

Jesus, Son of God

*The Gospel
according to
Mark*



Louis Nel

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Devotions from the
Gospel according to Mark

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The Gospel

Introduction to the Gospel according to Mark

"The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God." With this short sentence, Mark tells exactly what his book is about. It is primarily the heading of the introduction to the book, but it also tells something about the whole essence of the book. Mark calls his book simply: The Gospel, or Good News! What would this good news be about? About Jesus and about the salvation he brought of course. Mark's entire book is therefore only about one single Person: Jesus!

A critic of literary works would have given Mark a zero for the opening words his book. In a good detective story, you would have to wait until the very last page to find out who the culprit is. In Mark' story he blurts out in the very first sentence who the important Person is. But then it is so that you

understand right from the start what it is all about, that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God. Without this fact the book would be of no value!

The question is, is it really worth it for me to ever read this book? Is it still of any value to a modern believer today? Does the book really still have a topical message today?

Mark' message is in a certain sense very controversial. I have heard many people say that if you are a Christian believer and are serious about your faith, everything will go well with you. Adversity will then never cross your path, and you will be perfectly healthy. Your affairs will be successful, and prosperity will be your companion. Mark says: No, that's not true! Actually, the opposite is true, because if you truly want to follow Jesus, you must be prepared to experience hardship!

Why do you still make all the effort to follow Jesus if it only brings you hardship? For the simple reason, that the day you realize that Jesus is truly the Son of God, you simply

cannot help but follow Him unconditionally according to His direction. Oh, it's definitely not an easy path!

The Jews actually wanted to follow Jesus in a different way. They expected Him to deliver them from the yoke of the Romans so that they could live triumphantly in peace. It was difficult even for the disciples to understand that this was not His mission, and that He actually came to suffer and die.

Only when we truly understand this truth do we begin to realize that if the Son of God had to suffer, then we certainly cannot claim a prosperous life! I must also be prepared, like Jesus, to take up my cross, renounce myself, and follow Him!

Who wrote this Gospel?

Very simple: His name was Mark. Unfortunately, that's all we know about him. There are many theories about who exactly he was, such as that he is the John Mark we read about in Acts 12. However, these are

only guesses, and we know absolutely nothing about this unknown writer, except that he was a Jewish Christian and that Greek was not his mother tongue.

What we do know, however, is that this is the very first complete Gospel that was written and that it was written around 65 or 70 AD, about 35 years after Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection. Before Mark wrote his story, the events were transmitted orally, and some of the events may have been written down. Both Mark and Matthew use this source to compile their books.

Did Mark just sit down one day and start writing the story of Jesus? Definitely not! It was a Divine inspiration of the Holy Spirit that led him to write this wonderful, compelling story for all to know of Jesus, the Son of God who came to suffer and die for our salvation.

After Mark wrote his story, both Matthew and Luke looked at it, and they used much of the information in Mark's book as well as other sources to write down their own versions of

the Gospel. However, each of them left their own unique stamp, because they each wrote the story from a completely different point of view.

Who did Mark originally write the book for? We can conclude that it was for believers who lived in a very difficult time of conflict. The Romans made war against the rebellious Jews, and it might have been meant for them. Another possibility is that it was written for the believers who were so cruelly persecuted by Nero. For them, the message was that Jesus was not just someone who lived in Palestine, but that He also had to endure their kind of suffering.

Today, Mark wants to give us courage in the situation we find ourselves in, where violence, war, conflict and hardship are everyday occurrences. You will also clearly see that Mark does not even mention the birth and childhood of Jesus but that he simply starts off in the very first chapter with

Jesus in the merciless desert, and the devil who tempts Him.

I invite you to walk with me through the pages of this gripping book in search of God's will for our lives.

Prayer:

Lord, I would like to serve You with all my heart, even if it means hardship for me.

The Voice out of the Desert

Mark 1:1-8

Somewhere out of the desert this strange man just showed up one day. Everyone stared at him wide-eyed, guessing and whispering about him!

"Have you seen him? His clothes - I will freak out if I have to wear such coarse clothes!"

"They say he is apparently a real, genuine prophet!"

"Oh, that's just bogus man! Israel has never had a prophet in hundreds of years. They are all long dead! Why would a prophet suddenly appear here out of nowhere?"

"No really! This guy not only looks like a prophet, but he sounds like one too!"

"Apparently he disappears into the desert every night. No one knows where he lives. Maybe he's a hermit!"

"He's definitely very strange! Someone tells me that he saw with his own eyes the man eating locusts, and then he dips them in wild honey! Gross! I'm shuddering! How can anyone live like that?"

"Who are you talking about?" Andrew has just joined the conversation, and now he is very curious.

"That wild fellow with the untamed hair and the long beard down by the River Jordan. Apparently his name is John."

"Yes, he's apparantly just like a crocodile - drags everyone to the water!"

"To do what?"

"He baptizes them! Can you believe it, a baptizing prophet!"

"I want to see that spectacle for myself. Come, let's go and see!"

Jokingly, the group walks down to the river Jordan. From afar, they can already see the crowd gather - there are literally hundreds of people gathering around someone.

"Repent!" a big voice sounded from somewhere in the crowd. "Repent and be baptized and God will forgive your sins!"

Andrew decides that if he wants to see this John prophet, then they will have to hurry, because people are still flocking from everywhere, and the crowd is growing at an alarming rate.

"Come on guys, we have to hurry!"

Andrew wormed his way through the crowd - he simply had to see this man.

"Wait your turn!"

Andrew ignores him, and he pushes through. On the bank of the river Jordan the wild man

suddenly stood before him. Andrew is startled when the "prophet" looks him straight in the eye. He is definitely a prophet! This man is exactly like Dad always told about prophets, rough and wild. And then that leather belt that stands out so pertinently around his hips. Is this not perhaps the Messiah that everyone is talking about?

It is as if John is reading his mind. It feels to Andrew as if the man is looking right through him when he exclaims in a rough voice: "After me comes He who is stronger than I. I'm not even worth stooping and untying the thongs of his sandals. I baptized you with water, but He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

"Who is the man talking about?", Andrew wonders. "Is there then going to be a greater prophet than this one?"

John looks Andrew straight in the eyes - now his rough voice is soft and full of compassion: "My son, do you want to be baptized?"

Andrew feels very uncomfortable. He stuttered almost inaudibly: "I... I d-don't know...."

"Come my son, repent. Let go of all your sins. The prophet Isaiah said: Though your sins were like scarlet, they shall be like snow. And though you were crimson, you will become white as wool."

Andrew wants to turn and run away, but this man's gaze holds him. "Let go of your sins, and let yourself be baptized!" The man's words echoed through his entire being.

Then he makes the decision: "Yes, yes alright..."

Andrew is floating on a cloud. He can't believe that this thing is happening to him. He, a hardy fisherman, had himself talked into being baptized! "What will old brother Simon say about this? He's going to explode when he hears what I've been up to!"

"I baptized you with water, but He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." The prophet's words milled through John's mind. "Who is this Person John is talking about?"

For the Jews, the desert was not only an inhospitable wilderness, but also a place of preparation, where God equips people for a great task. John indeed had a huge task at hand. But his clothing also had to remind the people of the prophet Elijah. The Jews expected that the Messiah's coming would be preceded by a prophet like Elijah. Now everything was ready, the "prophet Elijah" came, and now the long-awaited Messiah could only step forward.....

Today, Mark informs you and me that Jesus' coming was the greatest event in history. The covenant with Adam, Noah and Abraham were indeed great highlights. However, they were all small compared to the coming of the Messiah, which was already predicted and planned during the fall of man in Paradise. Today, that event 2000 years ago is also the

highlight in every believer's life. Can you also get as excited about it as John was at that time?

Prayer:

Lord, thank You for including me in Your great counsel plan - that that event 2000 years ago is still fresh and new and current for me today, and the greatest event in my life.

The Voice of God

Mark 1:9-13

The prophet stands on the bank of the River Jordan: "Repent!" His loud, urgent voice echoed through the hills and ravines of the Jordan Valley. "Repent and be baptized, and God will forgive your sins!"

Suddenly John freezes. From the direction of Nazareth, a Man comes walking towards them. John stares at Him, aghasp. Everyone turns their necks to see who captures John's attention so suddenly .

"Who is He?" It ripples through the crowd, because John is certainly deeply touched by the arrival of this kind, but simple Man.

"There is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" John is suddenly very excited.

"Oh, but now I know Him! He is just a carpenter from Nazareth. I don't know why John gets so excited about Him!"

"He is the One of whom I said, 'He who comes after me is before me, because He was the first.' (John 1:15)

"What is John talking about?" Now they don't understand John at all. The people make way for Jesus to come through. There is tension in the air! But what is John's problem? Jesus signals to John that He wants to be baptized, but John refuses.

"Are the Man's sins so great that John does not even want to baptize him?" A shocked whisper goes through the crowd.

But then John groans: "I am not worthy to baptize you! I actually need to be baptized by You, and You come to me?"

"What does John mean? Is there more than one prophet here?" Now the people are totally confused!

Why did Jesus want to be baptized? He had no sins, had he? There were especially two reasons why Jesus had to be baptized: First, to identify Himself with the people who flocked to John. He did not elevate himself above ordinary people, even though He also had full reason to do so. Later in the story we see how low He would stoop just to reach the outcasts. But there was also another reason. Through His baptism, God would anoint Him with the Holy Spirit.....

Very reluctantly, John performs this baptism on Jesus, his distant relative. And then it happens: When Jesus comes out of the water, it is as if the sky above them is torn open. John stands stunned as this indescribable sight unfolds right above him. From the open heaven, something absolutely indescribable descends, right upon Jesus. It almost looks like a dove. And then suddenly John realizes: It is the Holy Spirit descending from heaven upon Jesus to anoint Him for His task!

