Does Jesus say that? (Interesting exercise: does Jesus EVER say that? Hmmm ... What does Jesus say? How do we process that?)
- Would you say something about obeying the Ten Commandments? Does Jesus say that?
- Would you say something about John 3:16? Does Jesus say that?

From all the 419,687 Hebrew words in the Old Testament, Jesus picks out one sentence from Deuteronomy and one from Leviticus to give us a basic guide to life in step with God's Spirit.

The scribe seems to relish Jesus' answer. He doesn't argue. Jesus' simple – yet profound – wisdom satisfies his longing. In response, the man applauds Jesus' answer. Jesus praises the seeker with a wonderful compliment: *"You are not far from the kingdom of God."*

Spend some time mulling over Jesus' words in Mark 12:29-31. Jesus' emphasizes these are pretty important principles – in fact they are MOST important commands of all ...

What is He saying to you, today? How is Jesus challenging you? Jesus says to you, *"You are not far from the kingdom of God ..."*

*"Come to me all you who are burdened, and I will give you rest."
Here I am, Lord. I come to seek your presence.
I long for your healing power.
Lord grant me the grace to have freedom in your Spirit.
Cleanse my heart and soul so I may live joyously in Your love.
Where do I sense hope, encouragement, and growth areas in my life?
By looking back over the last few months,
I may be able to see which activities and occasions have produced rich fruit.
If I do notice such areas, I will determine to give those areas both time and space in the future.
Am I consoled, troubled, left cold?
What is stirring in me as I pray?
I imagine Jesus himself standing or sitting at my side and share my feelings with him.
Thank You that You delight to hear me prayers – and You love me.
Amen*

Thursday, March 18: Mark 12:35-40

Some questions are mildly interesting but not really important to daily life: one geography student recently asked me, *"If something is at absolute zero (-273.15°C) is it still visible? Since radiant energy I'm assuming includes reflected light. So then can something at absolute zero exist only in absolute darkness?"* – I, in turn, asked my kids ... It's an interesting question, but not really that important to everyday life.

Other questions really are important: like *"Who is Jesus?"* If Jesus is just another teacher, then His words are mildly interesting but just one source of potential truth among many. But if Jesus really is God Himself, *"the Christ"* (Greek for *the Messiah* (Hebrew), the *Anointed One* (English)), then His words carry a LOT more authority – absolute authority. In terms Jewish scholars can understand, Jesus points back to their Scripture

to deal with the fact He **MUST BE** the Messiah. Thus, people **MUST** take His words very, very seriously. Jesus' words are truth – God's truth. The scribes were speechless. The crowd loved it.

WHO we listen to matters. Some people have lots to say, but we're not sure we believe any of it. They have a track record of lies. Their character is questionable, to say the least. Other people we know are people of integrity. They are as honest as the day is long. And when they speak, we really listen.

Jesus invites people to consider the character of the two sources of truth in their lives:

- On the one hand, they can listen to the teachers of the law. Do their lives support their claim to the spokesmen of God? Do they model the character of God? No ... they have shown themselves to be heartless, jealous, self-absorbed, conniving, Scripture-twisting legalists.
- On the other hand, they can listen to Jesus. Does His life support His claim to be the Son of God, the Messiah? Does He model the character of God? Absolutely. He models love, compassion, mercy, grace, wisdom. From what we see of Jesus in Mark, how else does Jesus reveal God to us?

If Jesus is God, **then** what do we do with His teaching? It's God's truth. Which of His teachings do you love? Which do you struggle with? Which do you try to ignore? What might Jesus be saying to you, today?

*You, O Lord, who commands us to ask, grant that we may receive.
You have put us on a journey, seeking; let us rejoice in finding you.
You have bidden us to knock;
we pray you open the door of your heart to us.
Please direct and govern all our thoughts and actions,
that for the future we may see you and entirely devote ourselves to obeying you.
Accept us, we pray, and draw us to yourself,
that we, who are already your own as your creatures, your precious creations,
may always be yours by obedience and love.
O Lord, who lives and reigns forever and ever,
fill our souls, guide our hearts, and direct our steps.
Amen*

Augustine (354-430)

Friday, March 19: Mark 12:38-44

[Sutton Hoo](#) is an amazing Anglo-Saxon burial site in England, dating from the 6-7th Centuries. Archaeologists uncovered a huge buried longboat, elaborate weapons, gorgeous jewelry, and other precious treasures. But who was buried there? He was obviously a powerful, wealthy warlord – possibly even a king. But no one knows who he was. All that wealth, and he's forgotten. One thing is certain: he couldn't take it with him. His treasures lay buried in a field for centuries. Now it all languishes in the British Museum.

In a long discourse on life, priorities, faith, and money, Jesus says, "*Don't store up treasures here on earth, where moths eat them and rust destroys them, and where thieves break in and steal. Store your treasures in heaven, where moths and rust cannot destroy, and thieves do not break in and steal. Wherever your treasure is, there the desires of your heart will also be*" (Matthew 6:19-21). Now, as Jesus teaches and observes the actions of both wealthy and poor people, His words are particularly poignant.

As we read Mark 12:38-44,

- What does this passage say about the priorities of the teachers of the law?
- About the priorities of the rich people (who may also have been the same teachers of the law)?
- What does this passage say about the priorities of the widow?

Only a bit earlier in this chapter, Jesus said, "*The most important commandment is this: 'Listen, O Israel. The Lord our God is the one and only Lord. And you must love the Lord your God with all your heart, all*

your soul, all your mind, and all your strength.’ The second is equally important: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ No other commandment is greater than these” (Mark 12:29-31).

How does this connect with the story of the rich people’s offerings and the widow’s offering?

In the film, *Babette’s Feast*, an old pastor comments, *“The only things we take with us from our life on earth are those which we have given away. It is a more blessed thing to give than to receive, and it brings greater happiness.”*

What might God be saying to me?

*How do I find myself today?
Where am I with God?
Where am I with others?
Do I have something to be grateful for?
Then I give thanks.
Is there something I am sorry for?
Then I ask forgiveness.
Dear Jesus, today I call on you in a special way.
Usually I come asking for favours.
Today I’d like just to be in Your presence.
Let my heart respond to Your Love.
Help me Lord to be more conscious of your presence.
Teach me to recognize your presence in others.
Fill my heart with gratitude for the times Your love has been shown to me through the care of others.
Amen*

Saturday, March 20: Mark 13:1-13

Every year end-of-the-world movies are among the highest grossing films. People in general – not just Christians – are fascinated by apocalyptic speculation ... And so people read passages like Mark 13 (and parallels in Luke and Matthew, the book of Revelation, and select Old Testament texts) and get all excited.

As you read through Mark 13:5-13, it sure sounds eerily contemporary, doesn’t it.? This must be being fulfilled right now, today. It’s all about us. Or is it? (You, too, could make a fortune online or on cable if you could link the symbolism of Mark 13 with the news of March 20, 2021 ...)

Read 13:1-3 carefully. What is the context? When Jesus said these words, the Jews believed the [Temple](#) in Jerusalem was the most glorious building in the world. It has the largest and most impressive creation most Israelites had ever seen. Compared to the airy columns of Greek and Roman architecture, the fortress-like Jewish Temple looked rock solid. It would last forever. It was eternal. Or was it?

*Jesus’ words in Mark 13 are specifically about the Jewish Temple. If we can get over the fact that we are **not** the most important people and **not** the most important generation of all time (and therefore **not** the primary target audience for Mark 13), history records that Jesus’ words all came true within the lifetimes of most of those who heard Him speak. They would live these prophecies in their lifetimes.*

Within 40 years of Jesus’ words, there will be civil war in the Roman Empire, a war for independence in Judea – and bloody suppression by the Roman army. There will be major earthquakes in the Middle East and Asia Minor (Turkey). After Jesus’ resurrection and the birth of the early church – which will spread the good news to all known nations of the day – Christians will be brutally persecuted throughout the known world, including genocidal pogroms by several emperors to wipe out the followers of Jesus altogether ...

