



The Gospel of Mark

10-Week Study

for Small Groups and Personal Use

2020



48 BARKER ROAD SINGAPORE 309917

TEL: 6256 4298 FAX 6255 4030

E: ADMIN@BRMC.ORG.SG

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	Acknowledgements Overview of Weekly Programme Getting Started Proposed Structure
Week 1	Daily Bible Reading Digging Deeper: Background Session 1: What is the Gospel
Week 2	Daily Bible Reading Digging Deeper: Jesus' Use of Parables Session 2: The Gospel and the Word
Week 3	Daily Bible Reading Digging Deeper: Jesus' Treatment of Ritual Impurity Session 3: The Power of the Gospel
Week 4	Daily Bible Reading Digging Deeper: Jewish Tradition and Purity Regulations Session 4: The Gospel and its Reach
Week 5	Daily Bible Reading Digging Deeper: The Messiah, John the Baptist and Elijah Session 5: The Gospel Programme
Week 6	Daily Bible Reading Digging Deeper: Jewish View on Marriage, Status and Wealth Session 6: The Gospel and its Demands
Week 7	Daily Bible Reading Digging Deeper: Jewish Understanding of the Temple Session 7: The Gospel and Faith
Week 8	Daily Bible Reading Digging Deeper: Background and Beliefs of the Pharisees, Herodians, Sadducees and Scribes Session 8: The Gospel and Love
Week 9	Daily Bible Reading Digging Deeper: Jesus' Passover with His Disciples Session 9: The Extravagant Gospel
Week 10	Daily Bible Reading Digging Deeper: The Problem of Mark's Ending Session 10: The Promise of the Gospel

Resources

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

These materials were originally prepared by the Rev Jasper Ngoh and the Rev Stefanie Oh as Small Group Materials on the Gospel of Mark for Foochow Methodist Church in 2018. We want to express our gratitude to Foochow Methodist Church, the Rev Poh Heow Lee, Pastor in Charge, and to the Rev Jasper Ngoh for allowing us to use and adapt their materials (with some minor additions, revisions and amendments) for use in BRMC.

We want to acknowledge with much appreciation the original work done by the Rev Jasper Ngoh and the Rev Stefanie Oh.

OVERVIEW OF WEEKLY PROGRAMME

- 0:00 Session Begins
Allow time for people to gather and settle down
- 0:05 Worship and Opening Prayer
Pray for the Holy Spirit's illumination during our Bible study, discussion and reflection
- 0:15 Questions for Discussion
1-2 questions. 25 min in total
- 0:40 Reflection Questions
You may break into smaller groups of threes or fours to facilitate this section.
25 mins in total
- 1:05 Prayer and Closing
Share with and pray for each other. 25 min in total.
- 1:30 Session Ends

GETTING STARTED

Introduction to the Format of the Series

For starters, make sure you are acquainted with what to expect from this series on the Gospel of Mark. There are three components to this 10-week series:

1. *Sunday Sermon*

Each week will begin on Sunday, with the exploration of the week's main theme through the Sunday service and the sermon.

2. *Daily Readings and Reflections*

You are expected to do the assigned daily readings and to spend some time contemplating the reflection questions. This should take no less than 15 minutes each day.

3. *Small Group Discussion*

Each week will conclude with a small group session. Your small group leader (or the assigned facilitator) will guide you in a discussion on issues that arise from the biblical text pertaining to the week's main theme. There will also be a time to share using some reflection questions that can help us connect the week's theme to our practical living.

*** Please take note that there will be a break in this series from 10 May to 30 May and for the week commencing 21 June**

Commitment Required

As this 10-week series on the Gospel of Mark will build upon itself in order to lead us into a deeper and clearer understanding of what the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ is, **commitment to the whole 10-week series is highly encouraged.**

We encourage every small group member to commit to **all three components of the 10-week series during the first small group session.** This includes attending weekly Sunday services, doing the daily readings and reflections, and participating in weekly small group meetings.

Do encourage and pray for each other during the course of the study!

**** Please note that this study is for internal use only.**

PROPOSED STRUCTURE

Week 1	1:1-5 1:16-8:21	The Beginning of the Gospel The Gospel in Galilee: The Mighty Messiah 1:16-45 Typical activities of Jesus' ministry 2:1-3:6 Conflicts with religious authorities
Week 2		3:7-35 Jesus' authority and family 4:1-41 The Kingdom and its King
Week 3		5:1-43 The need for faith 6:1-56 The Kingdom and the Jews
Week 4		7:1-8:21 The Kingdom extended
Week 5	8:22-10:52	The Gospel on the road to Jerusalem The Suffering Messiah 8:22-33 Beginning of true spiritual vision 8:34-9:1 The Messiah must suffer 9:2-13 The Transfiguration 9:14-29 The boy with an unclean spirit 9:30-50 The Messiah must suffer and lessons on greatness
Week 6		10:1-31 Revolutionary values for disciples 10:32-45 Following the Messiah 10:46-52 True spiritual vision
Week 7	11:1-16:20	The Gospel in Jerusalem: The Glorious Messiah 11:1-25 Symbols of Fulfilment and Judgment
Week 8		11:26-12:44 Conflicts with religious authorities
Week 9		13:1-37 Signs of the Temple's destruction and the End 14:1-11 Anointing at Bethany 14:12-32 The Last Supper 14:33-42 Gethsemane
Week 10		14:43-52 The arrest of Jesus 14:53-72 The Jewish trial 15:1-20 The Roman trial 15:21-47 The Crucifixion, Death and Burial of Jesus 16:1-20 The Resurrection



DAILY BIBLE READING

Week 1

Mark 1:1-3:6

Day 1: 20 Apr

Read Mark 1:1-15

Beginnings point to something new or renewed, and Mark tells us that this new thing is the Gospel. The Old Testament foretold it, John the Baptist is its messenger and Jesus is its embodiment - the Son of God has come! What is this Gospel? And at this point in your life, what does it mean for you?

Day 2: 21 Apr

Read Mark 1:16-45

What did the Gospel look like in practical terms? In this passage, Mark tells us that Jesus summoned his disciples, taught the people, drove away evil spirits with a single command, and healed the sick. But more than that, Jesus touched the untouchables and intentionally left the limelight to reach the unreached. How does the Gospel look like in today's world?

Day 3: 22 Apr

Read Mark 2:1-17

These are the first two accounts of conflict between Jesus and the religious authorities, and both concern the forgiveness of sins. In forgiving the paralytic's sins, Jesus showed that the Son of Man has authority to make a person whole. In eating with sinners, He showed that those who recognise their need of Him will be accepted. Have you come to Jesus for forgiveness - wholeness and acceptance?

Day 4: 23 Apr

Read Mark 2:18-22

In the third conflict between Jesus and the religious authorities, Jesus uses the imagery of a wedding feast wherein He is the bridegroom. This imagery recalls the story of God and Israel in Hosea where God the bridegroom woos and finally restores Israel the errant bride. In essence, Jesus was saying that the kingdom is mediated only through Him. When the new comes, the old must be done away with. What "old" things are you still holding onto that Jesus may want to make "new"?

Day 5: 24 Apr

Read Mark 2:23-3:6

In the fourth and fifth conflicts with the religious authorities, Jesus puts into correct perspective the purpose of the Sabbath - to sustain life. By declaring Himself the Lord of the Sabbath and by healing on the Sabbath, Jesus demonstrated that His ministry and the coming of the kingdom is about the renewal of life and creation. Have you been observing the Sabbath as God purposed it?

DIGGING DEEPER

Week 1: Mark 1:1-3:6

Background, Content and Structure

Since Mark is a common Roman name, the author of the Gospel of Mark is uncertain. Is it the Mark mentioned in the Acts of the Apostles and in some letters of Paul and Peter? No one knows for sure. Nevertheless, most scholars agree that the date of writing is between A.D. 64 to 68 when the Christian community in Rome was facing two major challenges to their faith: the ageing of the Apostles, and impending persecution from Roman emperor Nero.

In our endeavour to understand the Gospel presented by Mark more clearly, it is also important to note that the writing was intended for oral presentation in the setting of worship. Clues to this mode of transmission can be seen in the many stylistic descriptions used that served to heighten the listener's senses as he would hear the text read aloud. In addition, editorial remarks such as "let the reader understand" were used to highlight the portion of text so that the designated reader would not miss the point while reading it to those gathered in worship. Therefore, in order to gain the most out of our daily readings, you are encouraged to read the text aloud at least once.