John fell to the ground in worship, because from heaven a Voice that spoke with authority and majesty resounds: "You are my Son, my beloved." John immediately knows that this Voice was speaking to Jesus, and that it was the Voice of God. "I rejoice over You!" Thus the voice of God resounded from heaven.

The crowd of people are amazed: "What happened?" They could not understand it.

"I heard the Voice of God," John muttered to himself. "And I still live! I am the most blessed of all people. Praise the Lord!"

Have you heard the Voice of God? Someone once told me that she wanted so much to hear the Voice of God audibly. I thought about it and realized with a great shock that I had never learned to become truly quiet so that I could hear God's voice. Every time I go before God in prayer, I strike up a hurried conversation with Him. Yes, I may pray all the right things, but I have never sat at His feet in absolute silence.

It was only one evening during a "week of prayer" in our congregation, when it happened. It was one of those typical sweltering, sultry KwaZulu-Natal summer evenings. I sat down outside the church on a tree stump while the sweat trickled down my back. I closed my eyes. And then it happened: A soft, cool breeze refreshed my whole mind. In the stillness of the evening breeze, I just fell completely silent while the Voice of God whispered inaudibly softly in my ear.

What did He say? No, I don't know, but my whole spirit lifted and I poured out a praise before Him. Have I ever physically heard God's Voice? No! But He speaks to me every day through His Holy Spirit. He is the One who whispers the message of these devotionals in my ear every day. And every day I am amazed at what I have written, because it is not me, but the Holy Spirit who makes me write. I'm just the secretary.

Mark writes a note in which he briefly says that after the baptism, Jesus entered the desert, carried away by the Holy Spirit, and survived there for forty days among the wild animals and that the angels took care of Him there. Like John and many prophets before him, Jesus also had a desert period as preparation for the great task that rested on His shoulders. But there He was also tempted by the devil. Now everything was ready for Jesus' work to begin.

Prayer:

Lord, thank you that I can hear Your voice every day. Please open my ears of faith to clearly recognize and obey Your voice.

Jesus' Task Begins

Mark 1:12-20

What do Moses, Elijah and John have in common? Everyone experienced a desert period. Moses had been on the mountain for forty days and Elijah had walked through the desert for forty days without food. John the Baptist went to live permanently in the desert! For these people, the silence and solitude of the desert or mountain was a precious time to really get to know God and to learn to trust Him alone. Through the hardships they grew spiritually and became strong for the task they had to carry out.

But Jesus? He is God, not so? Why would He need it? We must never forget that Jesus was also at the same time a real human being who experienced the same things that an ordinary person experiences. In order to truly carry out His task successfully, He had to identify Himself fully with man, and

therefore He had to go through this desert period. Mark mentions just as briefly that Jesus was tempted by the devil there. The other gospels describe this temptation much more fully. However, the one big message that emerges here is that the devil suffered a humiliating defeat here. However, this was only a foretaste, because in the final battle, the "battle of Calvary", the devil was totally defeated.

With Jesus' forty days in the desert behind him, His public ministry now begins in earnest. He begins to preach - a short and powerful sermon, just like John: "The appointed time has been fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand. Repent and believe the gospel." Mark also casually mentions that John was locked up in prison. His only offense was that he denounced King Herod for marrying his brother's wife, Herodias. John finally had to pay the highest price for this: he was beheaded! Jesus could expect the same kind of opposition in His actions.

The question is: what does Jesus' message mean? Does it apply to us today? In the first part, Jesus says that God's Kingdom is at hand. It was the best news mankind had ever received. The Kingdom of God was fulfilled at Golgotha, when Jesus paid the final ransom. And today we can reap all the fruits of it.

In the second part of Jesus' sermon, He says a very important thing: "Repent". This means that you must break with your sins. Now you will immediately say that it is impossible. No man can truly break with all sin? Repentance is, however, a continuous process, where you reconsider your life every day, and sin less and less. In this way, you give more and more room for the Holy Spirit to fill your life, and thus to be able to live closer to God. If that process does not continue, you stagnate and you begin to die slowly spiritually.

The third part of Jesus' message is probably the most important part for us: "believe the gospel". In other words: Take God at His word and accept with a jubilant heart that the

good news of Jesus is true. But it doesn't just help that we believe it to be true. The devil believes it too, but for him it is bad news! We must make that good news our own through a living relationship with Jesus, the Messenger of this gospel!

However, Jesus did not want to carry out the task alone. He needed people who could continue the task when His task was completed. He would select for Himself a core group of men who later had to accept leadership and in turn train people to do the same. In this way, it would form a giant snowball effect. However, when Jesus gathers disciples around Him, there are a few things that we need to take very careful note of, things that also apply to us today.

In the first place, we see that it was not the men who wanted to follow Jesus, but that it was Jesus who took the initiative to call them. Other rabbis of that time also had pupils, but the pupils came and asked to learn from the rabbi. In Jesus' case it works

the other way around. It is not the disciple (it is now you and me) who chooses Jesus, but Jesus who chooses the disciple (you and me).

Jesus chooses the men with a specific purpose, in this case to become "fishers of men". The other rabbis trained their pupils to become masters in the interpretation of the Word etc. Jesus only wanted them to be able to "fish". They had to learn how to lead other people to Jesus, and this also applies to you and me today.

We see that the men immediately left everything as it was and followed Him. The first were Simon and Andrew, and then followed Zebedee's two sons, John and James. Today it still requires great sacrifice from us to follow Jesus. It was definitely not easy!

Have you heard the call of Jesus, the call to follow Him? Yes, as believers we all believe. But it is precisely that faith that makes us want to do what Jesus asks of us, not to be

able to get a reward, but simply out of gratitude for what He has already done for us. Can you sing the song "Where He leads, there I will follow" with surrender and mean it?

Prayer:

Lord, please make me obedient to Your call.

Possessed in Capernaum

Mark 1:21-28

Jesus' ministry began, and right away we notice that people listened to what He said. He spoke with authority. For now, his message was short and powerful: "Repent and believe the Gospel" (Mark 1:15). But is it really necessary for a message to be long and complicated? Do you still remember what Jonah's message was in Nineveh? "Just forty more days and Nineveh will be destroyed!" That was all Jonah said. But God made that simple message work in people's hearts so that the whole city was converted!

Jesus' message carried so much authority that people left whatever they were doing and followed Him to become His disciples. Everyone who heard Him took note of what He said.

Jesus began His public ministry a mere thirty kilometers from His hometown, Nazareth. Along the Sea of Galilee He found His first disciples, and from there He went to a very immoral city on the north shore of the Sea of Galilee, Capernaum. It was a very rich and prosperous city with 1500 inhabitants. There the Romans also established a headquarters for various army divisions, and therefore the non-Jewish influence was very great.

Jesus began to expand His ministry. Now, however, He was no longer just the "Street Preacher" preaching: "Repent!" We see that on His first Sabbath day in Capernaum, He went straight to the synagogue and preached to the people. However, it was much more than just another sermon by one of the highly learned scribes. Jesus' sermon was totally different. The people were used to the fact that the clever men often blew their own trumpets more than they preached the Word. However, when Jesus began to speak, a deadly silence fell over the listeners. Their mouths hung open, for here was One who

spoke to them with great authority and at the same time childlike simplicity. They could understand what He was saying, and He spoke straight to their hearts, not over their heads like the others!

I almost want to think that the great jealousy and hostility of the Scribes and Pharisees already started there, because this "unlearned" Jesus received much more attention than them.

But on this first Sabbath day in Capernaum something would happen that would shake the whole community to its foundations. If they thought that Jesus could only speak captivating, then they were far wrong!

All the attention was on Jesus as He spoke. But suddenly there was someone who made the whole synagogue look around despaired, a man who started shouting madly. Everyone tried to calm him down, but he just kept screaming. "It's an evil spirit that's in him!" it echoed through the congregation. "The poor man is now completely off his trolley!"

Then the man turned to Jesus and glared at Him with wild eyes as he screamed: "What have we to do with You, Jesus of Nazareth?" The people gasped audibly. How would this new rabbi deal with this dilemma?

"Have You come to destroy us?" shouted the man as his wild eyes rolled in their sockets. Everyone could clearly see that this man was trapped in the power of the most terrible demons that had full control over his life. "I know who You are!" With a trembling finger he pointed straight at Jesus: "You are the Holy One of God!"

"What would he mean by that?" everyone wondered aloud, while the man stood there trembling and drooling.

Through all these things, Jesus calmly waited for His chance to say something. When He finally spoke, all eyes turned to Him. With great authority He said: "Be still and come out of him!" Just this!

Suddenly the man had the most terrible convulsions. He gave one deafening scream, and then he fell down among the people and remained dead still (so we read in Luk 4:35). His face was calm now, however, and there was no longer any sign of the obsession that had plagued him.

"What happened here?" it buzzed through the synagogue. People could not believe what they had just experienced. "Even the unclean spirits obey Him", it echoed through the room. The news spread like wildfire, and within a few days the whole of Galilee knew about this incident. It was all the people were talking about! "That new Rabbi even has power over evil spirits!"

It was another big defeat for the devil. He sent an army of demons into this man, but Jesus defeated them. Now it was war! He would have to bring out the big guns!

One thing that everyone had to realize very clearly is that the person who would follow Jesus would be connected to the most

authoritative Teacher they had ever encountered.

Today it is still just as true, and if you and I commit ourselves to Him, we share in the most authoritative Person that history has ever known. Jesus is not only "Love", but Jesus is also Power! Almighty! With Jesus absolutely nothing is impossible don't lick And it's not just wishful thinking! Countless people can testify to that on a daily basis.