The details of this passage were all fulfilled within the lived experience of Jesus’ disciples. We need to be careful not to try to apply it willy-nilly to our context without appreciating that this was immediately relevant

– and important – to the people who first heard it. People would soon be persecuted and killed for their faith in Jesus. They needed to hear these words of hope.

We need to get over trying to read specific “signs of the times” all in terms of us, in Canada, in 2021. No, being asked to wear a mask into Costco is NOT persecution! There ARE people who really are facing persecution for their faith today – in China, India, the Middle East, North Africa, and other countries. We need to pray for them. Speculating about these prophecies in relation to Canadian news in 2021 is not the point, anyway: we are called to be ready for Jesus’ return any time (see [Matthew 25:1-13](#)).

Jesus’ words of hope are timeless: *“But when you are arrested and stand trial, don’t worry in advance about what to say. Just say what God tells you at that time, for it is not you who will be speaking, but the Holy Spirit ... the one who endures to the end will be saved.”* This is the message we need to hear today.

Do pray for our brothers and sisters around the world who really do endure persecution for their faith (see <https://www.opendoorsca.org/>). And pray that when we do have opportunity to share our faith, the Spirit will give us wisdom to share His words of love, grace, mercy, and hope ...

*O God, whose ways are all mercy and truth, carry on your gracious work in us,
Lord, by your grace, help us become what we cannot attain, in our own human frailty;
give us the faith, that in our own strength we cannot manage to find;
shine forth through our lives, despite our all too obvious weaknesses.
We ask, O Lord, in your compassion, that you increase our faith in you
and your faith in us.
May we know your loving-kindness, help and strength,
So we can love and help others in your Name, O Lord.
Amen*

Leonine Sacramentary (7th century)

Sunday, March 21: Mark 13:14-31

Surely **this** is about 2021, right??? When Mark/Jesus say *“let the reader understand”* they mean **us**, right? This is all being fulfilled right now, right? Why would you think that? What clues **in the text** tell you that?

In fact, this is a continuation of Jesus’ discourse about the fate of **the Temple** as He sat on the Mount of Olives looking directly at it (13:3). Jesus knows His hour is about to come. He is warning and encouraging His disciples about what will come **in their own lifetimes**. We have the privilege of eavesdropping on the counsel Jesus is giving to His closest friends as they are about to journey through tough times – tougher than we can imagine. We need to remember this passage is first and foremost about THEM, not us.

We noted earlier the Roman Empire – and specifically what is now Israel – was devastated by war in the 60s AD. Many would-be-messiahs rallied the Jews to fight the Romans. In 70 AD, the Romans had enough of the sedition and besieged Jerusalem. The Jewish historian, Josephus (37-100? AD), writes, *“Throughout the city people were dying of hunger in large numbers, and enduring unspeakable sufferings. In every house the merest hint of food sparked violence, and close relatives fell to blows, snatching from one another the pitiful supports of life ... Gaping with hunger, like mad dogs, lawless gangs went staggering and reeling through the streets, battering upon the doors like drunkards, and so bewildered that they broke into the same house two or three times in an hour. Need drove the starving to gnaw at anything ...”* In horror Josephus tells of a specific woman, Mary, daughter of Eleazar, who killed, roasted, and ate her own infant son.

Jerusalem capitulated. Titus, adopted son of Emperor Vespasian, sacked the city, crucified thousands of Jews, and burnt the Temple. **Every word** of Jesus’ prophetic talk came true by the end of 70 AD. The eternal Temple, the dwelling place of God on earth, was levelled. God had left the building. And earth. This text is about the end of the world – the end of the world as 1st Century Jews understood it.

Having said that, we need to hear the themes (not get sidetracked by the details) of this passage ... If we

can avoid getting obsessed with trying to link the text to today's news, what is Jesus really saying?

- The old order of things is done, gone, finished – the Old Testament sacrificial system, Jewish elitism, salvation-by-ritual is over (Romans and the Book of Hebrews deal with this in detail).
- A whole new order of things has begun in Jesus. Jesus is the true "Christ" (this is the Greek word for the Hebrew "Messiah" meaning "the Anointed One," the Saviour/King). In Him is new life. In Him is new hope. In Him is the power to endure. His people are those who have faith in Him. The Temple doesn't matter any more. Jesus – God's presence on earth – matters. ONLY Jesus matters.

We love the pleasant parts of Scripture. We love to think God only wants us to be healthy, wealthy, and happy. But, in fact, God wants us to be prepared for tough times, too.

Paul writes, "We patiently endure troubles and hardships and calamities of every kind. We have been beaten, been put in prison, faced angry mobs, worked to exhaustion, endured sleepless nights, and gone without food. We prove ourselves by our purity, our understanding, our patience, our kindness, by the Holy Spirit within us, and by our sincere love. We faithfully preach the truth. God's power is working in us. We use the weapons of righteousness in the right hand for attack and the left hand for defense.

"We serve God whether people honor us or despise us, whether they slander us or praise us. We are honest, but they call us impostors. We are ignored, even though we are well known. We live close to death, but we are still alive. We have been beaten, but we have not been killed. Our hearts ache, but we always have joy. We are poor, but we give spiritual riches to others. We own nothing, and yet we have everything" (2 Corinthians 6:4-10). How do you feel about that?

Thank God for His blessings to us. Thank Him, that, in general, our lives are pretty good. Pray for those who genuinely do suffer for their faith (if you didn't check out the ministry of Open Doors yesterday, visit their website today: <https://www.opendoorsca.org/>).

*All praise to you, God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.
You are our merciful Father and the source of all comfort.
Help us to stop relying on ourselves and rely only on You,
our God, who raises the dead.
We place our confidence in You, confident You will continue to rescue us.
You comfort us in all our troubles so that we can comfort others.
When they are troubled, we will be able to give them the same comfort You have given us.
Even when we are weighed down with troubles,
it is for the comfort and salvation of others.
For when we ourselves are comforted, we can comfort others.
Then they can patiently endure the same things we suffer.
We are confident that as we share in our sufferings,
we can also share in the comfort God gives us.
All praise to you, God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.
May You give us your grace and peace.
Amen.*

Monday, March 22: Mark 13:28-37

A few years ago, we had a break-in at the church. Now we have an alarm system on the doors, motion detectors, even motion-activated cameras. The beauty of electronic protections systems is that they "stay awake" all night and all weekend long.

In Jesus' day they didn't have electronic alarm systems. But wealthier people did have doorkeepers. Houses were built around interior courtyards with only one door to the street: a doorkeeper would keep watch. An essential quality for a good doorkeeper is that they actually stay awake. They have to really be alert and see who is coming and going ...

As Jesus sits on the Mount of Olives looking over Jerusalem and the Temple, He is giving a solemn warning to His disciples about what will happen in their near future. Like good doorkeepers, they need to keep alert. They need to keep watch, read the signs of the times ... and take heed.

On the one hand, in hindsight, we can see how all the specific details of Jesus' words came true about by 70 AD. But curiously, even Jesus does not seem to know exactly how and exactly when all the specific details will play out. However, we understand Jesus as fully human and fully divine. The fact that He does not yet know all the precise details of the immediate future gives us pause to ponder ... It is a mystery.

It also humbles us. If even Jesus does not know every detail of future events, how dare we presume to be able to figure it all out? Some teachers have worked out a precise prophetic timetable for the future. Every single one of them has been wrong. Absolutely wrong. Why do we still listen to them?

What does Jesus tell us to do? Does He tell us to hide away, trying to figure out the dates and times? No. If you do that, you may think you are really smart (smarter than Jesus.) but you are not obedient to Jesus!

What does Jesus tell us to do? *"I say to you what I say to everyone: Watch."* (see also [Matthew 25:1-13](#)). Jesus may return any time. In the meantime, the solemn warning of the destruction of the Temple is a warning to us that ritual and religion are not enough. Jesus invites us to experience real life – new life – in Him and through Him. It's that faith – faith-in-action and faith-in-endurance – that matters (see examples in [Hebrews 11](#)).