SESSION 1: WHAT IS THE GOSPEL?

Questions for Discussion

1. Refer to the Discussion Point at the bottom of this section. How was the term "gospel" used in the 1st century A.D. Roman Empire?
2. Read Mark 1:1-3. What are the similarities and differences with the Priene Calendar inscription? What is the "gospel" according to Mark?

3. *If You Have Time ...*

There are five episodes of conflict between Jesus and the religious authorities narrated in 2:1-3:6. They are as follows:

2:2-12	Healing of the Paralytic
2:13-17	Call of Levi and the feast
2:18-22	Question on fasting
2:23-27	Plucking grain on the Sabbath
3:1-6	Healing on the Sabbath

Do you notice a pattern in the series of conflict? Explain.

Discussion Point

"... since Providence... [has given] us Augustus, whom she filled with virtue that he might benefit humankind, sending him as a saviour, both for us and for our descendants, that he might end war and arrange all things, and since he, Caesar, by his epiphany ... since the birthday of the god Augustus was the beginning of the GOSPEL for the world that came by reason of him..." - The Priene Calendar Inscription (9 B.C), taken from Stanley Porter's *Hearing the Old Testament in the New Testament*, p 93.

Reflection Questions

4. What are some other "gospels" that our world may be presenting to us today?

5. Knowing that the Gospel refers primarily to the life and ministry of Jesus, what does it mean for you to be a messenger of the Gospel?

6. What are the escalating oppositions that you may face when you bear the good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ?

Learning Point

The Gospel is not just a series of events concerning the life and ministry of Jesus Christ. The Gospel refers primarily to the life and ministry of Jesus and what it means for us.



DAILY BIBLE READING

Week 2

Mark 3:7-4:41

Day 6: 27 Apr

Read Mark 3:7-12

Up to this point, we see that apart from God's own declaration of Jesus' sonship, no others have acclaimed Jesus with that title except for those possessed by unclean spirits. The unclean spirits seem to recognise Jesus' authority and identity when the people do not. Do you recognise Jesus' identity and authority in your life? How have you shown it?

Day 7: 28 Apr

Read Mark 3:13-35

What comes across most clearly in today's passage is Jesus' definition of "family" or the "family of God". This family is defined not by blood, class or status but by obedience to God's will. All who obey God's will are accepted into the family of God. In your interactions with fellow Christians, have you accepted and treated all as true family?

Day 8: 29 Apr

Read Mark 4:1-25

In the Parable of the Sower, Jesus tells the disciples that the "seed" represents the "word". Once planted, the different responses are highlighted: those who lost it straightaway, those who gave up because of persecution, those who were hampered by other cares and worries, and those who responded positively. What is your response to Jesus the Word?

Day 9: 30 Apr

Read Mark 4:26-34

In the Parables of the Growing Seed and the Mustard Seed, Jesus describes the kingdom of God as one that begins humbly and inconspicuously. Yet, like a seed that grows in good soil, the kingdom's King is at work and the end result is sure: so glorious will be the kingdom that Israel will not be its only beneficiary. In fact, all nations will be drawn to it, for God is the King of all. Are you working together with the Lord for His kingdom's work?

Day 10: 1 May

Read Mark 4:35-41

In this story, the word 'great' is used three times. Indeed, Jesus' identity is something great! Though His identity remains somewhat hidden up to this point in Mark's Gospel, Jesus' power in calming the storm shows His disciples that they must learn to exercise faith in Him even in the midst of the storms of life. Is the Lord calling you to exercise faith in your life now? In what area?

DIGGING DEEPER

Week 2: Mark 3:7-4:41

Jesus' Use of Parables

Although Mark has repeatedly emphasised what Jesus taught, this is the first time he features an extended block of His teaching. And Mark takes it a step further to tell his listeners that Jesus "taught them many things by parables" (4:2). The statement indicates that parables were Jesus' characteristic method of teaching.

Immediately following that statement, and before beginning to tell the first parable, Jesus says "Listen!" and "Look" (or "Behold"). Some bible translations omit the second word unfortunately, but the use of both senses of perception show how important the Parable of the Sower is. Indeed, the Parable of the Sower (4:1-9) is the key to unlocking all the other parables. So important is the teaching that mere listening is not enough. The listeners must also perceive what they are hearing, ie. their hearing should lead to a new outlook. And such is the unique characteristic of parables.

Parables engage the audience with a kind of symbolic universe or narrative world, drawing the audience in to make judgements about certain characters and their actions. In so doing, the audience themselves reveal to others and themselves the kind of people they really are. Very often, by using familiar symbols and storylines with a twist, parables challenge accepted worldviews that have been bequeathed by centuries of tradition, and thereby creating new possibilities for re-visioning.

Why does Jesus use parables? Parables set the stage for Jesus' message concerning the Kingdom of God, and signals to its listeners that the kingdom is not as they know it. Through the parables, the repeated theme of hiddenness followed by revelation will ring through, symbolising the paradoxical nature of the Kingdom of God. Through them, Jesus beckoned the people to come to true perception. Likewise, Jesus beckons us too to come to true perception as we study the Scriptures.

Will you ask the Lord for true spiritual vision as you continue daily reading of the Scriptures?

SESSION 2: THE GOSPEL AND THE WORD?

Questions for Discussion

1. Mark 4:1-25 is laid out in an ABA'B' pattern.

A	4:1-9	Model parable
B	4:10-12	The concealing function of parables
A'	4:13-20	Explanation of the model parable
B'	4:21-25	The concealing and revealing functions of parables

Why did Jesus choose to use "seed" parables to explain the Kingdom of God? List three reasons if you can.

2. In the Parable of the Sower, the "seed" represents the "word." How does the "word" relate to the presence of God's Kingdom, and how is it perceived by the various listeners?

3. *If You Have Time...*

Read Mark 4:10-12 and 4:21-25. In these verses, Jesus sets up two sets of contrasts - insiders versus outsiders (4:10-12) and revelation versus concealment (4:21-25). Why did Jesus exclude some from understanding the parables?

Discussion Point

Read Isaiah 40:8 and 55:10-11. The "word" of God referred to by Jesus is one that endures forever and is unfailing. In effect, this word functions as the restorative word of God. Wherever the word is received, broken people and broken relationships are restored.

Reflection Questions

4. Those who are unbelieving and obdurate (ie. hardness of heart) in the Gospel of Mark often dismiss the word given through Jesus' ministry as an impotent word. Hence, parables remain as parables for them, the kingdom remains concealed, and they are labelled as "outsiders" to the kingdom.

Are there people like that whom you know?

Are you in danger of becoming an "outsider" due to your unbelief and obduracy?

5. God's Word is a "seed": seemingly impotent but is actually powerful beyond measure. Are there areas in your life where faith in the "impotent seed" of God's word is needed?

Learning Point

The promised restorative word is given while obduracy is still at work, and therefore, Jesus advises His audience to use all their senses of perception. Those who have opened their senses and their hearts to Jesus' ministry will receive more insight while those who do not, whatever insight they may have received will be taken away from them.



DAILY BIBLE READING

Week 3

Mark 5:1-6:56

Day 11: 4 May

Read Mark 5:1-20

Once the man with the unclean spirit saw Jesus, he runs to Him. A thoroughly unclean person to a thoroughly pure one. For the Jews, contact between an unclean person and a clean one would render the pure one unclean. But Jesus casts out the unclean spirits and makes the man clean. This shows us that it is through Jesus that we are made clean! What is your response to Him?

Day 12: 5 May

Read Mark 5:21-43

In today's passage, we see Jesus performing two miracles of healing juxtaposed with each other. First, Jairus requests for Jesus to heal his sickly daughter. Then, as Jesus follows Jairus, an unclean woman touches His cloak to obtain healing. At this point, we are told that Jairus' daughter has died. Will Jesus go and heal her? Can He bring her back from death? Jesus' words to Jairus still rings true today, "do not be afraid any longer, only believe." Do you?