Prayer:

Lord Jesus, thank You for choosing me to be part of Your family, and that I can know that nothing is too big or difficult for You.

Peter's Mother-in-law

Mark 1:29-39

It was an ordinary Sabbath for Peter. However, he was very worried about his mother-in-law. No, he didn't have mother-in-law problems, but she was ill. She had a high fever the whole night. But he didn't have much time to pay attention to her, because his new Rabbi was waiting for him and brother Andrew, and they had to hurry to get to the synagogue on time.

His chest swelled with pride because he was a student of that Rabbi. And then that terrifying incident happened with the possessed. Peter was startled with fright when the man suddenly jumped up out of the crowd and started screaming and ranting. He wanted to jump up and throw the man out at once, but Rabbi Jesus motioned for him to stay seated. He was so very annoyed at the

man who came and spoiled such a heart-warming sermon from his special Rabbi.

However, the way Rabbi Jesus handled the matter was absolutely phenomenal! No one had ever experienced such a thing! Everyone was ecstatic!

Now, however, everything is over, and the group walks home. Suddenly Peter remembers his mother-in-law, and the worry settles again like a heavy weight in Peter's stomach. He hopes that she at least survived it, and that the fever left her. Peter puts a little more spring in his step, so that he walks out ahead of the others. Rabbi Jesus asked that they go to his house. What an honour! But mother-in-law will never be able to be their hostess in her condition!

When Peter walks into the house, he finds Mother-in-law still lying in bed and struggling with fever. Fear grips Peter, because she doesn't look good. Suddenly a thought strikes Peter: if Rabbi Jesus could heal that

possessed man, surely He can also pray for an ordinary sick person to be healed?

"Rabbi, please pray for my mother-in-law!" Jesus takes the woman's hand. Her fever is sky high, and the sweat is streaming down her pale face. She is deathly ill! Would this be the end of her? But when Jesus takes her hand, the miracle happens. The colour returned to her face, and she sat up as if there had been nothing wrong with her. Peter still wants to stop her from getting up, this woman had been very sick! "Mom, just lie down for a while..." But he is too late because she has already jumped out of bed, completely healthy. The men cannot believe their eyes. She recovered so quickly that she immediately went to work and prepared a meal for them!

Soon the bush telegraph starts buzzing: "Have you heard about Simon's mother-in-law? It's a miracle like no one has ever seen!"

"Let's go see what happened!"

"My little boy is sick - maybe the Rabbi can heal him too."

Within an hour, all of Capernaum knew about Peter's mother-in-law. From all corners of the city the people flock together to come and see for themselves what has happened. "How is that possible?" By the minute the crowd grows in front of Peter's simple house, until there are more than a thousand people gathered in the narrow street!

"Rabbi, please help me," it sounded from the crowd. Jesus is only too willing to help every sick person, and every time a healing takes place, it buzzes through the crowd like a swarm of bees. It continues until late at night, until Peter finally has to tell the people that it is now high time for them to return home. The Rabbi is only human! He needs rest too!

Early the next morning - it is still pitch dark - Peter hears someone moving in the house. He sees the silhouette of the Rabbi as He softly walks to go outside. Later he must learn that Jesus went to find a quiet place to

pray. When it starts getting light, everyone wants to know where Jesus is? Peter just indicates that He is out, somewhere out there.

"Let's go look for Him", they decided. When they finally find Him they want to know: "Where were You? Everyone is looking for You!"

But Jesus evades their question: "Come, we have work to do. We are going to minister to the neighbouring villages. I want to preach there, because that is what I came for after all."

The met meekly starts pcking. What excitement awaits them? Last night's events had them bubbling with excitement. Great things may still happen here! Galilee, here we come!

Today it is difficult for us to understand how new and fresh Jesus' preaching and actions were for those people. We have known all these stories since childhood, and it is old

news to us. But Jesus came to change everything and make everything new, not only for that time, but also today. Perhaps the new disciples were excited for the wrong reasons. Today, however, we know what the true background was, and that should give us even more reason to get excited about Jesus. Is Jesus "old news" to you? Then it is now time that we start looking at Him and our relationship with Him with new eyes, and that we get bubblingly excited about Jesus again!

Prayer:

Lord, please make me bubble with excitement about You today. You are still as wonderful as that time with the disciples!

The Leper is Healed

Mark 1:40-45

Have you ever come across someone who has leprosy? In all my life I have never seen it. Yet, when you read the Bible, it feels as if every town at that time had its group of lepers. Have the doctors now become so clever that all leprosy has been eradicated? Yes, science probably has something to do with it, but the big thing is actually that the doctors in the years of the Bible could not make such a good diagnosis. As a result, almost all skin diseases were labeled as leprosy.

To contract "leprosy" in those years was surely the most tragic disaster that could befall anyone. A leper simply no longer had a place in society. They were totally driven out of the city, and they didn't even dare to come near a healthy person. Touching was absolutely taboo! Not only was it very

uncomfortable for such a person, but also extremely humiliating. If a healthy person accidentally came near him, he had to shout: "Unclean! Unclean!" The poor lepers were avoided like the plague.

At least leprosy did not always mean the end of the world either: some lepers did heal. But then it was considered nothing less than a Divine intervention. When that happened, he couldn't just walk back home. He first had to be examined by the priests and declared pure.

In the leper colony outside the city sat a few very miserable men. Their friends rejected them and their families rejected them. They live on alms that people put aside for them. "I hear there is a new Miracle Worker in the area," says one fellow, "the people say that he supposedly heals the sick. Do you think a leper has a chance too?"

"No, forget it! How are you going to get close to Him in the first place? No, that's

impossible, only God can heal a leper! Keep dreaming!"

Nahum (a pseudonym to protect his identity) sits in silence and listens to this conversation. "Just say..." he thought. "No, never mind!" he thought to himself. Then he hears it: a crowd of people approaching - voices humming excitedly. "Probably a wedding," he thought and he started getting ready to get out of their way. However, when they come into view, he sees that this is no wedding. A large number of people were gathering around a Man. His heart began to beat wildly: "Couldn't it be that Miracle Worker?" On the spur of the moment he decides: "Today is the day!" He suddenly jumped up and quickly ran towards the crowd.

"What's biting you now Nahum?" his scruffy buddies want to know. But Nahum does not even hear them. The gamble he's planning could cost him his life if it doesn't work out,

but he's desperate. He can't live like this anymore!

"How am I ever going to get close to that Man?" he wonders. Carefully he covers his body with his clothes so that no one might notice that he is a leper. And in case someone might recognize him, he pulls a headscarf low over his eyes. With trembling knees and a wildly beating heart, he wormed his way through the crowd. "If they have to catch me now I'm minced meat!"

And then suddenly the "Miracle Worker" is here right in front of him. Nahum's mouth dries up. The words just won't come out. He catches a glimpse of the Man's friendly face. Like a dead man, Nahum falls down at Jesus' feet. "If You want, You can heal me!" Raw sobs ripped through his body. "Please, please!"

Then the miracle happens: Jesus reaches out His hand and touches the man: "I want to," Nahum hears the soft voice, "you are healed!"

Instantly the strangest feeling passes through Nahum's body. He felt the horrible boils suddenly dry up and just simply disappear. "Is that possible?" his overwhelmed mind screamed at him. He pulls up his sleeve. Where there was a painful, septic sore a few minutes ago, it is now clear, clean skin.

"Don't tell anyone," he vaguely heard the voice of the Miracle Worker, "but go show yourself to the priests."

But now, how can Nahum keep quiet about this? He runs and dances and hops and sings: "I'm healthy! I am healthy! Look here: that Miracle Worker, Jesus healed me!"

"Rabbi," Simon later said to Jesus, "You must be careful: that man was a leper, and you touched him just like that! You could get into big trouble!" But Jesus beckons him to just keep dead silent about this.

You and I were healed by Jesus of something much worse than just leprosy. We were doomed to eternal destruction. Jesus saved

us from it, and in the process not only got His hands dirty, but died on the cross. The question is, are we also as excited about our salvation as those lepers? Can we not keep quiet about it too? Let's proclaim it far and wide that Jesus has healed us!

Prayer:

Thank you for what you have done for me, Lord. Give me the excitement and courage to trumpet it worldwide!

The Paralytic of Capernaum

Mark 2:1-12

It echoes through Capernaum: "That Miracle Worker, Jesus is back! I heard He lives in Simon, the fisherman's house." In this way the news spreads along the grape vine, so that the whole city gets the message in a jiffy, and the people flock to Peter's house in large numbers. The Scribes had already put their heads together, and came to the conclusion that this Man only meant trouble for them! He says things that definitely make them feel uncomfortable, because how can an ordinary carpenter, an unlearned layman now want to stand and preach? That's unheard of! They have years and years of intense study of the Scriptures behind them, and this makes them qualified to preach. But this Man.....

When the scribes hear where Jesus is staying over, they quickly scrambled to get the front seats in Peter's house so that they

can listen to this Man properly. They can possibly ask Him a few tricky questions to see if He is really as good as the people claim. They had hardly found their seat, when the house was flooded with people, even protruding out of the windows and doors. Everyone wants to see this Miracle Worker, because today He is definitely going to perform some breathtaking miracle again!

When Jesus looks at the crowd of people who are still streaming in large numbers through the narrow streets, He so much wants to proclaim that He is the Son of God who has come to take away the sins of the world. But He dare not reveal it, because then it could spoil everything. If only they knew..... But now they are under the false impression that He is just an ordinary Miracle Worker. For him it is now very important that they get the message of the Kingdom of God. Once they grasp this, the way is paved for the final message.