When we live our faith – with our eyes wide open – we live as God's good news is a hurting world. And when we live that kind of dynamic faith that steps up and steps out for God, we are always ready. We face the future with hope, confidence, joy, love ... and action.

*Lord you became human to communicate with me.
You walked and worked on this earth.
You endured the heat and struggled with the cold.
All your time on this earth was spent in caring for humanity.
You healed the sick, you raised the dead.
Most important of all, you saved me from death.
Lord Jesus, Your death on the cross has set me free.
I can live joyously and freely without fear of death.
Your mercy knows no bounds.
Knowing that God loves me unconditionally, I can afford to be honest about how I am.
How has the last day been, and how do I feel now?
I share my feelings openly with the Lord.
Lord, grant me the grace to have freedom in your Spirit.
Cleanse my heart and soul so I may live joyously in Your love.
Amen*

Tuesday, March 23: Mark 14:1-11

Where is God? Where is God right now? If you were to talk with Him this moment, would He hear you? That may sound like an abstract question, but it is also an eminently practical question ... especially when times are hard. Especially when you're in pain.

In the Judaism of Jesus' day, people would have answered, *"God is in His Holy Temple"* – they believed God was physically present on earth – and only present on earth – in the Holy of Holies, behind the curtain, in the Temple in Jerusalem. And so they regularly made pilgrimages to the Holy City, made their offerings, and made their peace with God ... But if the Temple were to be destroyed (as Jesus has just predicted), what happens then? Where is God? How do you pray? If you were to pray, would God hear you? God would no longer be anywhere on earth. He would be completely absent.

Jesus has been trying to convey the truth that **He** is the presence of God. **Where He is, God is.** He will say, "I will destroy this Temple made with human hands, and in three days I will build another, made without human hands" (Mark 14:58). **He** is the new Temple. Because He is with us always, when we pray, **He** does hear us. The stone Temple is irrelevant. Jesus is the presence of God with us.

Mark 14 shifts the focus from the doomed old stone Temple, sitting on its rock in Jerusalem, to the real Temple – the real presence of God among us – **Jesus**. The old stone Temple will be besieged, destroyed, and never rise again. But that old Temple is redundant; it can be destroyed. Jesus has come. God is present. He is with us.

The new Temple, the **Temple-the-presence-of-God-who-is-Jesus**, will be attacked by the forces of evil. He will be besieged. He will be "destroyed" on the cross. However, through Jesus' death and resurrection, He will annihilate the powers of evil that try to destroy Him. His presence will spread through all the world and into all people through the Holy Spirit. His death will start a movement of the Spirit that will know no boundaries of time or space. He will go everywhere. His power and presence will never end.

Jesus is turning his face resolutely toward the cross knowing that, through His death, new life will come – His life, Kingdom of God life – eternal life now and forever. Somehow this woman has some vague inkling of this. While other people are arguing about budget lines, Jesus is challenging them to see that everything is changing. The old Temple is doomed. The new Temple – Jesus – has come among us.

"She has done what she could," Jesus said, "and has anointed my body for burial ahead of time" (14:8). We have no idea what motivated this lady to express her worship and adoration so profoundly at this time, but the depth of her love for Jesus is clear. Compare her heart – full of worship, love, and sacrifice – with that of the disciples (14:4-5) and Judas (14:10-11).

"The contrast of reactions as Jesus goes to the cross invites Mark's readers to ponder their own position, feelings and attitudes. 'Were you there,' asks the old song, 'when they crucified my Lord?' Yes, but the more important question is, 'What was going on inside you?' Were you part of those who wanted to look the other way, because some people were so exuberant in their devotion? Were you, like Judas, hoping that, if Jesus were determined to die anyway, you at least might make something out of it? Were you glad to be rid of such a troublemaker? Or were you ready to give everything you had to honour this strange man, this unexpected Messiah, this paradoxical Passover-maker?" (Tom Wright). What is going on in you?

*Lord, help us to be your people and the sheep of your pasture.
I give thanks to God the Father, through his Son, in the Holy Spirit,
because in his great love for us he took pity on us,
and, when we were dead in our sins, he brought us to life with Christ.
In him we can be new creations.
We beg you to be our help and strength.
Save those among us who are suffering, have pity on the lowly, and lift up the fallen.
Heal the sick, bring back the wandering, and feed the hungry.
Release those unjustly imprisoned, lift up those who falter, and strengthen the fainthearted.
Let all nations come to know you are the one God, with your son Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit.
Help me to throw off my old nature and all its ways as I have come to birth in Christ.
Amen*

Clement (92-101) and Leo (c.400-461)

Wednesday, March 24: Mark 14:12-26

How do you define "freedom"? It's the ability to do whatever you want, right? Or is it?

"Freedom in the Bible is always seen as a change of regime or jurisdiction, from the false dominion to the true, from serving Pharaoh to serving God, from serving sin and death to serving God," writes Lesslie

Newbiggen. *"From the point of view of the Enlightenment, the biblical idea of freedom is paradoxical – freedom means we serve the True Master. From the point of view of the Bible, the freedom celebrated in the Enlightenment is the freedom offered by the serpent to Adam and Eve, the freedom to make one's own decisions about what is good. By accepting that offer, we put ourselves under the domination of powers that lead to destruction. We become, as Paul says, the slaves of sin. True freedom is a gift of grace given by the One who is in fact Lord; that gift, freely given, can only be received in freedom."*

The annual Jewish Passover meal is all about freedom. It celebrates the deliverance of the Israelites from slavery to Pharaoh to living as God's faithful people. They were not saved for a free-for-all. They were saved to fulfill their calling and identity as God's faithful people. They were saved to serve God.

As Jesus shares the traditional Jewish Passover meal with His disciples, He reinterprets it for the present moment. At Passover, Jewish people retell the old story – again and again – of God's deliverance from Egypt: they are now God's free people, free to serve Him as their true King. It was a deeply religious act, but also a deeply political act. Even when Israel was occupied by foreign powers (like Rome), the Jews emphasized that, despite appearances, they were God's free people who claimed God as their rightful King. Nothing and no one could ever take their true freedom as God's people from them. They tried to demonstrate that by following the Law and sacrificing in the Temple again and again and again.

Jesus emphasizes that real freedom is neither political freedom nor found through religious ritual. True freedom is only found in a living, ongoing relationship with Him. Instead of linking the bread and cup back to the Exodus (as the Jews always did), He now links them directly to the death He will die and to the coming of the Kingdom of God that will come through His death. His death will set His people (us) truly free – freedom from the slavery of sin, freedom from the oppression of judgment, freedom to a wonderful hope for the future, freedom to serve God every moment of their – of our – lives ... (Romans 6). Real freedom is ACTUALLY living our faith IN God, by living FOR God.

Nothing and no one could ever take that true freedom from them – or us ([Romans 8:31-39](#)).

Every time we celebrate the Lord's Supper, we remind ourselves, again and again, of the freedom we have thanks to the incredible love and sacrifice of Jesus. We remind ourselves, again and again, that we are a free people – we can be forgiven, we can have a personal relationship with Jesus, we don't have to go along with the values of the culture around us ... No sin, no temptation, no vice, and no guilt or shame from the past need have control over us. Nothing and no one can ever take our true freedom in Jesus from us.

We may or may not have political freedom – that's of secondary importance. What matters is that we are free to love God, live for God, and worship God. Nothing and no one can ever take that from us. Even in prison, Paul found himself free to love and praise God.

We also remind ourselves that being free is not a free-for-all (Adam and Eve bought into that lie). Freedom is choosing to serve God, who wants what is best for us. Freedom is choosing to live the life God created us for, in relationship with Him. No one can take your freedom – your choice to live more and more like Jesus and for Jesus – from you. Celebrate your freedom. Live your freedom ...