Day 13: 6 May

Read Mark 6:1-30

Jesus' fame has become widespread, and news of His miracles were well known. Yet, He was rejected in His own hometown. The result was that few miracles were performed. Mark tells us that Jesus was amazed at their lack of faith. The earlier miracle stories in Days 11 and 12, along with today's passage, tells us the necessity of the response of faith. Will you respond to God in faith?

Day 14: 7 May

Read Mark 6:31-44

After returning from their mission undoubtedly tired, Jesus and His disciples went away to rest. But upon seeing the crowd that came to Him, Mark tells us that Jesus had compassion on them because they were like "sheep without a shepherd". Jesus, the Great Shepherd has come and He uses resources already present, and multiplies them to bless others. Will you be His "resource" to bless others?

Day 15: 8 May

Read Mark 6:45-56

When the disciples saw Jesus, they were afraid. Mark tells us in verse 52 that the disciples were afraid because they did not understand the miracle of the loaves (which we read yesterday).

What had they missed? What do you understand about Jesus from these two episodes?

DIGGING DEEPER

Week 3: Mark 5:1-6:56

Jesus' Treatment of Ritual Impurity

The three healing miracles in this week's readings deal with the issue of ritual impurity. In the first healing miracle, Jesus heals by exorcising a legion of unclean spirits from a man. While the story is laden with many fascinating details, it is essentially a story about Jesus intentionally going into "unclean" territory to heal an "unclean" man.

The place, we are told, is Gerasenes in the region of Decapolis which is populated by Gentiles. It is also an area where pigs are farmed. Pigs are regarded as unclean animals on the OT (Lev 11:7-8; Deut 14:8), and had become a symbol of paganism (cf. Mat 7:6). In addition, the man was possessed by a legion of unclean spirits. No ordinary Jew would have gone into that region let alone go near the demon-possessed man. And the underlying reason was because of the Jewish understanding of ritual impurity.

According to the tradition, when a "pure" person or object comes into contact with an "unclean" person or object, there is only one direction of influence: the "unclean" power will flow from the impure to contaminate the "clean" one. The message that Jesus sends through this healing miracle is that He is the only way that ritual impurity can be done away with. It is through Jesus that ritual impurity is removed and a legion of evil forces can be defeated.

The next two healing miracles add to this theme of Jesus' treatment of ritual impurity. In Jewish thought, both menstrual blood and death are considered unclean. And those who are afflicted with such are to be avoided for fear of "contamination". Yet, when in contact with Jesus, these two persons who suffered such affliction were healed from infirmities, and thus, understood to be made clean. Instead of the impurities rendering one unclean, Jesus' power and purity have the reverse effect. Jesus the Holy One of God does not shield Himself from uncleanness, but reaches out and touches the unclean, and in that process makes them clean! All this makes the question of His identity more urgent. Who is this person who can tame a legion of evil forces, cleanse the impure, and raise the dead? Through these healing miracles, Jesus is seen to play the role of God. Only God can do all these things!

Who is Jesus to you?

SESSION 3: THE POWER OF THE GOSPEL

Questions for Discussion

1. Mark 6:48 tells us that Jesus meant to pass by His disciples on the water. Read Exodus 33:12-23 and 1 Kings 19:11-18. What was the context of Moses' and Elijah's situations and how was God's "passing by" perceived by them? What was Jesus' intention in passing by His disciples on the water?
2. *If You Have Time...*
In Mark 6:51-52, the disciples were terrified because they had forgotten the loaves because their hearts were hardened. What was it about the feeding miracle that the disciples failed to understand?
3. Mark portrays exorcism and healing as key elements of Jesus' ministry and chapter 5 contains three healing miracles: the healing of the demon-possessed man (5:1-19), the healing of the woman with a menstrual disorder (5:25-34), and the healing of Jairus' daughter (5:20-24, 35-43). Read *Digging Deeper (Week 3)*. What is the common thread that runs through these stories? Can you observe a pattern?

Discussion Point

Jesus' response to the disciples, translated in NIV as "It is I," are the same words used in the Old Testament for "I AM". The title "I AM" is used in the context of commissioning or comforting because it declares God's sovereignty. In Isaiah, "I AM" or the claim of God's sole supremacy is given to awaken faith in His people and comfort them during difficult undertakings. And so, they are often coupled with "fear not" or "take heart".

Reflection Questions

4. You may have had the experience of being terrified amidst the strong winds and choppy waters of life. You may even be experiencing these right now. Has God ever “passed by” you and revealed Himself to you? What is God saying to you from the story in Mark 6:45-53?

Learning Point

As we struggle in the strong winds and choppy waters in obedience to Jesus’ commands, we must remember that He who commands us is present with us.



DAILY BIBLE READING

Week 4

Mark 7:1-8:21

Day 16: 1 Jun

Read Mark 7:1-13

In this episode, some religious leaders questioned Jesus about the disciples' neglect of some ceremonial regulations, and Jesus' answer to them is direct and accusatory: the religious leaders have rejected the commandments of God to keep the traditions of men. In so doing, they worship God in vain. Prayerfully consider - have you, in upholding traditions, worshipped God in vain?

Day 17: 2 Jun

Read Mark 7:14-23 and recall the readings for Day 15

In today's passage, Jesus explains the heart of the matter - the heart. It is not what goes into a person that defiles him, but what comes out. For what goes in does not affect the heart, what comes out proceeds from the heart. Sound simple? Yet, the disciples did not truly understand. Do you?

Day 18: 3 Jun

Read Mark 7:24-37

Jesus used the image of a meal when speaking with the Syro-Phoenician woman, which alludes to the promise of restoration to Israel where the nation will finally dine in perfect fellowship with God. Yet Jesus accedes to the woman's request and drives the unclean spirit of her daughter who is a Gentile. Is this a "crumb" from the children's table? Later on, Jesus goes further to touch the ears and tongue of a Gentile man and heal him. What might these healings signify?

Day 19: 4 Jun

Read Mark 8: 1-10

Mark presents a trend in this week's readings. First, there is Jesus' declaration that the Jewish traditions are secondary to the commands of God (see Day 16). Then, Jesus declares that it is the purity of the heart that matters rather than the ritual cleansing of the exterior (see Day 17). Going further, Jesus then heals two Gentiles (see Day 18). And in today's passage, like the previous incident recorded in Mark 6:31-44, Jesus had compassion on the large crowd and fed them through a miraculous multiplication of food. Only this time, the crowd was mainly Gentiles and the incident happened in Gentile territory. Do you notice the trend? What might it be?

Day 20: 5 Jun

Read Mark 8:11-21

After they experienced the miraculous feeding of the 4,000, the disciples now worry that they did not bring enough bread with them. They had completely missed the point! This is when Jesus chooses to explain the two feeding miracles. In Jewish thinking, the numbers 5 and 12 represents the five books of the Torah and the 12 tribes of Israel respectively. The number 4 represents the four corners of the world and 7 is the number for completeness. In other words, the kingdom of God is large enough to feed the whole world. In our world of limited resources, can you believe that this still holds true today?

DIGGING DEEPER

Week 4: Mark 7:1-8:21

Jewish Tradition and Purity Regulations

Jewish traditions are a result of interpretation developed, discussed and tested over years of the study of the Torah. These traditions were to be a buffer zone between the requirements of the Torah and daily living, such that if the traditions were observed, the Torah would not be transgressed. This is sometimes known as “fencing” the Torah. The main group of religious leaders responsible for developing these traditions are the Pharisees. The Pharisees can be typified as a movement which sought to extend the purity of the Temple to the home, and the Scribes were the ones who passed on the traditions. And in the narrative in 7:11-13, we are told that it is such a delegation of Pharisees and Scribes from Jerusalem who have made the accusation against Jesus’ disciples.

In order to gain further insights in to this episode, it is important to understand that eating common food with unwashed hands does not contradict the Torah. In fact, the most directly relevant Torah regulation is a command for priests to wash their hands ceremonially before offering sacrifices. And so, what we have in this episode is an example of an extension of this principle to the laity to cover all foods consumed and not just sacrifices made to God. Such as, the disciples were accused not based on transgressing the Torah but on flouting a tradition of the elders.