Elsewhere in Capernaum, another drama is playing itself out. On a bed lies an emaciated man, let's call him Joram. Years ago a terrible illness struck Joram. At first he just started limping, but it quickly got worse, until finally he was totally paralyzed. "It's your sins!" the people said to him, "God is punishing you for all your sins!"

When Joram heard about this new Miracle Worker prophet who was healing people left and right, a glimmer of hope dawned on him. Maybe, just maybe..... But then the Man left before he could see Him.

But now that Jesus is apparently back again. "I just simply have to get there!" he insists to his wife.

"I'll send for your friends, the few you still have left. Maybe they can help you."

And then four men show up with a stretcher that they borrowed somewhere: "Old Joram, don't worry, we'll get you to the Prophet!"

And so the four men carried their precious, protesting cargo through the winding streets of Capernaum to Peter's little house. Joram feels very uncomfortable, but there is a song in his heart. But oh goodness! When they get close to Peter's house, they see one huge traffic jam! Peter's street is so packed with people that you can't even get close to the door, let alone inside! Joram burst into tears. He had set his heart on seeing Jesus, and now this!

"I have a plan," says Josaphat. The men put their heads together. Joram can't quite hear what they're plotting, but they glance in his direction every now and then, and he knows that he is in for big trouble. "Come," said Josaphat, "We're going in!"

"But how?" Joram wants to ask, but then he is already being carried through the backyard of one of the neighbours, lifted over a fence and through rubbish mounds. In the meantime, one of the fellows went to borrow some ropes somewhere. Joram protests

when he sees ropes being tied to his stretcher. "Where are you taking me?" He gives a scream of anguish as his pals lift him up to the flat roof of Peter' house. "You're going to make me fall!"

Love is..... friends who are willing to climb even on rooftops for you! How far are you willing to go for your friends? Or for other people? Maybe even total strangers? Jesus showed us what true love is, that He was willing to go out of His way even for unwanted people. There was a Samaritan woman who lived in sin, a hated tax collector, a leper - you name it!

In the packed room, the important scribes were bitterly upset. They try to listen to what Jesus says, but now there is a noise on the roof. "Tell the people up there to shut up!" one gives an order outside. But then everyone looks up in horror when suddenly a hole appears in the roof and the bright sunlight streams in. "What are they trying to do?" one of the highly learned men wants to

know, annoyed. Jesus stops talking. To their dismay, they see the roof being broken open piece by piece above their heads.

To be continued.....

Prayer:

Lord, please give me a true caring love.

Man through the Roof!

Mark 2:1-12

Jesus' message is interrupted by a noise on the roof of the house. Pieces of roofing material fall on the audience's heads, and they look up angrily. Suddenly the bright daylight breaks through. Piece by piece the roof above their heads is broken open. "What is happening?" everyone whispers across the room.

"What are you doing up there? Stop your nonsense immediately!" The Scribe is very annoyed by this interruption! However, the men are so overwhelmed by their task that they don't even notice that they are causing consternation!

"Cease your nonsense immediately!" Peter wants to shout to the "guilty ones". After all, it is his house that they are tearing down above his head! But then his gaze falls on Jesus'

face, a strange smile that radiates love as Jesus watches the men working. And then Peter changes his mind: "Something very strange is going on here!"

Finally, the hole is big enough so that a man on a stretcher can fit through it. Now there is total chaos in the small room. Everyone watched with open mouths as a stretcher on ropes appeared through the roof opening and slowly descended to the floor. When he comes down, the people gasp for breath. Everyone recognizes the poor man on the stretcher. "Isn't it Joram? Poor man has been paralyzed for years."

Joram clearly feels very uncomfortable. For a paralyzed person to go through such a stunt is no joke. He lay there out of breath. Through the roof opening, four very satisfied faces peek out, each with a huge, smug smile. Gratefully, Jesus looks up at them: such faith is extremely rare.

You can hear a pin drop as Jesus bends down towards the man on the stretcher. "Child, your sins are forgiven!"

A murmuring goes through the room: "How can He say that? That's blasphemous! No one can forgive sins, except God alone! Does He perhaps think that He is God?"

Jesus immediately notices the antagonism: "Why do you have doubts in your hearts about this? Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Get up, pick up your sleeping mat and walk'?" He looked straight at the scribes. The anger is clearly visible on their red faces. "But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority to forgive sins on earth...." Then he bent down to the man, with a face that radiated love and compassion: "I tell you, stand up, pick up your sleeping mat and go to your house."

You can literally hear the people gasping for breath. Everyone is suddenly dead silent, and all eyes are fixed on the paralytic: Is he

going to get up? Are we going to see a miracle here today like no one has ever seen before? Very slowly, the man gets up from his stretcher. For the first time in many years he manages to lift his legs off the stretcher himself. The silence is so thick that you can cut it with a knife, and the spotlight falls (through the roof of course) on the paralytic. Suddenly he feels life in his two emaciated, dead legs. He tests the ground, and then, unsteadily, he stands up. Suddenly he bursts into tears, tears of joy streaming down his cheeks.

The moment is charged with emotion, and there is not a dry eye in the room. The man gives a hop, and then everyone just has to mind their toes, because in the small space he dances a jig causing the dust to fly up. From everywhere in the room it is heard: "Praise the Lord! Praise the Lord!" No one has ever seen such a thing happen! This miracle will never be forgotten in the history of Capernaum!

When Mark describes this event to us, he emphasizes that Jesus was not primarily in Peter's house to perform miracles, but to talk to the people about His message. The content of this message was, of course, that the Kingdom of God had come. People had to be prepared to be part of this Kingdom. Today we still need to understand very thoroughly what it is all about. Everything revolves around God's Kingdom. Of course, the time of miracles is still far from over. If you only open your eyes, you will see breathtaking miracles happening around you every day, things that simply cannot be described other than that God alone can be responsible for this.

However, what we must also realize is that if we want to detach the miracles from the coming of the Kingdom of God, then miracles become hollow and meaningless to us. Miracles were intended 2000 years ago to practically illustrate Jesus' message. In the case of the paralytic it was to say that the Son of God is able to forgive sins. The

scribes had to take notice! If that was the case, then Jesus was truly God! Today, miracles still happen to practically illustrate Jesus' message. And we must never separate it from the message.

A further message is the fact that the paralytic's friends brought him to Jesus. Do we ever bring our friends to Jesus? It should be part of every believer's life to care for our friends in this way, so that we bring them to Him.

Prayer:

Lord, thank you for this beautiful story. Thank you for the lessons we can learn from this. Help us put these lessons into practice.

Levi's Party

Mark 2:13-17

Levi is a man who has everything a man could desire, more than enough money, friends and authority. People jump when he says something! With the fact that society at large despises and shuns him, he has long since made peace. As a tax collector, he has more than enough enemies. It is basically just the scum of society who have become his friends, all a rough bunch who don't care at all about the church's narrow-minded laws. He actually finds it amusing when the Pharisees walk around him with their stiff necks, too afraid that some of his "uncleanness" will fall on them. Hypocrites! They think they are so high and holy, but he, Levi has also seen how they do things on the sly when they think no one sees them!

Look, Levi would not exactly describe himself as "holy"! Actually he is very far from it! But

who wants to be so holy anyway? Just look how terribly narrow-minded these poor Pharisees must live. May not do this; may not do that. They may not eat with any old John Tagrag and Bobtail. His host must also be a Pharisee himself and, moreover, live the law impeccably. The poor man may not even be touched by an "ordinary" person, because then he himself can become unclean! No, Levi is perfectly happy as a tax collector, even if he is hated by his own people. They think he is cheating on them at every turn. He's just doing his job!

In the narrow street, Levi hears a roar of many voices coming. When the procession comes around the corner, he sees a large crowd of very excited people. They are focused on Someone there in the middle of the group. He can't make out who it is. Levi's curiosity is piqued. "Who is that?" he asks a passerby who is hurrying to join the group.

"Oh Levi, you won't be interested, it's spiritual things!" The fellow hastily explains to Levi of

the Man who performs such incredible miracles.

“Oh, it must be Jesus? I have already heard of Him!”

Levi became engrossed in his work again, but every now and then he looked up, because the mass is getting closer to his toll booth. When he looked up again, he looked straight into the eyes of that Man. He had never seen such eyes! It felt as if they were looking right through him and seeing all his sins and tricks. Levi was startled when the Man walked straight up to him through all the people and said to him: "Follow Me, I want to come and eat with you tonight."

Levi is speechless! He simply cannot comprehend it - totally out of his mind! Why then would that holy Man want to come eat with him, a dirty sinner? He will become "unclean"! And then the Man is gone again - absorbed by the crowd, which demands all His attention.

Levi is shaking with excitement and nerves. What should he serve to the Man? Should he strictly follow the precepts laid down by the Pharisees? Levi goes to one of his colleagues for advice on the thorny matter. "Can I come eat with you, Levi?" His tax collector friend is immediately very excited. "I would very much like to meet that Prophet too! Please, my friend?"

The news spreads like wildfire among the publicans and outcasts. Everyone wants to come and eat together! Levi is frustrated - how can he turn them away? "Ah, well then," he finally give in, "The more the merrier!" And with the souls come the hands to help make this one giant party. Everyone wants to meet Jesus, but because they are not such "pure" people, it is not granted to anyone. Here is the chance of a lifetime!

There is great joy at the house of Levi when Jesus and His twelve followers arrive there. When the men see the bunch of tax collectors, they feel very uncomfortable.