*When I am invited into the presence of a friend, I feel honoured.
When God invites me to spend time in His presence, He desires me to know and feel His love.
With faith and hope, I turn my heart and mind to God,
and ask Him to help me become more aware of His loving presence.
"A thick and shapeless tree-trunk would never believe that it could become a statue,
and would never submit itself to the chisel of the sculptor,
who sees by her genius what she can make of it." (Ignatius)
I ask for the grace to let myself be shaped by my loving Creator.
I thank God for these few moments spent alone with him
and for any insights I may have been given from His Word.
Amen.*

Thursday, March 25: Mark 14:26-31, 66-72

Baseball manager Jim Leyland said, "I knew we were in for a long season when we lined up for the national anthem on opening day and one of my players said, 'Every time I hear that song, I have a bad game.'" We all want to succeed. Good intentions are one thing. Reality is sometimes a bit different.

Today's reading describes events on the Thursday evening before Jesus' crucifixion on Friday. Jesus is bluntly talking about what will happen over the next 24 hours.

I love Peter. Like Peter, if I were there, I also would have promised to succeed, too. Like Peter, I would have said, "Even if everyone else deserts you, I never will." Like Peter, if Jesus were to have told me I would deny I Him, I would have responded, "No. Even if I have to die with you, I will never deny you." Peter is declaring he will follow Jesus come hell or high water ... Me, too.

How about you? If you were there, what would you say?

Now let's skip ahead to Mark 14:66-72. What do you make of all of this?

I love Peter. Because, like Peter, if I were there, I also would have probably done much the same thing.

How does Peter handle it?

If you are like me, this leaves me feeling very dissatisfied. I want a happy ending. But Mark (like Luke and Matthew) doesn't give us a nice neat, sweet resolution ... at least not yet. Mark allows us to live with this awkwardness, this ugliness, this shame, this failure, and this guilt for a while ...

Why? Because we have all been there. Perhaps we are there right now. We need to know we are not alone in our sin and failure. This is part of the authentic human experience ... Pray about this. What is Jesus saying to you?

(OK – Mark might be able to leave you there for a while, but I can't. Read [John 21:15-19](#). Jesus forgives Peter – three times, cancelling out his three denials. And He gives Peter a mission three times – to love and care for the people around him. Jesus completely forgives you, too. He restores you, too. And He calls you back to your true freedom – to live as His beloved son/daughter, sharing His love, forgiveness and grace with the people around you)

*You call us to be your voices in this world
and we stay silent.
You call us to be your hands in this world
and we keep them hidden.
You call us to be your feet in this world
and we go our own way.
When we meet those who are doubting
and say nothing, forgive us.
When we meet those who need your touch
and do nothing, forgive us.
When we are called to take up your cross
and carry nothing, forgive us.
Breathe life into these bones
bring freedom to these lives
that we might declare
with heart and soul and voice
that you are our Lord and our God.
Amen*

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Friday, March 26: Mark 14:32-42

I admit it. I like to be in control – in a good way (I think). I like to make plans and follow through on them. I like to do what I want to do, eat what I want to eat, read what I want to read, go to bed when I want to go to bed, get up when I want to get up ...

Sometimes, however, we are definitely out of control – when Air Canada calls to say my flight is cancelled and I have to wait 24 hours, when the car starts to slide on the ice, when my doctor gives me the diagnosis – I can get very stressed very quickly. Because I can't fix it. I am out of control.

We are used to Jesus being in control of every situation. Even when the Pharisees and teachers of the law think they have the upper hand, Jesus always seems able to put them in their place. But from Gethsemane on, things change. The powers of darkness and evil seem to be in the driver's seat (at least temporarily). Events seem out of control. We're not sure how to make sense of this. How can this be?

Isn't it good to know that, when we face those out-of-control times, Jesus understands? Isn't it great to know that when we pray, *"My soul is crushed with grief to the point of death,"* Jesus understands? Isn't it helpful to know that when we call out, *"Father, please take this cup of suffering away from me,"* Jesus understands? Isn't it good to know that, when our friends abandon us, let us down, or are not there to support us, Jesus understands? Isn't it wonderful to know that when we feel like the whole world is against us and our problems are overwhelming, Jesus understands? Isn't it helpful to know that when circumstances seem to be crushing us, Jesus understands?

Consider Jesus' friends for a minute. In His time of deepest need, they desert Him. Is it because they don't care? Because they don't like Him? Not at all. They do care. Very simply, they are struggling with their own problems (the emotions of recent events and their physical exhaustion). Sometimes when our friends are not as supportive as we'd like, we get annoyed. We think they are avoiding us, or they don't care. Perhaps they have their own issues, or are just plain tired. Remember Jesus' disciples: they care, deeply – they love Jesus, deeply – but they are struggling through their own problems.

As Jesus wrestles through this brutal time, He prays for deliverance. He also prays, *"Yet I want your will to be done, not mine."*

As we fight (or flounder) through difficult times, we can pray for deliverance. But we also need to pray, *"Yet I want your will to be done, not mine."* That's not a cop out. It's not a lack of faith. It is a profound statement **of faith** that God knows best. We cannot begin to comprehend what is going on in our lives, families, and world. But God does. And so we defer to His wisdom. And to His will.

In Jesus' case, the pain, suffering, abuse, and horror will be very, very real. But it will ultimately lead to resurrection and to the destruction of sin and death. It will provide salvation for all who believe.

In our cases, the pain and suffering may be very real, too. We may never know what good may come from it. But, in faith, we know we have a Saviour who understands, who is with us, and who gets us through ...

Peter (who will be martyred for his faith), writes, *"May God give you more and more grace and peace. All praise to God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. It is by his great mercy that we have been born again, because God raised Jesus Christ from the dead. Now we live with great expectation, and we have a priceless inheritance – an inheritance that is kept in heaven for you, pure and undefiled, beyond the reach of change and decay. And through your faith, God is protecting you by his power until you receive this salvation, which is ready to be revealed on the last day for all to see. So be truly glad."*

"There is wonderful joy ahead, even though you must endure many trials for a little while. These trials will show that your faith is genuine. It is being tested as fire tests and purifies gold – though your faith is far more precious than mere gold. So when your faith remains strong through many trials, it will bring you much praise, glory and honor on the day when Jesus Christ is revealed to the whole world" (1 Peter 1:2-7).

*Stretching out Your divine hands upon the Cross,
 You joined together that which was divided – ourselves and our loving God.
 Hanging upon the cross, O Christ, our Saviour,
 You have made the ends of the earth and all peoples
 come together as one with You, our God.
 Therefore, I cry aloud:
 I am darkened always by black clouds of sin.
 Help me see Your sun shining behind the darkest clouds,
 and grant me strength, O Saviour,
 to overcome all temptation and all evil,
 for You are good.
 You are light.
 You are life.
 Therefore, I sing Your praises on this day.
 Amen*

Joseph the Hymn-Writer (816-886)

Saturday, March 27: Mark 14:43-52

It seems a bit sacrilegious to point it out, but did you know there is a streaker in the Bible? "*One young man following behind was clothed only in a long linen shirt. When the mob tried to grab him, he slipped out of his shirt and ran away naked*" (Mark 14:51-52). This is such an intimate, personal, unflattering comment that many scholars suggest this might have been Mark himself. We don't know. If it were Mark, it means he had an "uninhibited" eyewitness perspective on all that is going on ... ☺

What this young man saw (whether or not it was actually Mark) was Judas betray Jesus with a kiss ... What he also saw was everyone desert Jesus and flee ...

Let's leave that young man, scampering away with his wounded dignity.

Think about Judas. We can speculate (and people have speculated) all sorts of things about Judas:

- Was he tempted by money the religious leaders offered him?
- Was he wanting Jesus to be the political/military deliverer of Israel? Did he think that, since Jesus was not yet raising an army, this would force Jesus' hand to take up arms?
- Was he afraid? Was he trying to save his own skin by collaborating with the enemy?
- Was he just plain evil?
- Did he have a moment (or a few moments) of moral lapse? Even temporary insanity?