But why did the Pharisees hold these Jewish traditions so tightly? They believed that loyalty to the Torah including the regulations on purity (also called the “purity code”) would cause God to come alongside the nation. Small Israel could then triumph over any big kingdom. So tightly do they hold to this belief that many famous Jewish martyrs of the Maccabean period lost their lives precisely because of the unflinching loyalty to the purity code. Hence, purity issues were paramount for bound up with them were the Torah, tradition and politics. This implies that adherence to the purity code as an indicator of loyalty to God and to the nation. And as such, any transgression, even of the tradition, is a mark of disloyalty or betrayal.

Are there traditions or beliefs that you hold to that Jesus might be trying to make right?

SESSION 4: THE GOSPEL AND ITS REACH

Questions for Discussion

1. Compare the feeding of the 5,000 (6:31-44) and the feeding of the 4,000 (8:1-10). What are some similarities and differences between the two stories?
2. Recall Jesus' treatment of ritual impurity, the declaration that all foods are clean, followed by the two healing miracles leading up to the feeding of the 4,000. What pattern can you observe? What is the underlying message?
3. *If You Have Time...*
Read Mark 7:14-23. Jesus explains that food does not affect the heart, which is the seat of personality in ancient thought. But rather, the heart of the matter is the heart. It is from the heart that impure thoughts and actions arise. What are the implications of this teaching in regards to a) how we should view rituals; and b) who can be received into God's Kingdom?

Discussion Point

Note the progression of events between the two feeding miracles. First, the declaration of all food being clean breaks down the barriers that divide Jews and Gentiles. Second, the healing of the Syro-Phoenician woman's daughter indicates that Gentiles can have the scraps from the children's table. Third, the healing of the deaf-mute Gentile man suggests that Gentiles are also beneficiaries of the blessings of the Kingdom.

Reflection Questions

4. In those days, the Jews thought that they were the sole beneficiaries of the Kingdom, and that the Gentiles were strictly “outsiders.” Jesus, however, had a revolutionary message. Through His acts and His teachings, He demonstrated that the doors of the Kingdom were open also to those “outsiders” whom the “insider” Jews thought belonged outside the Kingdom.

Who are the perceived “outsiders” of the kingdom in our society and in your social circle?

What is your role in being a messenger of the Gospel to these “outsiders” in your life?

Learning Point

There is a generosity and abundance to the Kingdom of God as seen in the large quantities of leftovers from the two feeding miracles. It is this generosity that clashes with the kingdom visions of the Pharisees and Herod, and so, Jesus’ warning is dire. The pure bread of the Kingdom must not be corrupted by the yeast of triumphalism and narrow-mindedness.



DAILY BIBLE READING

Week 5

Mark 6:22-9:50

Day 21: 8 Jun

Read Mark 8:22-33

Immediately following Peter's confession of Jesus as the 'Christ', he rebukes Jesus for teaching His disciples that the Son must suffer many things, be killed and after 3 days rise again. As a result, he is reprimanded by Jesus for not having in mind the things of God. Did Peter truly understand Jesus' true identity and the "things of God"? Do you?

Day 22: 9 Jun

Read Mark 8:34-9:1

In this passage, Jesus tells His disciples the cost of following Him - they must deny themselves, take up their cross and follow Him. This is a difficult saying. Taking up the cross in the context of the first century is not about denying oneself the pleasures of life or bearing the burdensome responsibilities placed upon us. Instead, it is about carrying the cross to the place of crucifixion. In other words, those who carry crosses are those who are making journey to the place of death. Jesus Himself takes up the cross and bids His followers follow suit. Have you taken up your cross? Will you?

Day 23: 10 Jun

Read Mark 9:2-13

Recall our bible reading for this week. Up to this point, Jesus had been teaching the reality of the Kingdom in unprecedented and shocking ways. Not only that, His words on what the Messiah has to suffer at the hands of mortal men are downright scandalous. In the account of the Transfiguration, the divine voice from the cloud speaks to affirm Jesus' status as the Son of God, and commands them to listen to Him! Are you listening? Do you believe in the suffering Messiah?

Day 24: 11 Jun

Read Mark 9:14-29

Jesus descends from the mountain after the Transfiguration only to walk into an ongoing argument resulting from the other disciples' failure to exorcise an unclean spirit from a young boy. Jesus rebukes the crowd and the boy's father for their lack of faith, and casts out the evil spirit. Later, He explains to the disciples that their failure was due to a lack of prayer. Indeed, prayer is an expression of faith. How is your faith? How is your prayer life?

Day 25: 12 Jun

Read Mark 9:30-50

In today's readings, we are presented with three lessons on greatness. In the first, Jesus says receiving a child, who is easily ignored and without status in first century society, in His name, welcomes Him. In the second, Jesus accepts a stranger who exorcises in His name and forbids the disciples from stopping him. And finally, Jesus warns against stumbling others. All these point to Jesus' perspective of greatness - true greatness means being a servant of all in Jesus' name and involves having a largeness of heart that goes beyond one's in-group. How large is your heart?

DIGGING DEEPER

Week 5: Mark 8:22-9:50

The Messiah, John the Baptist and Elijah (9:11-13)

In this week's bible readings, we come across the name of Elijah in two passages. In chapter 8, Jesus asks His disciples, "Who do people say I am?" and they reply, "Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets." In chapter 9, the disciples see Moses and Elijah with Jesus at the Transfiguration and ask Jesus regarding the coming of Elijah. So what is the Jewish understanding of the end times, the prophet Elijah and John the Baptist in relation to the Messiah?

There are a few difficulties in understanding Jesus' reply in 9:12-13. Firstly, Elijah is never said to be the forerunner of the Messiah in the Scriptures. However, in Malachi 4:5-6, he is said to herald the day of the Lord which refers to the return of God to reign in Zion (ie. The Kingdom of God). Since the ushering in of this great day of the Lord is often related to the coming of the Messiah, the Scribes may have expressed belief in Elijah as the herald of the Messiah.

Secondly, nowhere in Scripture does it prophesy explicitly that the Son of Man must suffer. The title of "Son of Man" appears chiefly in the Book of Daniel, in which He plays the role of vindicator of God's people, and One who will ultimately reign. However, the Gospel of Mark alludes also to Isaiah 53 in which the Messiah is depicted as the suffering servant. The passages of Daniel 7 and Isaiah 53 are similar and can be envisioned together. The implication is that the One who ushers in God's Kingdom is also the suffering Servant.

Thirdly, the prophet Elijah was taken up in a chariot of fire and did not suffer death by the people. What is important to note though, is that the statement in 9:13 refers not to 'Elijah' the prophet, but to his symbolic role as a forerunner. Though Mark does not name the actual person, Mark's readers may take this as a clue that points to John the Baptist.

Having resolved the difficulties in Jesus' reply, the main point must not be missed - as the forerunner has suffered, so would the Son of Man. In this way, glory and suffering come together in the life and ministry of Jesus.

What does this mean for you?

SESSION 5: THE GOSPEL PROGRAMME

Questions for Discussion

1. Read Mark 8:31-38. Jesus often referred to Himself with the title "Son of Man." Read Daniel 7:9-14. What was given to the "Son of Man"?
2. Peter is called "satan" in Jesus' rebuke because the word "satan" is understood generically as the one who opposes. Who or what did Peter oppose?
3. *If You Have Time...*
Jesus said, "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." In your own words, rephrase verses 35-38. What does it mean to follow Jesus?

Discussion Point

If the "Son of Man" figure is supposed to be so glorious, it is no wonder that Peter reacted against Jesus' teaching that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the religious leaders of Israel. Yet, Jesus insists that the programme that God has for the Son of Man and His kingdom involves suffering.

Reflection Questions

4. In God's kingdom programme, glory is found in self-giving to the point of suffering for another's benefit. As Christians, the knowledge of God's self-giving character drives our acts of charity and altruism. However, Jesus' command for us to deny ourselves, take up our crosses, and follow Him leaves no room for any other programme in our lives. Have you subconsciously excluded God's kingdom programme from certain areas of your lives?

Learning Point

Becoming disciples of the Son of Man involves re-visioning societal norms and one's values. Even today, statistics relating to the breakup of marriages, pictures of the poor starving for food and affection, and backstabbing and betrayals resulting from a desire for self-benefit are aplenty. In contrast, Jesus teaches that true greatness involves service and largeness of heart.