However, their Master immediately falls in with the rough lot, and it seems to them that it is second nature for Him to converse and mix with them. Peter and his brother, Andrew are still hesitating outside. After all, Dad taught them that one never sets foot in a tax collector's house. A scribe comes and confronts Peter uo front: "What is your Rabbi doing? Why does He eat with the crowd of bad people?" Then his Master answers from inside, above the noise: "Healthy people don't need a doctor!"

"Come, Simon", Andrew urges him, "Our Master is waiting!"

What would happen if a dirty begger walked into the church on a Sunday morning? Would everyone accept him unconditionally? Would I.....? Am I better than the tax collectors and outcasts? We are all sinners, and one sin is not greater than another. Jesus did not discriminate! What then gives me the right to make a distinction? It is not only good and exemplary people who form part of God's

Kingdom. The only "entry ticket" is faith in Jesus.

Prayer:

Lord, You often send outcasts and "sinners" my way. Please forgive me where I have so often been insensitive and harsh towards them. Give me a heart of love for all people, no matter who or what they are.

To be Fasting

Mark 2:18-22

When she walks through the door, I can just see: this woman is going through very deep waters. Her face shows it; her shoulders droop; her whole posture shows it. She sighed heavily, and then she looked at me with eyes that said: "It's very, very sad! I am deeply burdened...." with such doe-like eyes.

Then I make the big mistake, and I ask: "What's wrong?"

She gives a heavy sigh, and then she starts lamenting: "I am fasting! In sack and ashes!"

I want to kick myself for asking her what's wrong, because I know her and I know that here comes another long story! Her husband is a rough miner, and he gives her a hard time.

She sighs again long and heavily, and then she begins telling that she is mourning her sins. And she especially mourns her husband's sins! But she came to the realization that it was not enough to just fast, because her husband's sins are entirely too great for just a simple fast. So she went and bought herself a thessian sack from the Co-op and cut holes for her head and arms. Then she dressed herself in this course sack and sat flat on the ground in her backyard. She sprinkled ashes over her beautiful hair, so that the grey streaks ran over her little face where the ashes mixed with her tears.

The woman bursts into a flood of tears. She feels very sorry for herself, and I feel very uncomfortable!

Many years ago I worked in a Christian bookstore in Welkom. The woman was one of my very regular visitors who only came in to chat and off-load their problems.

Now you will probably think that I am going to ask the question, is it wrong to fast? No, I'm

not going to ask or answer that question! What I do want to emphasize is that if you want to fast, you must think very carefully about how and when you want to do it. In addition, you should reflect thoroughly on the true purpose of your fast.

Mark writes that it was again one of the regular Jewish fasts, and many Jews strictly observed it. It was a very important custom by the Jews. The Pharisees were of course the leaders in this area, and they fasted regularly every Monday and Thursday.

The question is, why did the Jews fast? The purpose was twofold, firstly as a sign of mourning when someone suffered a great loss, such as the death of a loved one. Her fasting showed the world how much she missed that person.

Fasting was also used as a sign of self-denial, to show that the person truly repented his sins. And if he really wanted to emphasize the mourning, he would also sit down in sackcloth and ashes so that

everyone could know that he was going through deep, deep waters!

However, Mark tells us that Jesus' disciples did not fast while all the others put on their long faces. Even John the Baptist's disciples were fasting, but Jesus' followers did not care to do it.

The men were hot under the collar: "It's not fair! Why should we mourn and suffer while those disciples carry on as if nothing is wrong? They should fast too!"

Jesus' answer was that the guests at a wedding don't fast, do they? That would be outrageous! At a wedding, everything is cheerful, because everyone is happy and excited about the couple's happiness. The person who fasts at a wedding has a very big problem!

What did Jesus mean by this? He wanted to emphasize that there is a profound difference between the time before His coming and after His coming. They couldn't just plod

along like before! His coming heralded the beginning of the end times, when the Bridegroom (Jesus) would be with man forever. Later, the Holy Spirit would also be within every believer, and not just in a few selected leaders.

What difference should it make? Certainly one of the most important characteristics of the end times is the exuberant joy that should be in every believer. It would therefore be inappropriate to try to cling to the old practices of mourning. Grief certainly does not allow joy!

Indeed, there would have been a very short period of mourning, sadness and fasting, that day when Jesus was crucified. However, it was short-lived, and today we can rejoice in the fact that Jesus did not stay hanging on the cross or stay in the grave. He has truly risen! Now He is with us, as He promised in Matthew 28 during His ascension!

Now you may ask me again: "But is it wrong to fast?" No, certainly not! But then you have

to be very careful not to fast so that others can see how terribly you are suffering. Fast in your inner room without anyone else knowing about it. This is a matter between you and God alone. And when you come out there, the joy that only Jesus can give should fill your whole mind, being and face.

However, there is a serious warning: It is an extremely dangerous practice to fast to try to force God in a certain direction. I cannot and may not prescribe to God how He should act! Yes, I can ask Him in prayer to do something, but then I have to rest in His decision.

Yes, you may fast! But it's much better to burst out in a song of praise instead: "It's bubbling in me, because I'm so happy - Jesus loves me!"

Prayer:

Thank you Jesus, that it bubbles in my life, that You, the Bridegroom, are here! That's why I can't keep quiet - I just have to simply shout out and exult my joy!

The Sabbath

Mark 2:23-28

The Sunday starts like any other Sunday, quiet and peaceful. There is a spirit of sacredness hanging over the old farmhouse, and there is no sign of the hustle and bustle of the week. The farm-yard is deserted, as it is every Sunday morning. Dressed in our Sunday clothes, we drive to church in deathly silence, where the sacred mood of Uncle Fred Geyser's heavenly organ playing awaits us. After church we drive again through the town straight to the farm. Everything is dead-quiet in town. There is hardly a car in the streets, and all the shops are closed. Sunday lunch is also, like every Sunday, special, and much earlier than weekdays, so that after dinner there is enough time to take a nap.

And this is where the trouble begins. For a lively ten-year-old boy, it is the greatest punishment on earth to have to lie down and

sleep in the middle of the day, and this while the mountains and all the adventures out there are calling you! However, the rules were laid down very clearly a long time ago: On a Sunday you behave in a sedate manner! You don't work, you don't play, you don't swim and you don't catch fish - not even tadpoles or frogs! That means, you go and lie down to sleep! What a punishment!

I am hardly lying down on my bed, when someone knocks on my window. Outside, a boy's voice calls out: "Louis! Let's go swimming!" My friends from town used to ride with bikes all the way to come and have fun on our farm, because we have a lovely farm dam where you can swim until you drop. And then there are the fruit trees where you can eat your fill of yellow peaches, apples, prickly pears, apricots and plums.

"No, I'm not allowed!"

"Aah please man!" Gerry begs. It doesn't take much persuasion for me to give in to the pressure, and quietly I sneak out the back

door. While running down to the dam, the clothes are already being stripped off, and we dive naked into the dam. We throw mud at each other, and we laugh and shout exuberantly. It's fun to be a kid! It's nice to be able to frolic freely!

But then the ominous voice from the farmhouse reaches my ears above the exuberant laughter: "Louis! Come here!" And I know: here comes BIG troubles!

"You know you're not allowed to swim on Sundays!" Dad is not a happy man! Look, he is not someone who just deal out punishment, but that day when it happens.....

"Go pick yourself a stick."

My mouth fell open. "Dad....?"

"Yes, go on! It must be a proper rod for your hiding!"

I had forgotten that beating many years ago, but the terrible punishment of having to go

and find the rod with which I had to be beaten it is burned into my memory, as if it happened yesterday.

Things have changed: Sunday is leisure day, the day for sports and relaxation, movies and shopping. Sunday is the day for swimming and fishing and playing on the beach. The shop that is not open on a Sunday will very soon go bankrupt.

It is therefore very difficult for us to really form a picture and understand how incredibly important the Sabbath was for the Jews in Jesus' time. For them there were the "ordinary" laws such as that you may not kill and steal. And then there were the two "main" laws that distinguished Jews from all other people: circumcision and the Sabbath. There were long lists of do's and don'ts for a Sabbath. Sabbath, of course, lasted from Friday evening at sunset to Saturday evening at sunset, as some Christians, by the way, still observe today.

And then Jesus' disciples committed the terrible "sin" of plucking ears of wheat while walking through a field. It was a natural action of men who picked something for the hunger pangs in passing. Unfortunately for them, plucking wheat ears was on the Pharisees' list of "don'ts", because it was "harvest", and harvesting was work. And work was of course forbidden!

"The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath," Jesus explained to the Pharisees. What does it mean? The Pharisees saw the Sabbath as something that God imposed on man, and if you don't keep it you will be punished. Jesus presents God as the Good Giver who loves His children and gives commandments to support and help people, and certainly not to oppress them, so therefore the disciples can therefore just pick wheat if they are hungry. Christian freedom frees us from legalism. This means that we can look at a Sunday with completely different eyes.

Does that mean you can do as you please? In verse 28 Jesus says that He is also Lord of the Sabbath. This means that the authority does not lie in ourselves, but that Jesus is the One who has the final say. We must give Him all the glory, also in living out our Sunday/Sabbath. Christian freedom means that we can only live out our freedom in personal connection and obedience to Jesus, not only in the way we will spend Sunday, but also how we will live our whole life.

Prayer:

Lord, please help me to arrange my whole life to live in Your love, and to live out my freedom to honour You.

The Deformed and the Pharisees

Mark 3:1-6

The Pharisees began to realize that they had a very big problem, and that Jesus was becoming a big nightmare for them. People flocked to Him in great numbers, and He seduced them into believing wrong things.

The stiff-necked men are gathered, and there is only one topic in their conversation today: the problem of that Carpenter of Nazareth! "Just look how He despises the law!" the men said to each other, shaking their heads.