We have no idea.

What we do know is that we all have a bit of Judas in us.

- We are all tempted ... maybe by money, maybe by lust, maybe by cheating, maybe by lying, maybe by _____, _____, _____ (fill in the blanks with your issues).
- We all want Jesus to do what **we** want Him to do (or let us do what we want to do). We get frustrated when Jesus doesn't answer our prayers in the way we'd like.
- We all are afraid, worried, and stressed at times. It is easy to compromise our principles when we are fearful and anxious. It seems like the path of least resistance.
- We all have occasions when we accidentally (or intentionally) do what we know is wrong – call it moral lapses, temporary insanity, giving into temptation, or just plain evil.

As we journey through this dark night with Jesus, it is good for us to pause and think about the darkness in our own souls. God know us intimately – inside out, front to back, top to bottom. No long linen shirt can hide anything from Him. What do I need to confess to God? Will I?

*Lord, help us to know you, and love you, and rejoice in you.
Even though we know we cannot do these perfectly in this life,
let us, at least, grow closer to you every day,
till we come to know, love, and rejoice in you in perfection, in heaven.
May our knowledge of you increase in us, day by day.
May our love for you grow every day, more and more.
May our joy become greater and fuller as we live in your presence each day.
May the gifts of grace you give us fill us so that our joy may be full.
To you, O Lord, be the honor and glory,
who with the Father and Holy Spirit lives and reigns,
one God, world without end.
Amen*

Augustine (354-430)

Palm Sunday, March 28: Mark 11:1-11 (backtracking a bit)

Israel is under the heels of the Roman legions. Herod Antipas is "tetrarch" (meaning "quarter" – he ruled one quarter of his father's, Herod the Great's, kingdom). Although Herod calls himself a king, he is not officially a "king." In reality, Herod is a puppet of the Roman governor. But now the crowds are welcoming Jesus as the true King of Israel, the true heir of "*the kingdom of our father, David.*" This is a brave affirmation. It is tantamount to treason – against Herod and Rome. It is significant that on this Sunday, people were willing to praise and worship Jesus, regardless of the potential cost.

Why is Jesus the true King? He is the Christ/Messiah/"Anointed One" – the promised Saviour, King, and High Priest of biblical prophecy. As God Himself among us, Jesus is the true King of Kings. He is also the only One worthy of being both the spiritual and social/cultural/political leader of the world.

For a few moments on that glorious Sunday, people seem to "get it." Jesus is the promised Saviour King, foretold by the prophets. He has come to bring freedom, hope, love, peace, and joy to the world.

The people welcoming and worshipping Jesus were taking a risk. Herod (the actual king), the Jewish priests, and the Roman authorities all see Jesus as a threat. His movement will be brutally suppressed. Jesus will be executed.

Spend some time this morning reflecting on the wonder of our new life in and through Jesus ... Will I choose to live for Jesus ... no matter what? Would I be willing to risk everything for Him?

Lord, give me the courage to do what is best, even when it is risky. Lord, give me courage to do honour, praise, and serve my God, even if I'm afraid. Lord, help me to find life in God and in God alone ...

*Dear Lord, as I come to you, fill my whole being with the wonder of Your presence.
It is so easy to get caught up with the trappings of this life.
Grant that I may be free from greed and selfishness.
Remind me that the best things in life are free:
love, laughter, caring and sharing.
In Your loving presence I unwind the past day, moment by moment.
I gather in all the goodness and light, in gratitude.
I attend to the shadows, seeking healing, courage, forgiveness.
Conversation requires talking and listening.
As I talk to Jesus, may I also learn to be still and listen.
I can be totally honest with Jesus as I tell Him of my worries and my cares.
I can open my heart to Him as I tell Him of my fears and my doubts.
I can place myself fully in His care, to abandon myself to Him,
knowing that He always wants what is best for me.
Amen*

Monday, March 29: Mark 14:53-65

When I was in Cambridge a few years ago, I met a nice young man from South Carolina. I introduced myself as "Bruce." But he always called me "Dr. Martin" and "Sir." I never knew who he was talking to. No one calls me "Dr. Martin." He explained that in his culture, it was expected that a younger man like himself would call an older(?) man like myself by their title and with the word, "Sir." (I was tempted to say, "Well, then, be totally correct: 'The Reverend Doctor Martin' please" – nah, way too ostentatious)

One of the main themes in this passage is the proper use of titles. The high priest asks Jesus: "Are you the Christ/Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One?" These are specific titles given to the long-awaited, much prophesied "Messiah" (Hebrew) / "Christ" (Greek) / "Anointed One" (English) in the Old Testament. These are titles ascribed to the Saviour whom the people of Israel had been anticipating for generations. However, they expected Him to come as a military deliverer, a warring conqueror, a glorious general like King David of old. Is Jesus claiming to be this David-like hero?

How does Jesus reply? "I am." These are words no Jew **ever** said. Because "I AM" is the name God chose for Himself when He called Moses ([Exodus 3:14](#)). The Hebrew word for "I AM" – YHWH – is used for God's name throughout the Old Testament text. Typically, it is translated as "The LORD" (in capital letters). This follows a long Jewish tradition that God's name, "YHWH" / "I am," is too holy for sinful mortals (like you or I) to say aloud. So whenever they came across that name in the written text, they spoke aloud the word "LORD" (Hebrew "Adonai"). So when Jesus says out loud (probably in Aramaic, a variant of Hebrew), "I AM," He is saying aloud words no mortal person spoke aloud ... ever. It is a direct claim to be God.

Jesus goes on to quote one of the great prophetic passages about the coming of the Messiah: "And you will see the Son of Man seated in the place of power at God's right hand and coming on the clouds of heaven." The Jewish leaders know what this text is all about. In Daniel's dream, various evil beasts (various empires) arise, but God judges them all. Then Daniel writes, "I saw someone like a Son of Man coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient One and was led into his presence. He was given authority, honor, and sovereignty over all the nations of the world, so that people of every race and nation and language would obey him. His rule is eternal – it will never end. His kingdom will never be destroyed" (Daniel 7:13-14). Jesus is directly claiming to be this "Son of Man," the Messiah, God's eternal King.

Do you understand why the high priest and his cronies are upset? Jesus is EITHER a complete raving lunatic (there have been more than a few people who have claimed to be "God" over the years – they usually end up in asylums), OR He actually IS God. They are not willing to entertain the second possibility – after all He is threatening their Temple, the heart of their religion, where they believe God physically "lived" on earth. Therefore, Jesus must be mad. His insanity is so heretical, He must be destroyed.

It is interesting that no one who met Jesus expressed mild approval. No one said, "Oh, what a nice young man He is" or "He has such great wisdom and insight; I really like His moral teachings about loving your neighbour ..." People either welcomed Him as the Messiah and struggled to figure out what that meant. Or they despised Him as a heretic, liar, and fool. They rarely were neutral.

What title(s) do we give Jesus? Do we know He is our Saviour? Do we know He is our Lord? Do we know He is our King? Do we know He is our Friend? Do we know He is our God? Do we know He is our Comforter? Do we know He is our Guide? Do we know He is our Protector? Do we know He is our Wisdom? Do we know He is our Life? Do we know He is our Light? Do we know He is our Truth? Do we know He is our Hope? Do we know He is our Resurrection? Do we know He is our Peace? Do we know He is our Joy? Do we know He is the one who disciplines us? Do we know He is our Strength? What else?

If we call Jesus by all those wonderful titles, do we actually LIVE as if they are true? Do we follow Him as our Lord? Obey Him as our King? Read through the list above and reflect on what these titles mean, in practice ...