DAILY BIBLE READING

Week 6

Mark 10:1-52

Day 26: 15 Jun

Read Mark 10:1-16

We continue on Jesus' revolutionary teachings on discipleship today with regards to two areas: marriage and status. These values are revolutionary precisely because they were antithetical to the societal view at the time. In the first century, divorce was rampant and assumed to be a husband's right based on even the smallest displeasure, and children utterly dependent on adults and therefore without status. Yet, Jesus taught that divorce is but a concession due to obduracy (ie. hardness of heart) and that the Kingdom belonged to such ones (ie. children). What values might you be holding on to that Jesus is seeking to revolutionise?

Day 27: 16 June

Read Mark 10:17-31

In this episode, Jesus teaches a rich young man that merely complying with the Commandments without re-ordering his values will not get him eternal life. Paradoxically, giving up his possessions for the sake of the kingdom results in gaining treasure in heaven. What have you given up to follow Jesus? What values might Jesus be seeking to re-order in your life?

Day 28: 17 Jun

Read Mark 10:32-40

This passage details the last of the three occasions when Jesus predicts His own death. This immediately prompts a response from disciples James and John, asking to sit at His right and left when He is finally glorified. Their intent is clear - they want to share in Jesus' glory. Suffering, in their minds, is but a means to glory. In this thinking, they missed the point. The passion of Christ (or the cross) is the crux of the Kingdom of God and the Gospel. The suffering of the Messiah is not just a means to glory, but is itself a display of the glory of God. What are your thoughts on suffering?

Day 29: 18 Jun

Read Mark 10:41-45

Continuing from yesterday's reading, we see that the remaining ten disciples became indignant at James and John because of their request to be recognised alongside Jesus in His glory. Jesus uses the occasion to teach the disciples one last lesson on greatness. The Gentile idea of greatness is lording over others, but the Kingdom's idea of greatness is expressed in humble servanthood. What is your idea of greatness?

Day 30: 19 Jun

Read Mark 10:46-52

When Jesus calls for Bartimaeus to be brought to Him, Bartimaeus throws away his cloak and goes to Jesus. The throwing away of the cloak is significant because it is deemed essential for survival. In fact, the Torah provides that a person's cloak cannot be taken away from him by any creditor for this very reason. For a beggar, the cloak is even more significant because it represents all his worldly possessions and his means of sustenance as it is used for collecting money from begging. In other words, Bartimaeus threw away all that he had in order to follow Jesus. Would you? Have you?

DIGGING DEEPER

Week 6: Mark 10:1-52

Jewish View on Marriage, Status and Wealth

In the first century, divorce was considered the husband's prerogative and the conditions for divorce easily attained. For example, a man could divorce his wife for even the most minute reason, such as spoiling a dish. Furthermore, in Jewish understating, men do not commit adultery against women, but only against other men. If a man commits adultery with a married woman, both of them sin against the woman's husband and likewise, if a woman commits adultery, she does not sin against the other woman but against her own husband. Jesus' sayings are revolutionary in that He reminds the Pharisees that divorce was a concession given due to the peoples' hardness of heart, and not a man's right. His saying in 10:11-12 goes further because it declares that the woman can be sinned against, and the dismissal of a wife by a husband seeking to marry someone else is adultery according to the Commandments. Even today, this saying is radical!

What about children and wealth? In the society then, children were considered utterly dependent and without status. As such, they were considered a burden to society until they came of age. Jesus' saying that the Kingdom belongs to such as these ones was radical because it placed all humans in the same dire status as children in need of redemption and forgiveness. It is precisely those who recognise their need and come to Jesus that will finally belong to the Kingdom.

Regarding wealth, Jesus exclaimed how hard it is for the rich to enter the Kingdom of God. What was so revolutionary about this? Simply put, in Jewish understanding, wealth was a sign of God's blessings and those who possess it were thought to be assured of the life to come. Jesus' saying goes against this because wealth is not the key to the Kingdom. Neither is impoverishment. Rather, following the Messiah means re-ordering one's values rightly.

All these three items listed are life's essentials: home, status and mean of survival. Jesus' assertion is that giving up all these things for the Kingdom results paradoxically in gaining them. Giving up is not impoverishment but being free in order to share, and such sharing enlarges one's home, relationships and possessions. This was God's divine intention behind the creation of the world.

What is Jesus asking you to give up?

SESSION 6: THE GOSPEL AND ITS DEMANDS

Questions for Discussion

1. Read Mark 2:1-12 ,23-28; 8:31-38; 9:12-18, 30-32; 10:45. List down what you have learnt about the Son of Man from these passages. How did Jesus slowly redefine his disciples' straightforward understanding of the glorious "Son of Man" as found in the book of Daniel?
2. Read Mark 10:42-44. What does a proper understanding of the "Son of Man" title imply for Jesus' disciples?
3. *If You Have Time...*
Read Mark 10:46-52 and 8:22-25. How does the healing of Bartimaeus and the healing of the blind man relate to the theme of spiritual vision? How does the theme of faith relate to spiritual vision?

Discussion Point

Some have interpreted Jesus' self-prediction that "after three days he will rise" (Mark 9:31; 10:34) as a model of Christian living - that temporary suffering is a means to gain more glory. However, according to Jesus, the Son of Man must suffer and die. This comes about not because of failure or a means to gain more glory. Instead, this suffering is part and parcel of His vocation: service for all and a ransom for many.

Reflection Questions

4. As followers of Christ, we are called to imitate Christ and therefore imitate His vocation of suffering and service. This is a general vocational call. At the same time, all of us are called to a specific vocation in terms of the places where we work and serve. How is God prompting you to live out your general vocation in the sphere of your specific vocation?

Learning Point

The coming of the Son of Man signals the conclusion of God's program and so His coming to serve must then signal that the new fabric that will characterise the Kingdom is service. His disciples, likewise, must follow in His footsteps in service for all, as that is their vocation.



DAILY BIBLE READING

Week 7

Mark 11:1-12: 21

Day 31: 29 Jun

Read Mark 11:1-10

It was the first Palm Sunday. The Passover crowds were gathered as Jesus begins His final week (aka. passion week) entering into Jerusalem. The alert listener would recall the third passion prediction: it will be in this city that the Son of Man will be handed over and killed. And yet, the crowd appeared to acclaim Jesus as the long-awaited King from the line of David. They laid down their cloaks, shouted Hosanna, and waved branches. But did they really see Him as King? Do you?

Day 32: 30 Jun

Read Mark 11:11-19

In this episode, Jesus curses a fig tree for being fruitless, and drives out those who were buying and selling in the Temple, overturning the tables of the moneychangers and dove-sellers. He declares that the Temple had become a robber's den instead of being a house of prayer as God intended. Like the fig tree, the Temple had the appearance of godliness, but failed to bear its fruit. What about you? What does bearing fruit mean for you?

Day 33: 1 Jul

Read Mark 11:12-26

When Jesus and His disciples returned to the fig tree a second time, it had withered. The disciples could not believe it really happened! What message was Jesus trying to convey in the "cleansing" of the Temple and the withering of the fig tree? And what has faith, prayer and forgiveness to do with it?

Day 34: 2 Jul

Read Mark 11:27-33

This is the first of many conflicts to come as Jesus spends His final week in Jerusalem, alluding to the five conflicts Jesus had with the religious leaders as the Gospel of Mark began. Jesus responds to their accusations with an invitation masked as a question. If they accepted John's baptism, they would accept Jesus' ministry as well, and be welcomed into the Kingdom. Instead, they chose the cowardly way out, "we do not know". Just as Jesus invited His enemies, He too invites you. What will your response be?

Day 35: 3 Jul

Read Mark 12:1-12

The tenants were mistaken. They thought they owned the vineyard and committed increasingly atrocious acts against the servants sent to collect the harvest. They even went as far as to murder the owner's son. So it was with the leaders of Israel. They rejected the prophets and they will soon crucify the Son. Yet, they will eventually be destroyed by the owner. Are there times in your life that you have wilfully disobeyed God?

DIGGING DEEPER

Week 7: Mark 11:1-12:12

Jewish Understanding of the Temple

In this week's readings, we come across a pivotal episode where Jesus supposedly "cleanses" the Temple. In order to grasp Jesus' actions, a preliminary understanding of the Jewish background and context is needed.