Lately there have been several extremely disturbing incidents. It all started when that fisherman, Simon's, mother-in-law became so inexplicably healthy. The people then flocked to Jesus in their thousands, because they believed that it was He who miraculously healed her. And then of course there was the leper who claimed that Jesus

healed him of his leprosy. Everyone knows that only God can perform such a miracle!

The icing on the cake was of course the paralyzed man, the one who let his friends down through a hole in the roof with ropes. The problem is that there were some of these Pharisees' colleagues who saw with their own eyes how the man was instantly healed right there.

"How does one explain this? Only God can bring about such a healing!" Abigael is very upset, but at the same time there is a huge question mark on his face.

"Yes, that's all well and good, but then He stopped and forgave the guy's sins. That's blasphemous!" Now Josephath is furious!

"Yes," agreed the men, nodding their heads, "who can forgive sins but God alone?"

The group of Pharisees was clearly very upset. "One might still think that there is a vague possibility that He might be the

Messiah, as the people whisper," observes someone, "but after that incident when He defiled Himself by partying with the hateful bunch of unclean tax collectors, we all realized that He very definitely cannot be the Messiah."

"Yes," the men all nodded their heads in unison, "surely the Messiah will at least be a Pharisee!"

"The worst thing for me," whines a "wise" old Pharisee, "is the fact that He so horribly despises our precious law. Just look at what He and His disciples make of fasting! They just don't take any notice of it!"

"Any proper Jew will observe it strictly, as we do!" Everyone agrees that regular fasting is definitely important!

But then the men decide that the pinnacle of arrogance is Jesus and His disciples' flagrant violation of the most holy Sabbath laws, when they walked in the wheat field and "harvested", and that during a Sabbath! "We

just have to simply arrest Him!" the men decided.

Their chance comes much sooner and easier than they could have dreamed, because just the following Sabbath they find Jesus preaching in a synagogue. When they walk in, they see the man with the deformed hand sitting there. He is full of expectation, because his chance to see Jesus has come! Maybe Jesus can also do a miracle for him. He would like to be normal like any other man. The Pharisees nudge each other, and gesture to the man: "Today is the day!"

Jesus reads the minds of the clever men like a book, and He knows that they want to arrest Him. He calls the defective one and motions for him to come and stand here in front of the group of Pharisees. He looked the group of men in the eyes: "Is it permissible to do good or bad on the Sabbath, to save a life or to kill?"

The men grumbled among themselves: "What kind of question is that? He is

arrogant! Doesn't He realize who He's talking to? After all, we all have a decent learning in the Scriptures, much more than He can say!"

"Wait guys, let's keep quiet! We will still catch him!"

Jesus is angry with the Pharisees because they are playing into the hands of the devil and trying to thwart the Gospel. But at the same time He is deeply grieved because they harden their hearts so much. The greatest event in the history of the universe, the day when God came down from heaven to save mankind from sin, is completely passing them by. "If only they could realize...."

"Stretch out your hand," He said to the man. And then the miracle happens: instantly the man is healed, his withered hand as normal as that of a carpenter!

Saddened, Jesus looks at the Pharisees as they get up and walk out. "We have Him!" they say to each other smugly. And with that

they walk to their "friends in high places" to forge a plot against Jesus. Soon He will pay the ultimate price for such arrogance!

Jesus came to save people - that's the message he wants to give us from this incident. The Kingdom of God is here, and Jesus is the Ruler, even over the Sabbath! The Pharisees had to get the message clearly: see Jesus for Who He is! After all, he is the One who brought the Kingdom of God.

The message is still exactly the same for us today, and we must take clear notice of the King of the Kingdom. More than that, we must become part of the Kingdom by accepting His invitation! And once you are part, then throw your full weight into being an active Kingdom citizen!

Prayer:

Lord, thank you that I may be part of Your Kingdom, and that I may serve under the greatest of all Kings!

The Twelve are Appointed

Mark 3:7-19

One day I was invited by Rev. Simon Kwaseba from a congregation in Shakaville to deliver a message to them. It's in a very poor town area near Kwa Dukuza (Stanger). For me it was a huge privilege! It's a typical small country church, where time is not a factor, the service was already over, when people still came ambling in!

It's hot, steaming hot, and the small windows only let in the minimum amount of air. Sweat pours down me, where I stand and strangle in my tie (the preacher must wear a tie!) I look over the congregation and a sea of little children's faces filling the front rows greets me expectantly. Will they ever understand? I preach in English while an interpreter translates into Zulu. It's distracting and hard to keep rhythm. A baby screams deafeningly, and his friend starts "singing" together in the

choir. I can barely hear myself speak! How much of this sermon will ever catch on?

At the front door, a red rooster proclaims his domain while his harem cackles and clucks incessantly. "I'll have to bring out all the big guns here this morning," I realized, while the sweat ran in rivulets through my eyes. "How did Jesus manage to keep the crowd's attention?" I wonder "He must have done a lot of practical things!"

My message is about the multiplication of bread loaves, of the five loaves and two fish. I brought five oblong loaves with me which were set on a small table in front of the pulpit. I get down from my high pulpit throne, and start breaking the loaves into pieces. First the little ones each get a piece of bread, and the congregation cranes their necks to see what happens. A murmuring goes through the congregation, because there is action here! I walk through the isles and hand out pieces of bread. Everyone is excited, and their eyes sparkle, because they have never

experienced such a service! The message is simple: you take a piece of bread, break off a piece for yourself and give the rest to your neighbour. This act says that as believers we must also share the Bread of Life (Jesus) that we have received with others.

They understand! Even the very little ones understand.

And I say: "Thank you, thank you Jesus!" while heavenly choral sounds spontaneously fill the church building with the most wonderful harmonies, without an organ or piano or orchestra and ascend to heaven.

When I walk out, everyone in the church wants to shake my hand. And then I wonder: why do our worship services have to be so complicated, formal and pompous?

Mark tells us that Jesus and His followers went down to the Sea of Galilee. People flocked to Him in large numbers, they simply had to see Him! There were people from Tiro and Sidon, Jerusalem, Idumea and from

across the Jordan. From far and wide they flocked to see Jesus. The crowds later grew so large that Jesus had to get into a boat and preach from there so that everyone could see Him.

Why did Jesus draw such huge crowds? The one big reason was that His sermons were not just a bunch of theological reasoning, like those of the scribes who talked over the heads of the common people. Jesus' sermons were simple stories that illustrated very deep truths. He makes generous use of parables that each of these people could associate with, things from everyday life. But Jesus' sermons also involved him doing practical things. It didn't just stay with words, but He applied it practically. He healed many people of all kinds of ailments. And then there was also the exorcism of unclean spirits or demons.

When a thing is told in such a graphic way, and on top of that is illustrated practically, the audience remembers the sermon, and they

make it part of their lives. Moreover, the people enjoy it, and this means that not only a handful show up, but that the news spreads, and people flock there in large numbers to experience His sermons.

One day Jesus sat down among a group of His regular followers. He looked Simon straight in the eyes and then beckoned the rough fisherman closer. Little brother Andrew also has to stand closer, and so do the two brothers with highly flammable tempers, John and James. When He beckons Judas Iscariot closer, there is a sad look in Jesus' eyes. The men look at each other questioningly: What does Jesus want to do with them? More men are called closer until finally there is a group of twelve men standing. Then Jesus explains: they are His core group of "apostles", His emissaries. A huge responsibility would one day rest on their shoulders. But now three years of intense training await them.

These men would not only represent the twelve tribes of Israel, but with the powerful

renewal with which Jesus was busy, the men would also represent and preach the "new Israel", the church of Christ, and carry out the wonderful Gospel to the whole world!

Prayer:

Lord, thank you for the example that You have set for us. Thank you for teaching us to share the Gospel in a simple way.

Blasphemy against the Holy Spirit

Mark 3:20-30

We have already seen that Jesus' actions attracted huge crowds of people. Often people travelled long distances, even for days, just to experience Jesus. However, not everyone experienced Him so positively - He made some people uncomfortable. There was sometimes fierce criticism, and often even open hostility towards Him!

In today's pericope we read that Jesus entered a house, probably again Peter's house in Capernaum. (Also translated that He went home.) As on the previous occasions when He was there, people once again gathered around Him so much so, that they did not even give Him a chance to eat something!

Jesus' family was very worried about Him. He was totally neglecting Himself. But on top of

that, He was busy embarrassing them. If you disgraced your family those years, it simply meant big trouble. Granted, their Family Member's behaviour was very strange. He, according to the opinion of that time, did not know His place. If you wanted to be a rabbi, you first had to undergo years of training from a teacher. Jesus never had that kind of training, and now suddenly He was this great Rabbi who wanted to teach people left and right. He even contradicted the famous rabbis, and proved their teachings wrong. His behaviour was very strange indeed!

However, there was something else that was much worse. He did embarrassing things that made them hide their heads in shame, like for example that time when He went to party with a bunch of tax-collectors and sinners. He was really busy dragging their respected family name through the mud!

"He's insane!" Jesus' family shook their heads compassionately

But Jesus' family were not the only ones who thought that He had got off the track completely. The Scribes of Jerusalem came to the conclusion that it was much worse, and that He was demon possessed! The men carefully watched Jesus' actions, and finally came to the conclusion that there was indeed something supernatural going on. They could not overlook the fact that He did perform numerous healings and miracles. Also could they deny that He cast out demons. Some of them saw with their own eyes how the devils left possessed people with a great pomp and manifestation.

"These are demonic things!" they said to each other. "These are all things of the Evil One!"