*When our faith stands at the grave,
grieving for a stone that's rolled away,
forgive us.*

*When our faith is short of understanding
though the truth is there to see,
forgive us.*

*When our faith, beset by doubt, sees no further
than an empty tomb today,
forgive us.*

*Bring to mind the cry of Mary,
'I have seen the Lord.'
and grant us faith to believe.*

*We thank you that Easter is not about one people,
but ALL people,
that your love and your Salvation are for ALL
who confess with voices, hearts and lives
that the tomb is empty because Jesus is risen,
that we might know forgiveness,
that lives might be reborn
and your name glorified
now and for eternity.
Amen*

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Tuesday, March 30: Mark 15:1-15

I'm not big on titles: I don't feel terribly "reverend-y" or "doctoral" most of the time. But I have a friend who really does like to be known as "*The Reverend Doctor _____*." Although he is Baptist, he also likes to wear a clerical collar. He wants people to know he is a "priest" (his word not mine) ... that's his thing.

In the ancient world, people were big on titles, too. So Pilate asks a title question: "*Are you the king of the Jews?*" We tend to skip over that question, but let's consider it for a moment ... Titles matter.

This is a critical political question. There is one – only one – REAL king in Jesus' world: the Emperor of Rome, Tiberius Caesar *Divi Augusti* (son "*of the divine Augustus*" – "*augustus*" itself meaning "*the venerated one*"). There is one "puppet king" in Jesus' world – the supposed "King of the Jews" – King Herod. Herod had no real power, and was not even of Jewish descent, but rather of Idumaeen and Edomite ancestry. Pilate, the Roman Prefect of Judea, was the REAL boots-on-the-ground power in Israel. When he asks, "*Are you the king of the Jews?*" it's a serious political question. If Jesus says "Yes," He is committing blatant treason against Rome (let alone Herod). That carries the death sentence. How does Jesus answer?

The Jewish leaders accuse Jesus of blasphemy. For Pilate, a Roman, these Jewish religious accusations mean nothing. They are simply internal Jewish religious bickering. Jesus never says or does anything that constitutes treason according to Roman law. How does Pilate handle the situation?

In a twist-of-fate, soaked in blood and irony, a real murderous – treasonous – revolutionary is released. The Prince of Peace, who never leads a political revolution or takes up arms, will be executed for treason.

Consider Pilate. He has the opportunity to do the right thing: to release Jesus and execute Barabbas. But he wants to satisfy the crowd, so he compromises what he knows is right:

- He does not do the **right** thing (release Jesus, execute Barabbas)
- He does do the **wrong** thing (condemns Jesus, releases Barabbas)
- Do I ever NOT do the right thing? Do I ever do the wrong thing?

- Do I ever NOT say the right thing? Do I ever say the wrong thing?

Thankfully we have a Saviour who forgives us. In the midst of darkness of Mark 15, hear these words of hope: *"This is the message we heard from Jesus and now declare to you: God is light, and there is no darkness in him at all. So we are lying if we say we have fellowship with God but go on living in spiritual darkness; we are not practicing the truth. But if we are living in the light, as God is in the light, then we have fellowship with each other, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, cleanses us from all sin.*

"If we claim we have no sin, we are fooling ourselves and not living in the truth. But if we confess our sins to him, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all wickedness" (1 John 1:5-9).

*Lord God, make us glad in speaking boldly of your mercies;
help us rejoice in adoring your Holiness;
and may our chief joy be to glorify and proclaim your holy Name.
Almighty, everlasting God, dwelling in love and power in our souls,
make yourself known to the world in us,
bring people to your light through us,
that all might know the true Light, the bright and morning Star.
We pray that you would fill the world with your glory
and show yourself by the radiance of your light to all nations.
May we be your faithful people, persevering in prayer
and persevering in service to all people.
To you be the glory forever and ever.
Amen*

Gregorian Sacramentary (c.593)

Wednesday, March 31: Mark 15:16-20

People can do awful things. We watch the news and wonder how once decent people in the Middle East and North Africa can commit such atrocities against other people in the name of ISIS, Boko Haram, or state governments. We wonder how decent people can storm the Capitol, expressing a desire to lynch the vice-president of the United States. We wonder how ____ (you can fill in the blank from today's news).

History testifies that normally good people do evil things time and time again. We can go back to the Crusades, Russia during the pogroms, Germany in World War 2, Rwanda and Bosnia in the 1990s, Syria and Iraq in the 2000's). Especially when people feel that violence is government/officially/religiously sanctioned – even encouraged – they can do horrible things to one another.

These soldiers are backed by the approval of – and the encouragement of – both the civil authorities (Pilate) and the religious leadership (the high priest and Sanhedrin). They are doing what their leaders told them to do. For the Jewish leaders, these thugs are doing "God's will." They mock Jesus as "king of the Jews" – the title Pilate had asked about (Mark 15:2).

Think about kingship. Our typical idea of a king is someone bedecked in jewels and fine clothing, eating well, living in a sumptuous palace, enjoying a decadent life. However a **good** king is really a servant leader. Yes, he does provide leadership. But his goal is to do everything he possibly can to make his people and his country as safe, strong, and prosperous as possible. A good king will sacrifice his own comfort, time, safety, welfare, energy, honour, dignity, pride – even his own life – so that his people thrive. He truly is a public servant (the best politicians, today, could learn from this example, too).

This is the kind of king Jesus is – not just for the Jews, but for all people, of every ethnic background, race, or nationality. Unbeknownst to Pilate, the Jewish priests, and these soldiers, Jesus really is the King of Righteousness, the King of Peace (titles the author of Hebrews gives Him, based on Melchizedek in Hebrews 7). He is King, not just of the Jews, but King of all Creation. The Jews and Romans cannot see it. They cannot see that Jesus – the true servant King – is giving Himself completely for His people, for all people

(because we are ALL His people), so that we might have true life in relationship with God Himself. He will sacrifice his own comfort, time, safety, welfare, energy, honour, dignity, pride – even his own life – so that His people have life. He is God’s suffering servant king. He is our servant King.

Jesus is still very much in control. Being in complete control, He chooses to give His own life to give us real life – now and forever.

We glibly rattle off John 3:16. But think about the profundity of those words in the context of Jesus’ suffering: *"For this is how God loved the world: He gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life."* Pray through those words for a moment ...

Paul challenges us to reflect upon this: *"When we were utterly helpless, Christ came at just the right time and died for us sinners. Now, most people would not be willing to die for an upright person, though someone might perhaps be willing to die for a person who is especially good. But God showed his great love for us by sending Christ to die for us while we were still sinners."*

"And since we have been made right in God’s sight by the blood of Christ, he will certainly save us from God’s condemnation. For since our friendship with God was restored by the death of his Son while we were still his enemies, we will certainly be saved through the life of his Son. So now we can rejoice in our wonderful new relationship with God because our Lord Jesus Christ has made us friends of God" (Romans 5:6-11).

Spend some time thinking on – and giving thanks for – the wonder of God’s love shown to us through Jesus.

*Open my heart, O Lord.
Enlighten me by the grace of your Holy Spirit,
that I may seek what is well pleasing to your will.
Help me to order my doings after your commandments, so I may live a life that pleases you.
May God the Father bless us.
May Christ the Son take care of us.
May the Holy Spirit and enlighten us all the days of our life.
The Lord be our defender and keeper of body and soul
both now and forever and to the ages of ages.
Amen*

Bede (672-735)

Thursday, April 1: Mark 15:21-32

Crucifixion is a hideous way to kill someone. It’s an agonizing, slow, excruciating death (we won’t go into all the gory details). In the Roman Empire, it was a common way to execute violent criminals – a grim, ghastly object lesson and warning to other potential troublemakers. When the Romans sacked Jerusalem in 70 AD, they crucified over 6000 Jews as a brutal, graphic illustration about what happens to people who defy Rome. It wouldn’t take many crucifixions to stamp out resistance.

Three men were supposed to be crucified on this Friday – two nameless thieves and Barabbas, a murderous revolutionary. They all deserved it. Three men were actually crucified on this Friday – two nameless thieves and Jesus, the Prince of Peace – who did not deserve it at all. A murdering, treasonous thug went free.