The first thing to bear in mind is that the Jewish Temple is not simply a place where tourists visit as a religious shrine. It is a national symbol for God's presence and Israel's special relationship as God's chosen people. As such, it is also a symbol of resistance to the influences of the Roman empire and foreign rule.

In Jesus' time, the first century A.D., the Second Temple was a magnificent structure. Refurbishment and enlargement of the small structure began some twenty years before by Herod the Great, and became what is possibly the most beautiful building of its time. The stones used in the construction of the Temple were huge and the complex took up one-sixth of the city.

The Jews believed that in the last days, a new Temple or a renewed Temple will come about and God's presence will be experienced like never before. At that time, Israel will be vindicated, restored, and glorified.

The Temple was also a place around which most of the economy of Jerusalem revolved. Gifts and deposits are transacted at the Temple because it is a sacred place thought to be the most secure on earth, in addition to the buying and selling associated with Temple sacrifices and offerings and tax. In the past, the financial cost of running the Temple was forked out by the kings. But after Israel lost its monarchy, the cost was borne by the common people in the form of an annual tax imposed on all males. Since many different types of coins were used throughout the empire, the Temple authorities insisted on a particular coinage. If this is so, money-changing facilities were needed.

Since many Jews travelled far distances to make their sacrifices at the Temple, it would be difficult for them to bring their animals from their homes. And therefore, animal sellers provided the services needed. Dove-sellers supplied sacrificial doves to the poor mostly. The rich might bring more expensive options such as bulls and lambs, but for the poor, doves were the least expensive option the Torah provided for.

With this background, any demonstration or protest in the Temple is not to be taken lightly. It is either a rejection of the Temple's significance or a direct challenge to the Temple authorities.

SESSION 7: THE GOSPEL AND FAITH

Questions for Discussion

1. Read Mark 11:12-14, 20-26. The fig tree is mentioned just before the Temple scene and just after, and forms a frame with which the Temple scene should be understood. The fig tree is a symbol often used for the nation of Israel, and the Temple is the one institution that demonstrates Israel's unique identity as God's people.
Read the Discussion Point. What does the cursing of the fig tree imply for the Temple in regards to its "fruits", fulfilling its purpose, and its judgement?

2. In Jewish culture, faith is expressed in devotion to the Temple and its practices. Consequently, prayer is made in the Temple and forgiveness pronounced and received in the Temple through its rituals. In Jesus' reply to Peter, the Temple is likened to a mountain which is thrown into the sea. What do Jesus' words imply with regards to faith, prayer, and forgiveness?

Discussion Point

The fig tree is unique from other trees in that its fruits appear before the leaves. So it is not unreasonable for Jesus to expect to find fruit on the fig tree when the leaves have sprouted. However, this fig tree was said to have leaves but no fruit. In other words, it was barren.

Reflection Questions

3. Jesus rejected the empty and corrupted shell of the Temple, which no longer served its originally intended purpose, and distracted the people from faith in God Himself. Have you put your faith in any practices or spiritual habits which, being empty and corrupted shells, serve only to distract you from faith in God?
4. Read Mark 11:25 again in light of the passage on the fig tree and the Temple. Jesus ties forgiveness that is received through faith in God with acts of forgiving others. Are there any areas in your life where your actions still trail behind the faith that you profess?

Learning Point

Faith is the new badge of identity for God's people. This is in contrast to the old markers of identity such as the Temple or their Jewish ethnicity. What marks out God's people is no longer their devotion to the Temple, but a true faith in God that encompasses corresponding actions.



DAILY BIBLE READING

Week 8

Mark 12:13-44

Day 36: 6 Jul

Read Mark 12:13-17

As a response to the Parable of the Tenants, Jesus' enemies plot to kill Him. In this episode, the Pharisees and the Herodians partner to oppose Jesus. They ask a tricky question to entrap Him. Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar? Say 'yes' and the Jews would turn against Him for supporting a foreign power. Say 'no' and He faces the charge of sedition. Jesus sees through their hypocrisy and cuts to the heart of the matter. Render to God your hearts on which is carved His image and to whom you owe everything! Have you given your heart wholly to Jesus? How would your life be different if every aspect came under His rule?

Day 37: 7 Jul

Read Mark 12:18-27

Next, the Sadducees, a group of wealthy powerful Jews, have their turn at Jesus. They present a near-impossible situation of a widow who married seven brothers after each passed away, thinking they could educate Jesus about (the false teaching of) the resurrection. What is telling is Jesus' rebuke - that they do not understand the Scriptures and the power of God. Are there times where you, like the Sadducees, have thought yourself more highly than you ought and thus belittled the power of God? What will you do about it?

Day 38: 8 Jul

Read Mark 12:28-34

It now comes to the Scribe's turn. Of the many commandments, which is the greatest? Jesus cites the Shema of Deut. 6:4-5 and combines it with the commandment to love one's neighbour. His point is clear - the one who claims to love God must express that love towards his neighbour. That is what it means to be God's chosen people. Why is it impossible to separate love of God and love for neighbour? In what ways have you shown your love for God towards your neighbour?

Day 39: 9 Jul

Read Mark 12:35-37

How can David's son also be David's Lord? This hardly makes sense. The Messiah, though from the line of David, is greater than David. He is much more than the political deliverer they were hoping for, and He is more than just the son of David - He is the Son of God and the true Lord over the world. In what ways have you boxed Jesus in? How will your worldview change if Jesus was truly Lord over all?

Day 40: 10 Jul

Read Mark 12:38-44

In this account, Jesus observes the monetary offerings from opposite the treasury. Many give large sums of money, but it is a poor widow who catches His eye. And He takes the moment to teach the disciples that this woman who gave only two copper coins has given more than all the others because she had given up all that she had to survive. In her giving, she had made herself utterly vulnerable! What have you given to follow Jesus?

DIGGING DEEPER

Week 8: Mark 12:13-44

Background and beliefs of the Pharisees, Herodians, Sadducees and Scribes

This week's readings cover the conflicts between Jesus and various groups. It is therefore helpful to understand the background and beliefs of these four major groups of people.

The first and probably most often mentioned in the NT are the Pharisees. In Digging Deeper (Week 4), we have briefly mentioned the role of the Pharisees in the Jewish religious landscape. This group is chiefly responsible for studying and interpreting the Torah, and forming Jewish traditions that were to be a buffer zone between the requirements of the Torah and daily living. They can be thought of as a movement which sought to extend the purity of the Temple to the home. They hold to the whole OT as Scripture, and are therefore in disagreement with the Sadducees in regard to the resurrection.

The Herodians are a lesser-understood group than the Pharisees, though they are mentioned together in the NT. Made up of Hellenistic Jews, they were a political party who supported Herod the Great, a vessel of the Roman empire. They perceived Herod's reforms (including the refurbishment and expansion of the second Temple) to be advantageous and held the Herodian family as the last hope of retaining a fragment of national government even though not completely independent of Rome. In this respect, they were in disagreement with the Pharisees who wanted complete independence from any foreign rule as prophesied in the OT.

The Sadducees were a group of wealthy aristocrats who held powerful positions in Jerusalem, including that of chief priests and high priest, and held the majority of the 70 seats of the Sanhedrin (ie. the ruling council). In order to cement their wealth and status, they rarely opposed the decisions of Rome and eventually lost touch with the common man, nor did the common man hold them in high regard. They held only to the Pentateuch or the Torah (first 5 books) as authoritative, and therefore did not believe in the final resurrection since explicit references to the resurrection occur in the other books of the OT. That is why Jesus cites Exodus in His reply to them.

The Scribes were lawyers tasked with copying and interpreting Scriptures. They were known to be obsessed with details of the law and worked closely with the Pharisees in discussing and studying the Torah. Most of them take the cue from the Pharisees and were therefore keen followers of tradition as well. Though they are usually teamed with the Pharisees, they are a distinct group that are also highly regarded in the Jewish religious circles. In fact, the most learned Scribes, together with honoured guests, get to sit in the most important seat in the

synagogue, which is the bench in front of the Ark. However, the Scribes are not without their own corrupt motives. Being lawyers, many of them use their own craft to exploit the most vulnerable in the society by the mismanagement of estates of which they have become trustees and taking others' houses for unpaid debts.

Re-read and recall the various controversies raised by the various groups. Do you understand their political positions better? Why did they ask these specific questions and how did Jesus respond? What has God been speaking to you through these interactions between Jesus and the various groups?