And so the learned men marched into Capernaum, all the way from Jerusalem to confront Jesus. They accused Him of being possessed by Beelzebul, i.e. the devil, and that with the help of the leader of the

demons, which of course also refers to the devil, He cast out these demons.

Their allegations were actually ludicrous because they were totally contradictory. Jesus then told them exactly this too, because it made no sense at all. The devil wouldn't use someone to thwart his own demons' work? "How can Satan drive out Satan?" Jesus wanted to know. That's ridiculous! Then He explained with a few images how these allegations of theirs just simply could not make sense. Like, that Satan wouldn't rebel against himself? In fact, they were horrendous, slanderous allegations that they made.

Jesus looked at the crafty men, and then said something to them that made their hair stand on end: "Whoever says evil things against the Holy Spirit will never be forgiven, because he has committed an eternal sin!"

What exactly did Jesus mean by this? This question has given many people, often even believers, nightmares. I have often heard this

worried question: "Haven't I somewhere perhaps already unknowingly slandered against the Holy Spirit? In my young days I was very reckless, and I said things against God that I bitterly regret today! Can I ever be forgiven?"

If you read carefully what Mark wrote here, it is not about something that was said thoughtlessly, or something that you just did by chance. It is about someone who persistently attributes the redemptive work of Jesus to the devil. It is about someone rejecting God's great grace. We must remember that the Lord does not force His work of salvation on anyone. No one is ever forced to accept the salvation that Jesus offers. In Revelation 3:20 it says: "I stand at the door and I knock." Jesus does not say that He will break down the door if you do not want to open. He stands and knocks, and waits. Patiently! It's your own choice whether you're going to open!

However, if someone persistently rejects Jesus, he blasphemes against the Holy Spirit. Then he is lost! Harsh and bitter words!

But unfortunately we often miss the other side of the story: All your other sins will be forgiven! The greatness of God's grace is breathtaking. His forgiveness is a thousand times greater than all other things. How wonderful it is to be able to worship such a God!

Prayer:

Thank you Lord, that your mercy is also so great on me, and that you have forgiven all my sins.

The Family of Jesus

Mark 3:31-35

What do we learn in the Bible about Jesus' family? We read very little of Father Joseph. By the time Jesus began His task, we hear nothing of him, so we can assume he was already dead. He was a carpenter and his eldest son, Jesus, learned his trade from him. And yes, there were other children too: Jesus had brothers. However, there is no mention of sisters. So it was a perfectly normal family.

In New Testament times, a family was a very close unit, even after the children were already out of the house and had their own families. Everything literally revolved around your extended family, and nothing would be too much effort for you to do for them. The family members stood together through thick and thin.

In the previous pericope, however, we saw that Jesus' family began to feel uncomfortable with the things He was doing, and they began to suspect that He was "deprived of His senses." They were very worried about Him. When such a disaster struck a family, the family member was not summarily rejected as the "black sheep" of the family. The family would continue to care for the "strayed" member. And that's exactly how it was with Jesus' family. Mark tells that they decided to come and get Him, because He needed them to get Him back on the right path. He had to come home, where He belonged. After all, he was the Carpenter of Nazareth and certainly not a "street preacher"!

Mark tells that Jesus' family remained standing outside. They did not want to come into the house like Jesus' followers. The people who were really interested in Jesus sat around Him. They wanted to be close to Him. However, his opponents remained outside. Could one perhaps now also classify

Jesus' family as His opponents? No, definitely not! They did reject the things He was busy with, and therefore they remained standing outside. However, they did not reject Him as a family member at all.

Thank goodness that this situation changed completely a few years later. Jesus' brother, James, came to new insights after Jesus' ascension and realized who his Brother really was. After that he played a very big role as a leader in the new Christian church and later even wrote one of the Bible books.

When Jesus' family came to fetch Him, His answer was: "Who are My mother and my brothers?" Then He explained to the people with Him that His mother and brothers were the ones who were sitting here around Him. He therefore exchanged His blood family for a new family: those who did the will of God. They were now His family.

The question is: how do you do the will of God? Simple: you follow Jesus!

We can now draw some conclusions in the light of what we have just read: If Jesus classifies His followers as His brothers and sisters, can we now also say that you and I are His brothers and sisters, because we follow Him? But then we also have to say at the same time that we are brothers and sisters of each other. So we are one big family. And that is exactly what the church is. The church is not a building, nor is it a certain congregation. It is not even a specific denomination. The church is all the followers of Jesus collectively. And this is what makes the church so different from a sports club or a political party. The church is one big close family of brothers and sisters.

We can learn from the family set-up of Jesus' time. In this pericope we see that Jesus' family was worried about Him, because He was "deprived of His senses." They were not at all happy with His actions. According to them, He brought shame on the good name of the family. What did they do? Did they reject Him? No! Even though, like His

opponents, they remained outside the circle, they still cared, and they wanted to take Him back home.

What do we do when one of our church family members embarrasses us? What do we do when someone who is part of the church stumbles? Usually he is summarily rejected! We distance ourselves from the person. Often such a person even becomes an outcast from society.

Just as family members in a family are often vastly different from one another, so family members in the family of Jesus also differ from one another. We don't all share the same view. Some of us are charismatic, while others are narrowly reformed. We disagree about baptism and many other things. Even within our own denomination there are often major differences of opinion on certain matters of faith and there are sometimes heated arguments. We experience it every day. But today I want to appeal to you, dear reader, that we will

respect our fellow believers for their views, and not judge them. After all, he is your brother and she is your sister! Instead, let's show true love to each other, as Jesus set an example for us. Let's treat each other like a real family should.

Prayer:

Thank you Lord for the huge family you have given me. Thank you for giving me so many brothers and sisters, and even though most of them are so different from me, I know today that we have one thing in common: Jesus our Saviour and Lord!

The Sower

Mark 4:1-20

It's early in the morning, and Jesus walks calmly with his group of disciples on the beach of the Sea of Galilee, while He teaches them. It's not long before someone notices them. The news spreads like wildfire, and in no time people flock from all over to see the Great Prophet. All too soon, their leisurely stroll is cut short when a huge crowd gathers around them, completely crowding them out. Jesus is forced to get into a boat. Simon Peter and his men push the boat into the calm water of the lake, so that it floats a few meters from the beach.

When Jesus looks over the hungry crowd, He sees in the distance a farmer working in his fields. A young boy struggles behind a plough, pulled by an ox. The ground is very stony, and every now and then the boy has to throw a sharp turn to avoid the big rock in the

field. A few steps behind the boy, Dad walks with a leather seed bag hanging over his shoulder. Rhythmically, his hand is put into the bag and with a graceful swinging movement the seed is deftly scattered, as years of practice has taught him. "How much of that seed ever actually falls into the furrows?" Jesus asks in general.

"Master?" Peter has not the faintest idea what Jesus is talking about. So what do seeds and plough-shares have to do with the crowd here on the beach?

Then Jesus begins to tell the people on the beach a story: "Listen, everyone!" He calls them to silence. "Look, a sower went out to sow." A dead silence falls over the people. They sit open-mouthed listening while Jesus tells about the sower's seed that does not always fall so safely into the furrows, but that many seeds fall in other places: on stones; on the road; between bushes. None of this seed ever becomes a plant that produces wheat. Only the seeds that land in

the furrows grow successfully and eventually become fertile plants that produce a large harvest. "Let those who have ears to hear, listen!" Jesus concludes the story.

On many faces there is a big question mark. Yes, it was a nice story, and they can relate to it. And yes, it is very true that the seed does not always fall where it should. One farmer here in the front row vehemently agrees with Jesus. He's already lost a lot of seed that way. But now, what can one do? That's just the fate of a farmer!

Late afternoon, when the last people walk away to go home, only a handful of men remain with Jesus, the twelve that He chose earlier and a few faithful followers. Then one dares: "Master, this was a nice story, but what did you really want to say with this?"

Then Jesus explains to them exactly what the meaning is. The question now is: what does this parable say to you and me today in our modern society?

We have been taught since childhood that this beautiful parable means that it is a call to the people who hear the Word. You must show the right response when the Lord speaks to you through His word. You must, as it were, strive to be the "good soil", so that the seed of the Gospel that is sown in your life will grow to maturity and bear fruit. And that's quite right too.

But there is a second meaning that is just as important. It is not necessarily only about the recipients of the seed, but also about the sower, the person who proclaims the good news. This parable serves to encourage those who sow the seed of the word in their labour. Personally, I can confess this morning that I have been extremely disappointed many times when I sowed the Word, and it was simply swallowed up by the weeds. Or it seems to me that my message is accepted with joy, and there is great joy, but a month or two later everything withers, like the seed that fell on the stone, and the beautiful young

plant is scorched by the sun. It makes one so discouraged!

A pastor can stand on the pulpit Sunday after Sunday and preach the Word, but at the end of the day it feels to him as if nothing happens. The congregation members are still divided; they still gossip about each other; his words fell among the thistles!

This parable wants to encourage the sowers, and encourage them to keep sowing. Yes, seed will fall on the road, between the bushes and on stones. But then you must know that seed will also fall into the furrows, and that seed will grow to maturity and bear fruit. Never ever stop your sowing efforts, even if you sometimes feel discouraged. And never ever stop spreading the gospel, because somewhere there is someone just waiting for that message from you.

In Mark's time, this parable was an encouragement to the entire congregation, because everyone participated in the sowing process. It was not just the pastor who

sowed. Today, this parable not only wants to encourage the pastor, but encourages every "ordinary" believer to become part of the sowing process. Come on, be a sower! God will give fruit to our labour!

Prayer:

Lord, thank you for this wonderful encouragement, that my labour is not in vain. Thank you for bearing fruit on my labour, even if I often don't even notice it. Please give me the perseverance to keep sowing.