Jesus – innocent, without sin, God Himself, the Messiah, the Creator of the Universe, the Holy One – is executed in the place of a rebel assassin. Is that fair? Not at all. Welcome to the real world of sin, abuse, violence, corruption, evil, larceny, unfairness, cruelty ... and humanity. This is human nature at its horrific worst – and most real. This is the graphic reality of our fallen, hurting, broken world.

IF this is where the story ends, **then** there is no hope here for people then – or for us now. Jesus, the idealist, is annihilated. His dream of the kingdom of God is destroyed with Him. The message: evil wins.

Murderers goes free. Crime really does pay after all. Being good isn't worth it. There is no justice.

However, **if this is NOT** where the story ends, **then** something much more profound is happening here. Evil does not win. Good triumphs over evil. There is justice.

Jesus is dying in the exact place where Barabbas, the criminal, should die. Somewhere out there on this dreadful Friday is Barabbas. Barabbas has been forgiven and set free. Jesus, an innocent man, is dying in his place. How should Barabbas feel? With a new chance at a new life, how should Barabbas live?

None of us may be guilty of murder or treason like Barabbas, but we are all guilty of something. Let's be honest: we all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. And Jesus dies in our place, too ... How should I feel? With a new chance at a new life, how should I live?

Jesus dies to destroy the power of sin and death once and for all. He triumphs over evil.

"God's law," writes Paul, "was given so that all people could see how sinful they were. But as people sinned more and more, God's wonderful grace became more abundant. So just as sin ruled over all people and brought them to death, now God's wonderful grace rules instead, giving us right standing with God and resulting in eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord" (Romans 5:20-21). Praise God. Thank God.

*O God Almighty, Father of our Lord Jesus Christ,
help us be grounded and settled in your truth,
by the coming down of the Holy Spirit into our hearts.
Reveal to us that which we do not know.
Please fill up that which is empty or insufficient in us,
Confirm in us that which we know is true.
Forgive and remove from us that which is evil and sinful.
Cause that which is beautiful to shine through us for your glory.
And keep us blameless in your service, through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen*

Clement (died 99 AD)

Good Friday, April 2: Mark 15:33-41 and Psalm 22:1-18

One of the occupational hazards/privileges of being a pastor is that it is not unusual to be with a person when they die. I have no idea how many times I have had that honour. On the one hand, it is an awesome privilege to be with a person (and their family) when their pain and suffering ends and when (if they have faith) you have confidence they are now with the Lord.

On the other hand, it always seems wrong, unnatural, and jarring. It always is twinged with sadness, grief, loss, and pain. It should be. Death, as we know it, was never God's original plan for human beings. It is always unnatural. I recall in seminary, one (younger) student commenting that he could not understand why anyone would feel sad or grieve when a Christian dies – after all they are now with Jesus. True, they are with Jesus. But, as human beings with hearts, we still experience a profound sense of sorrow and loss. That's good. Our lives are so much poorer for the loss of our loved one. (I wonder how this fellow actually coped with ministry – or a personal loss – when reality hit, as it inevitably does ...)

Certainly, Jesus' death offends us as wrong and unnatural. How could God, the Father, allow this to happen? How could Jesus have allowed this to happen? How could His disciples have allowed this to happen?

As we pause at the foot of the cross, notice who is here ... The only people Mark names are women: *"Mary Magdalene, Mary (the mother of James the younger and of Joseph), and Salome ... Many other women who had come with him to Jerusalem were also there."* Curiously, Mark mentions none of Jesus' male followers – Peter, James, John, etc. Where were they? Think on that ...

Mark also notes another detail: way back in Jerusalem, in the heart of the Temple, the curtain that separated the Holy of Holies from the rest of the world (where God was believed to be actually present) was torn in two. Do you get the profound symbolism? The separation between God and His people, institutionalized in the Temple, is gone, done, finished, broken, ripped apart forever. Jesus' death destroyed the separation that existed between God and his people since the sin of Adam and Eve.

Our direct relationship with God has been restored by Jesus' death. There is no separation between God and us. God is now among us, His people – with everyone, everywhere, at every time. The old order is finished – once and for all.

As Jesus dies, He quotes David's Psalm 22. Psalm 22 begins with a lament of a person who feels abandoned by God. It gives us painful insight into the horror of what Jesus is experiencing (Psalm 22:1-18):

*"My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?
Why are you so far away when I groan for help?
Every day I call to you, my God, but you do not answer.
Every night I lift my voice, but I find no relief ...
I am a worm and not a man. I am scorned and despised by all.
Everyone who sees me mocks me.
They sneer and shake their heads, saying,
"Is this the one who relies on the Lord? Then let the Lord save him.
If the Lord loves him so much, let the Lord rescue him." ...
My life is poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint.
My heart is like wax, melting within me.
My strength has dried up like sunbaked clay.
My tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth.
You have laid me in the dust and left me for dead.
My enemies surround me like a pack of dogs; an evil gang closes in on me.
They have pierced my hands and feet. I can count all my bones.
My enemies stare at me and gloat.
They divide my garments among themselves and throw dice for my clothing."*

God loves us so much He is willing to go through this for you and for me ...

*Lord God, Jesus cried out to you on the cross, "Why have you forsaken me?"
You seemed so far from His cry and from His distress.
Those who stood at the foot of the cross wondered where You were,
as they saw Jesus mocked and shamed and killed.
Where were You then?
Lord God, we, too, ask where You are,
when there is trouble and suffering and death, and we cry out for help.
Be near to us.
Save us so we may praise You for your deliverance.
Lord God, we wait, on Friday, for the resurrection of Sunday
and sometimes our lives seem a succession of Fridays and we cannot see what is "Good."
Teach us to call out Your name as Jesus did.
Help us trust in You like little children.
Amen.*

Saturday, April 3: Mark 15:42-47

Unexpected saints. God brings along just the right person at just the right time, every now and then – just when there is a need.

A few years ago, when we picked up our Syrian family at the airport, four Arabic speakers (including a doctor) showed up completely unexpectedly. By being able to speak Arabic, they could help us welcome our new friends. Their presence REALLY helped our family begin the process of becoming Lethbridgeans. Those four greeters were Good Samaritans to us and our family. Unexpected saints. Unanticipated blessings.

Joseph of Arimathea is an unexpected saint, too. A prominent member of the Jewish Council (the Sanhedrin) who have opposed Jesus time and again, he is the last person one would expect to care for Jesus. He is taking a huge risk by publicly coming forward and claiming Jesus' body.

Have you ever been blessed by an unexpected saint? How has it made you feel?

Have you ever felt God nudging you to do something unexpected? To call someone out of the blue? To do a random act of kindness? To help a neighbour? To give a word of sincere encouragement? To give a gift, just because ...? Did you do it? How did it make you feel? How did it make the other person feel?

I wonder if we were to pray more often, "*Lord, who can I bless today?*" what would happen? What kind of an influence would we have? What kind of a family, neighbourhood, school, or workplace would we have?

As we spend today in the awful shadow of the cross, the tiniest glimmer of hope comes through a man who takes a risk, and steps out in faith to do the right thing for Jesus ... The kingdom of God starts to break into the world as one unexpected saint chooses to do one simple, right thing in the name of Jesus ...

What might God be saying to me? Lord, who can I bless today? Lord, your kingdom come ...

*My Lord, today all is silent.
You have given Your precious life for the salvation of the world.
You died a horrific death.
Now You rest in peace in the tomb as the soldiers keep watch.
Lord, I know that this day ends with Your glorious triumph, Your victory over sin and death.
But for now I sit quietly mourning Your death.
Help me enter into the sorrow and the silence of this Holy Saturday.
Today the world waits, in mourning, in anticipation of the glory of new life.
As I keep watch, awaiting the celebration of Your Resurrection, fill me with hope.
Help me to look forward to the celebration of Your Resurrection,
but also to look forward to the hope of my own share in the new life You won for the world.
As you gave your whole life for me, I entrust my whole being to You, dear Lord.
Transform the brokenness of my own soul, my weaknesses, and my sin.
You are glorious, and You bring the greatest good out of Your apparent defeat.
I trust in Your power to do all things and I entrust my life to You.
Jesus, I trust in You.
Amen*

Easter Sunday, April 4: Mark 16:1-8

Last Friday, as we stood before the cross, we note that **IF** the crucifixion were where the story ends, **then** there is no hope for people then – or for us now. Jesus, the idealist, is annihilated. His dream of the kingdom of God is destroyed with Him. However, **if the cross is NOT** where the story ends, **then** something much more profound is happening here ...