SESSION 8: THE GOSPEL AND LOVE

Questions for Discussion

1. Read Mark 12:28-34. One of the Scribes ask Jesus about the Greatest Commandment. In response, Jesus cites the Shema (12:29-30). In it, Israel's covenantal status is summed up, and adherence to it marks her out as the special people of God.
What was the point Jesus was trying to make in providing the two most important Commandments together? How is love for God related to love for the neighbour?

2. Read the Discussion Point below. Jesus commented that the Scribe was "not far from the kingdom of God". What does the Scribe's answer tell you about the Kingdom of God?

3. *If You Have Time...*

This week's bible readings is building up to the climactic moment of Jesus' ministry. The Gospel is coming to the fore. It is about God's promised return, and Jesus must therefore confront the city and her leaders. In doing so, certain issues must be tackled and taught. Match these issues with the corresponding episodes.

- Jesus' identity
- Covenantal identity
- Relationship between earthly powers and the Kingdom of God
- Eschaton and judgment

Discussion Point

The Kingdom of God is fundamentally about monotheism and election, which is surmised in the *Shema* (Hebrew for "Hear," the first word of Deut. 6:4), an important Jewish scripture testifying to the oneness of God's kingship. Those who enter the Kingdom are the authentic confessors of the *Shema*, which defines for them their fundamental belief and practice. Knowing how critical the *Shema* is, and understanding how the other commandments are secondary to it, including those which are connected to the Temple, places the scribe in a position to grasp fully Jesus' mission.

Reflection Questions

4. In your Christian life thus far, how have you been living out the Great Commandment, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength"?

5. Knowing that the Kingdom of God is fundamentally about relationships, as summarised in loving God and loving neighbours, how is God challenging you to love Him practically by loving your neighbours? What will Jesus' assessment of your life priorities be?

Learning Point

The One God and King whom we proclaim and worship elects for Himself a people to constitute His kingdom. The citizens of this kingdom live by its fundamental rule, which is to love the King through loving the King's people.



DAILY BIBLE READING

Week 9

Mark 13:1-14:42

Day 41: 13 Jul

Read Mark 13:1-27

In week 7's readings, we read that Jesus trashed the Temple. The message is clear - the long-awaited King has returned and inspected the Temple, and found it wanting. Judgment is at hand. And in today's reading, Jesus makes what was implicit before loud and clear - the Temple is about to be destroyed! In response, the disciples ask the obvious question of "when" and "what ". And yet, Jesus begins His reply by telling them to "watch" that they are not distracted by "birth pangs", but continue to preach the Gospel to all nations. What does this mean for Jesus' disciples today?

Day 42: 14 Jul

Read Mark 13:28-37

Jesus tells His disciples to observe how the budding of the fig tree signifies that summer is near. Similarly, when they witness the abomination of desolation, they will know that the destruction of the Temple is about to take place. In contrast, no one knows the exact day and hour the Master will return, but the doorkeeper is to be watchful and ready. As a servant of Jesus, what does it mean for you to be watchful and ready for the Master's return?

Day 43: 15 Jul

Read Mark 14:1-11

The Feast of the Passover is the festival where Jewish pilgrims from all over the world gather in Jerusalem to celebrate and remember God's deliverance from Egypt. During this period, tensions run high with nationalistic fervour and revolts could start at the slightest provocation. Amidst the tense political climate, an unnamed woman enters the house where Jesus was and anoints His head with perfume. The onlookers frown at the waste of resources but Jesus calls her action "a beautiful thing". What was so "beautiful" about the woman's action?

Day 44: 16 Jul

Read Mark 14: 12-31

At the Last Supper, Jesus predicts that one of the twelve will betray Him. Yet, He reminds the disciples that this betrayal and His subsequent death are not an unfortunate mistake nor a failure of His ministry. Rather, it is a fulfilment of God's plan foretold in Scripture. To further bring the point home, Jesus breaks bread to represent His body and life as a once-and-for-all sacrifice, and drinks the wine which represents His blood shed for the sins of many. The Son of Man is not only the inauguration of the Kingdom, but also the One who suffers for human redemption. What does the Last Supper mean to you?

Day 45: 17 Jul

Read Mark 14:32-42

In the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus takes Peter, James and John a little further, sharing with them His grief as He knew that His time had come - He was about to bear the cup of God's wrath for the sins of many. Despite hearing Jesus' prediction about His betrayal and His sorrow at His impending death, Peter, James and John do not seem to fully grasp the severity of the situation and keep falling asleep instead of keeping watch and praying. The absolute submission of the Son to His ABBA (ie, Father) is put in stark contrast to the abject failure of the disciples to their Lord. How does Jesus' action in His personal time of trial set the example for you? What are some temptations you are facing right now? Lift them up to the Lord in unceasing prayer.

DIGGING DEEPER

Week 9: Mark 13:1-14:42

Jesus' Passover with His Disciples

In many ways, what took place at the Last Supper corresponds with the traditional Passover liturgy with a structure as follows:

1. *The Preliminary Course*

- a. 1st cup is drunk with Words of Dedication spoken by the Presider. Preliminary dish consisting of green herbs, bitter herbs and a sauce of fruit puree, among other things.
- b. The meal proper is served but not yet eaten.
- c. 2nd cup is mixed and put in its place but not yet drunk.

2. *The Passover Liturgy*

- a. Passover haggadah is recited by the Presider (which includes a narrative of the Exodus).
- b. 1st part of the Passover hallel is recited/sung (Jewish prayer taken from Ps 113-114).
- c. 2nd cup is drunk.

3. *The Main Meal*

- a. Grace is spoken by the Presider over the unleavened bread.
- b. Meal, consisting of Passover lamb, unleavened bread, bitter herbs, fruit puree and wine, is consumed.
- c. Grace is spoken as 3rd cup is drunk.

4. *The Conclusion*

- a. 2nd part of the Passover hallel is recited/sung (Jewish prayer taken from Ps 115-118).
- b. 4th cup is drunk

Typically, the liturgy for the Passover meal recalls the acts of God in the Exodus, in which the Jewish nation was formed and where they were specially selected by YHWH. In the Last Supper, Jesus transforms this liturgy to draw attention to Himself in the breaking of bread and the sharing of the cup. The words spoken over the bread during the Main Meal goes like this, "This is the bread of affliction which our fathers ate in the land of Egypt. Let everyone who hungers come and eat; let everyone who is needy come and eat the Passover meal." Jesus transforms its meaning and defines it according to His own identity and vocation. The bread signifies His body and this stands for His life.

As for His blood, Jesus harkens back to the covenant at Sinai where Moses had previously sprinkled blood on the Israelites (see Ex 24:8). So then, we can understand that the symbolism

is in the shedding of His blood that seals a new covenant. The once-for-all sacrifice of Jesus is superior to the repeated sacrifices required previously. This saying probably took place at the 3rd cup. And the hymn that Jesus and the disciples sang at the conclusion of the meal is none other than the hallel psalm, specifically Ps 115-118.

What does Jesus' Passover mean for us today?

SESSION 9: THE EXTRAVAGANT GOSPEL

Questions for Discussion

1. Read Mark 14:3-9. The perfume is pure spikenard, an expensive item used usually for anointing specially honoured guests during special occasions and festivals. It is also used for anointing the body of the dead, particularly those held in high regard.

What was the woman's intention in breaking the jar of perfume instead of merely pouring it out? Read the Discussion Point. What was the onlookers' objection to the woman's action?

2. Jesus praised the woman's action because her action mirrors two aspects of Jesus' identity and ministry. What are the two aspects and how does the woman's act mirror Jesus' identity and ministry?

3. *If You Have Time...*

Read again Mark 14:9. It is significant that Jesus relates the gospel with the woman's action. What is it about the woman's action that must be remembered when the gospel is spread through all the world? Why is she left un-named?

Discussion Point

The Passover was an opportunity to remember the poor in the community and this helps us understand why the onlookers were somewhat shocked at the extravagance of what the woman did. To them, it was plainly wrong! Jesus' response that we would always have the poor with us does not disparage them but gives due priority to Himself as the Lord who is about to die on behalf of His people.

Reflection Questions

4. The woman's extravagant worship in response to the extravagant gospel was done in spite of overt opposition.
 - a. Do you truly appreciate the extravagance of God in saving the undeserving including yourself?
 - b. How are you responding to the extravagant gospel with extravagant worship?
 - c. In so doing, how have you made sense of any opposition that has come your way when you give yourself wholeheartedly to the worship of God in word and deed?

Learning Point

The Gospel preached by Jesus tells of God's extravagant act in giving Himself for the ransom of undeserving people. Our response to the extravagant Gospel should rightly be both the imitation of God's extravagant giving and a correspondingly extravagant worship of the generous God.



DAILY BIBLE READING

Week 10

Mark 14:43-16:20

Day 46: 20 Jul

Read Mark 14:43-65

The Temple Police arrives with Judas to arrest Jesus. The irony is heavy. A kiss, which is usually a show of affection or greeting is used as the sign of betrayal. Jesus is then brought before the Sanhedrin with false accusations levied against Him by various witnesses. Finally, seeing that the eyewitnesses' testimonies was becoming an embarrassing cacophony of contradictions, the high priest asks the loaded question to which Jesus answers loud and clear - He is the Christ, the Son of the Blessed One. What does this mean to you today?

Day 47: 21 Jul

Read Mark 14:66-72

As Jesus is delivered over to Pilate for a trial, Peter undergoes his own trial too. He is recognised by a servant girl and denies Jesus three times, each time more severely than the previous time. The spokesman who claimed boldly that he would stand by Jesus has now openly denied Him, going to the extent of swearing and calling down curses. The contrast between the unshakable stand of Jesus and the wavering Peter is stark. Ultimately, we are reminded of just how fallen and frail we can all be. Where do you stand in your faith at this moment?

Day 48: 22 Jul

Read Mark 15:1-20

The Jewish leaders hand Jesus over to the Roman governor, Pilate, charging Him with claiming to be the King of the Jews. Sensing that Jesus had been framed by the Jewish leaders, Pilate tried to release Jesus. But the crowd, influenced by the chief priests asked for the murderer Barabbas to be released instead. The irony is heavy as the crowd failed to recognise their true King and sought to crucify Him instead. Just as they rejected God's prophets, they now also harden their hearts against God's Son. They reject the Prince of Peace for the insurrectionist whose type would later lead Jerusalem into a direct bloody confrontation with Rome. Pause, and reflect. Have you rejected Jesus in any way or in any area of your life?

Day 49: 23 Jul

Read Mark 15:21-41

After being tried, flogged and mocked, Jesus is forced to carry His cross to Golgotha. At the third hour, He is crucified between two bandits. At the sixth hour, darkness fell over the land during daytime, a sign of divine displeasure or judgement. At the ninth hour, Jesus cries out to God in the words of the Psalmist (Ps 22). Shortly after, He utters a loud cry and breathes His last. The Temple veil is torn from top to bottom and the centurion, seeing these things, confesses Jesus to be truly the Son of God. Who is Jesus to you? What does His death mean for you at this point in your life?

Day 50: 24 Jul

Read Mark 16:1-20

Even after hearing the testimonies of those who had seen the risen Christ, the disciples did not believe and continued to mourn the death of their Lord. Just as He did before, Jesus came to the disciples at a time of loss and desperation. And true to tradition, Jesus' appearance is meant not merely to soothe the hearts of the disciples, but also to commission them (ie. calling, vocation) and empower their hands (ie. ministry, service). What does Jesus' appearance in your life mean to you today?

DIGGING DEEPER

Week 10: Mark 14:43-16:20

The Problem of Mark's Ending

It is almost the unanimous opinion of all Markan scholars that Mark 16:9-20 is not an original part of Mark's text. The earliest manuscripts do not have them; the prominent Church Fathers made no reference to them; and some manuscripts that attest to the extended ending mark it off with signs or comments to indicate its doubtful status. The best explanation for this is that the original text as we have it now ends at verse 8. This explains why a multiplicity of endings for the Gospel of Mark arose, why the last twelve verses of Mark read like a pastiche of traditions deriving from Luke, John, and Acts, and why there is a high concentration of unique words found in these verses but not found elsewhere in Mark.

However if Mark ends with verse 8, it creates another problem for the reader: endings are supposed to wrap things up by defusing potential contradictions and providing closure. Verse 8 ends with the description of the women's fears, with no narration of their seeing Jesus raised or His restoring the disciples, which were predictions Jesus Himself made. Could Mark end with loose ends untied?

One recent solution is that Mark's ending is meant to be ironical, and even downright discouraging. This is to convey the message that the story goes on in the lives of the readers, who are the people in position to fulfil Jesus' predictions and provide closure to Mark's text. The problem with this theory is that it is quite improbable for ancient readers to detect this surreptitious message. Most ancient tales are told with rather explicit conclusions so that their message gets through without misunderstanding. Furthermore, this will mean that Jesus failed to restore His disciples after His resurrection, something which was mentioned earlier (14:28; 16:7)

If so, we are left with one probable conclusion: either Mark could not complete his Gospel because of extenuating circumstances, or that the original ending was lost at an early stage. However, some scholars think that we can reconstruct this lost ending of Mark. If it is true that Matthew and Luke have used Mark, it can then be conjectured that the similar elements between Matthew's and Luke's resurrection accounts would most probably be from Mark. Furthermore, much of Matthew's resurrection account in the first seven verses follows Mark's closely. It may then be conjectured, based on Matthew's penchant for following Mark and diverging only when certain Matthean motifs are being fleshed out, that Mark's resurrection account would most probably contain what we have now in verses 9-20.

SESSION 10: THE PROMISE OF THE GOSPEL

Questions for Discussion

1. In the rabbi-pupil dynamic of Jesus' day, pupils decide who they want to learn from and explicitly seek the individual rabbis to be their teacher and Master. Read Mark 1:16-20 and 3:13-19. How did Jesus first call His disciples? How was Jesus' call different? What was the specific call that Jesus issued?
2. Read Mark 14:32-42 and 14:66-72. Recall also the specific call that Jesus made when He first called Peter. When crunch time came, Jesus' most avid disciple, Peter, failed. How did Peter fail? Does this mean that Jesus' teaching was futile?
3. *If You Have Time...*
Read Mark 16:1-7. Peter was the most abject failure of a disciple aside from Judas Iscariot. Why then did Jesus single Peter out? What is the underlying message?

Discussion Point

The failure of the disciples is only part of the story. Mark portrays Jesus as being patient with them, and putting up with all their obtuseness and cowardice. Indeed, the finale of the Gospel sounds the note that the risen Christ will once again shepherd them. So the failure of the disciples must not be understood on its own. It must be related to the theme of restoration, which is Mark's intention.

Reflection Questions

4. Think about the times when you have denied Jesus, either in literal ways when questioned about your faith or when prompted to make a stand for your belief, or in the subtle ways that you have entertained the powers of sin and self-centeredness instead of submitting to the Lordship of Christ. List the occasions here. How have you experienced God's grace in times of failure?
 - 1)
 - 2)
 - 3)

5. Reflect on the rhythm of the Christian life as enacted in our weekly worship service. As Christ extends unfailing grace to fallible disciples in the movement of "coming to them, restoring them, and re-commissioning them to preach the Gospel of Jesus Christ," so also we re-experience God's grace every week when God gathers us by calling us to worship, restoring us when we confess our sins and failures in prayer, encountering us in the Word proclaimed and expounded, and then re-commissioning us to preach the Gospel of Jesus Christ and sending us out into the world. Can you relate the elements in BRMC's worship service with this reality of God's grace?

Learning Point

Jesus' first disciples were fallible men, called only because of grace. This grace is not withdrawn even when they fail, as seen in the risen Messiah coming to them, gathering them, restoring them, and finally, re-commissioning them to preach the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

RESOURCES

The following publications were acknowledged as resources by Foochow Methodist Church in their materials:

Mark, by Tan Kim Huat
Series: New Covenant Commentary Series
Publisher: Wipf and Stock
Date: 2015

Mark for Everyone, by N. T. Wright
Series: The New Testament for Everyone
Publisher: Westminster John Knox Press
Date: 2004

Mark: A 12-Week Study, by Dane C. Ortlund
Series: Knowing the Bible
Publisher: Crossway
Date: 2015