Is the cross the end? Is that where the story of Jesus concludes?

Not at all. On the Sunday morning, those same women who were at the cross (Mark 15:40-41), those same women who saw Jesus laid in the stone-sealed tomb (15:47), come to the graveyard to anoint Jesus' body according to Jewish custom ... (where **ARE** those men???) What do they find?

What they find is **NOT** normal. People do not rise from the dead.

Back then – and over the intervening centuries – skeptics have tried to rationalize it all away: Jesus had just swooned, the disciples stole the body, the Jews stole the body, the Romans stole the body. But each of those excuses could have been easily disproven then and can be easily brushed aside now. The only credible interpretation of events is that Jesus was dead and did, in fact, rise again.

We are faced with the awkward, unnerving, awe-inspiring, world-changing reality that Jesus has risen from the dead. What Jesus has been saying all along is true: something new is beginning. Jesus really is God Himself. The kingdom of God has come among us (Mark 1:17). The power of sin and death has been destroyed. Our sin and guilt are forgiven. We are reunited with God. God is present among us as His Spirit – with everyone, everywhere, at every time.

What do we do with that reality?

The young man these ladies see is not Jesus, but an angel. Where is Jesus? *"He is going ahead of you ..."* (16:7). Jesus is on the move. He is already going places, doing things, meeting people, changing lives ...

Notice the little phrase, *"go and tell his disciples, including Peter, that Jesus is going ahead of you ..."* Why is this important? Remember Peter is the one who blustered about standing by Jesus, but failed miserably. God wants Peter – especially Peter – to know that he still has a place in His emerging kingdom. No matter how we may have failed in the past, we are God's forgiven people. Like Peter, we always have a place in God's growing kingdom, too.

Jesus has risen from the dead. We now live in a world in which Jesus is on the move. He is already going ahead of us ... What do you think about that? Where might He be leading us? What opportunity might He be preparing for us?

*Good and gracious God, our most glorious Creator,
As we greet the signs of Spring once again, in the buds forming,
in the songs of returning birds and fields soon to be planted,
we give you praise for an even greater sign of new life:
the resurrection of your Son, Our Lord Jesus Christ.
The sadness and despair of His death has given way to the bright promise of immortality.
The Resurrection is our guarantee that justice will triumph over evil,
light will overcome darkness,
and love will conquer death.
As we celebrate, we also ask for your grace to live the promise given to us,
by imitating the life of Jesus in reaching out to the poor,
the marginalized, the least among us,
May we strive to be good neighbour to all those we meet.
We praise You in this Easter season.
Change our lives, change our hearts to be messengers of Easter joy and hope.
We make our prayer through Jesus Christ, our risen Lord forever.
Amen.*

Monday, April 5: Mark 16:9-13, Luke 24:13-49

Sometimes I'm just walking along minding our own business, and ... I realize I'm not as alone as I think I am. I suddenly remember Jesus is with us. His promise is He is with me always. Through His Spirit He never leaves me. He is with me all the time. Those times are a motivation for me to pray. And to ask if He is trying to tell me something ...

Two of Jesus' disciples are going for a walk in the country and ... they are not as alone as they thought they were. Jesus is with them.

Luke spends more time with this story than Mark does. Interestingly, in Luke's parallel account, the two men don't recognize Jesus for a LONG time. He walks with them. He lets them talk all about what has been going on ... They are talking about Jesus, but don't recognize that He is actually with them all along.

I wonder if I ever do that. I am going through life. I'm busy. I'm on the move. But I'm not recognizing the truth that Jesus is, in fact, with me the whole time? Perhaps I'm even talking about Jesus (or preparing a sermon about Jesus or writing one of these reflections about Jesus) completely oblivious to the reality that Jesus is actually with me as I do so?

Or maybe I'm going to a doctor's appointment? Or at work? Or dealing with a difficult family member? Or facing a job interview? Or anticipating surgery? Or feeling overwhelmed with life? Or dealing with depression? Or trying to make a major decision? Or feeling afraid and stressed? Or _____ (fill in the blank), and I don't recognize that, in fact, Jesus is with me all along. I am not alone.

I can talk with Him about all my issues (Jesus is a great listener).

He wants me to know He is with me. He will get me where I need to be.

Jesus has risen. He is with you as you read these words. He will be with you all day today (and tomorrow, and the next day, and forever ...). He will never leave you. Be encouraged. Talk with Him. Listen to Him. Trust Him ...

*Dear God,
Thank you that you make all things new.
Thank you for the victory and power in your Name.
Thank you that you hold the keys over death,
that by your might, Jesus was raised from the grave,
paving the way for us to have new life with you.
Thank you that you had plan, that you made a way.
We confess our need for you ... fresh ... new ... again.
We ask that you renew our hearts, minds, and lives, for the days ahead.
We pray for your refreshing over us.*

*Keep your words of truth planted firm within us.
Keep us focused on what is pure and right.
Give us the power to be obedient to your word.
We ask that you will be our strength,
keeping our way clear, removing the obstacles, and covering the pitfalls.
Lord, lead us on your level ground.*

*Shine your light in us, through us, over us.
May we make a difference in this world, for your glory and purposes.
Set your way before us.
We may reflect your peace and hope to a world
that so desperately needs your presence and healing.
Thanks be to you God, for your indescribable gift!
To you be glory and honor, this day, and forever.
Amen.*

Tuesday, April 6: Mark 16:14-20

- Jesus is going ahead of us ... (16:7).
- Jesus is walking with us ... (16:12).
- Jesus is even with us when we eat ... (16:14) – remember in Luke 24:30-32, the two disciples

recognized Jesus as they were eating.

In this new resurrection-transformed world, Jesus is not limited by space and time. Through His Spirit He is with us always, everywhere. He is on the move. Wherever we go, He goes. That is great news.

In this new world, too, we have a purpose. We have a mission. We have good news to share with people around us: Jesus – the Saviour, the King – is alive. He is with us.

We can live with new passion. Walking with Jesus, every moment of every day, we can make a real, tangible difference for God's Kingdom. Call someone. Encourage someone. Help someone.

Perhaps God is inviting you to do something glorious and spectacular ... A few people are called to dramatic things for Jesus. That's great.

More likely God is calling you to live faithfully, quietly, dependably, with integrity, right where you are. We are called to be Jesus' people in our families, workplaces, schools, lodges, and neighbourhoods ...

- Who can you love in the name of Jesus – right where you are?
- Who can you care for in the name of Jesus – right where you are?
- What true, noble, right, pure, lovely, admirable, excellent, praiseworthy thing can you do in the name of Jesus – right where you are?
- Who can you forgive in the name of Jesus – right where you are?
- Who can you talk about Jesus with – right where you are?
- How can you care for God's creation in the name of Jesus – right where you are?
- How can you be a blessing in the name of Jesus – right where you are?

He has called you to be His ambassador in the name of Jesus – right where you are. That may not sound as sexy and exciting as going to Namibia or Norway, but ***right here, right now*** is where God has called you.

Be that person who lives their faith in the name of Jesus – right where they are, right at this time ...

*I will not stumble,
for your hand will guide and in your footsteps I will tread.
I will not grow weary,
for your Spirit sustains and my soul shall be renewed.
I will not be weak,
for your truth strengthens and no evil shall defeat me.
From the depths of the earth,
filled with Your Spirit,
I shall soar upward on wings like eagles,
spread the news throughout the world,
run the race against all odds,
and shall prevail.
Amen*

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