The Lamp Under the Bucket

Mark 4:21-25

Darkness slowly descends, where we relax peacefully on the porch. Along the water channel, the first frogs are starting to warm up for tonight's big concert. A cricket tunes his violin, and Grandma's Guinea-fowl's "Tjee-tjee-tjee-tjirrrrrrrr!" is deafening so as to get all her children and grandchildren and great-grandchildren together. They must be very widely scattered, for her raspy little voice echoes through the ravines of Waterval Boven, so that no one can say that they have not been warned that the night is here.

"Now then," Grandpa urges us, and then we know: it's time for our radi story, the Du Plooy's of Soetmelksvlei. The house is pitch dark as we all scurry down the passage in a line on the wooden floors. The darkness wants to grab me by the throat, but luckily the adults are here. I make sure that I walk very

close to Grandpa. It sounds to me as if the floor is creaking more than usual tonight. When we push open the dining-room door, it makes a lowd screeching noise. I shudder to my marrow-bones! Grandma draws a match. The paraffin lamp's wick catches fire. And suddenly the darkness is gone. Just like that! One simple paraffin lamp makes the darkness disappear like fog before the sun! Relieved, I look around me: Indeed, everything still looks exactly as it did in the bright daylight!

Wonderful thing, a lamp! So simple, and just look what miracles it can do with darkness! But now Jesus tells His followers that one might consider putting a lamp under a bucket, or even worse, under the bed! This is a laughable situation, because then what would be the purpose of such a lamp? It will be totally useless. First of all, it is designed to make light. But what good does it do if you hide the light?

The Kingdom of God was coming, so Jesus told His listeners on several occasions. And we must also see this parable of Jesus in this light. The coming of the Kingdom is of course a very broad concept. But in the very first place it is about Jesus' great act of reconciliation. At the stage when Jesus told this parable, it was really all still real like a lamp under a bucket, where only a slit of light shone through. Even Jesus' intimate friends had not even the faintest idea of what it was all about. Some did venture a wild guess by saying that Jesus might be the Messiah, but even this claim was very vague, because they expected a totally different Messiah, a Messiah who would free them from the Romans and then reign as eternal King over Israel.

But all this would change: "For nothing is hidden that will not be revealed," Jesus tells them. The "great secret" about the Messiah would soon be trumpeted forth like a bright lamp on a stand spreads its light and dispels the darkness.

"Let those who have ears to hear, listen!" Jesus warns His hearers. They do not quite understand what Jesus means. But they would eventually understand later. It would take three years for those men before they could really understand for the first time what it was all about. But they heeded Jesus' words, and when they finally understood everything, after Jesus' ascension, they remembered His words.

When the Holy Spirit is poured out on them, a new task falls on their shoulders. Now they no longer sit at Jesus' feet and listen. Now they are those lamps that Jesus spoke of. What is the purpose of a lamp? To spread light! Their task now was to spread and trumpet forth the light of Jesus and the Kingdom of God as lamps.

But for eleven men (remember, one was dead) it was an almost impossible task to carry this light to the whole world with extremely limited means of communication. That's why everyone who received the light

from them also became a lamp that made the light shine wider and wider, until it shined even into the heart of evil Rome like a lighthouse.

The Lord has given you and me ears to hear, and today we must listen attentively, because just as the Lord appointed the new believers as lamps two thousand years ago to spread His wonderful light, so He also says to us that every believer, and that includes you and me, is a lamp. And like any lamp, our goal is to spread the light of Jesus. As the disciples of old were equipped by the Holy Spirit for their task, so we are also equipped by the same Holy Spirit. So we have no excuse!

Of course, this does not mean that each of us should preach. Just as there are many different types of lamps, each of us has also been given our own unique talents. The great instruction is that we may not hide that talent under a bucket (or the bed), but that we will let Jesus' light shine by using our talents to the glory of God.

So listen prayerfully today to what the Lord's instruction is to you. In which way does He want you to shine His light in the world?

Prayer:

Lord, thank you for the talents you have given me. Thank you also that I may use them freely, and especially to let the light of Jesus shine. Help me to hear Your voice clearly, and give me the will to do what You ask of me.

The Sunflower Field

Mark 4:26-29

Early morning, April 1977. I am standing in front of our little house on the farm near Welkom. The horizon is scattered by the grey-yellow mine dumps, but here in front of me lies a stubble field stretching almost to the foot of the mine dumps. A boring picture of nothing! Just stubble from the previous year's harvest. This morning, however, there is something exciting in the air: the rumble of tractors coming from afar down the farm road. A whole string of green, smoke-spewing worms coming nose-to-tail, each with a giant plough behind its tail. Today is the day!

In unison, the tractors drive their ploughs into the hard-baked soil, groaning and roaring and behind them the fertile red soil breaks open. On the other side of the field they turn, and then they come rushing down again like a platoon of soldiers, with a cloud of red dust

hanging over their tails. Up and down, up and down they rumble on. When night comes, I watch the lights as they get smaller and smaller. And then finally they are done, and a deadly silence falls over the farm.

The next day it's a bustling when all the right fertilisers and chemicals are added in the furrows. Then comes the turn of the planters and finally the furrows are covered.

Rain comes at exactly the right time, and then a bubbling excitement begins to grow somewhere deep in my stomach. My anticipation is great, because something is going on underground. Every morning I walk down to the field to see if anything has happened, but then I just have to turn around disappointed: "What's wrong? Why then does the seed not grow?"

But one clear morning I see it: the ground has a crack in it, just a hairline crack. Carefully I fumble in the ground with my finger. Then my breath goes away: GREEN! There are two tiny green leaves under the

cap of soil. The next day, the whole field, as far as the eye can see, is covered in a soft green carpet of brand new leaves. What a miracle!

With great interest I watch the plants as they grow and swell day by day, until later they are so big that I get lost when I walk between the rows of sunflower plants in the evening twilight. The green jungle soon gives way to a sea of gold, when the plants open their giant golden flowers and turn their heads towards the sun. Every now and then there is a team of workers who come to eradicate weeds or give fertilizer and pamper the precious farmland.

All too soon their lifetime is over. All too soon, the lush green plants wither to make way for old, shriveled grey stems with heavy, black heads that sag down towards the ground under the great weight of their seeds.

But then one fine morning there is that excitement in me again when I hear the monotonous hum. I run outside: I see a long

line of giant green harvesters, coming down the farm road, in a big cloud of dust. It's harvest time! Wriggling sickles devour the aged sunflower field, and where they had passed, only the stubble remains. The heavy, black heads disappear into the green monster's stomach, only to be spat out again later as a thick stream of seeds into the back of a truck.

Then it's all over. The harvesters are gone. The trucks with their heavy loads of sunflower seeds have gone to the granaries. And once again a deathly silence falls over the stripped stubble land that stretches almost to the grey-yellow mine dumps.

And I get a chance to contemplate over it all. Jesus once told a parable about seeds that grow by themselves. "The kingdom of God is like a man who scatters seed on the ground," said Jesus, "and goes to sleep night after night, and rises day after day, and the seed germinates and grows." Then Jesus further explains that the person who sows does not

himself know how this seed germinates or grows. Something inexplicable is happening in the ground, something he himself has nothing to do with.

You and I were given the task to sow, to sow the Word of God. Please note: our task is not to try to convince a person with great arguments to allow Jesus into his life. In any case, no one will ever understand the complexity of Jesus' redemptive work. It is totally inexplicable, and trying to explain it to an unbeliever is a completely impossible matter. We only know the very basic outlines. So all Jesus asks of me is to sow.

Meanwhile, an inexplicable thing happens in the person who received the "seed". In a supernatural way, the Holy Spirit works in that person's life, and He convinces him of Jesus' work of salvation. And suddenly, one day, that growth comes. Yes, it's tragic that not everyone "germinates", and not everyone reaches full maturity and bears fruit.

But just as plants must be cared for and fertilized and weeds must be eradicated, so it is with the human "plants." A new believer who is left alone will never make it. It is our task as sowers to also constantly look after the well-being of the fruit of our labour. They must be encouraged to grow and bear fruit. If we don't give aftercare, we have not yet completed our task. Let's reflect today on the way we sow and give aftercare. God gives the growth. We dare not undo God's work through laxity!

Prayer:

Lord, thank you that I can sow too. Thank you for so many people who You entrusted to me. Please help me give them all the aftercare they need.

The Mustard Seed

Mark 4:30-34

Jesus tells a parable of a tiny mustard seed that germinates and grows into a large, useful shrub of almost 3m high in which even the birds come to nest. Mark says that Jesus often used such parables to bring home truths to the people. However, most of them did not understand it. Why? Most of Jesus' followers were only there for one purpose: sensation!

This parable of the mustard seed is so telling of Jesus' own ministry. Yes, there were thousands of people around Him every day, but only a small handful were there to truly follow Jesus. His ministry was truly like a tiny mustard seed, if we see it in the context of Israel. However, if we consider the entire world as at the time, it was still much smaller. Remember: Israel was just an insignificant

little country somewhere in the desert, just a speck in the mighty Roman empire!

In the world context, a dozen clumsy leaders without any theological training, and a few poor admirers, were hardly a drop in the ocean. Moreover, the tragic happens when this group of fishermen's Teacher is executed, barely three years after they started their training. That mustard seed is, as it were, "planted" in the stone grave. The men were leaderless, discouraged and totally helpless. A sad, hopeless situation!

But then the miracle happens when Jesus rises from the grave. For Jesus' small handful of followers who remained, it was literally like the mustard seed that sprouted - fresh, brand new leaves that came out of the ground. They still didn't have the faintest idea what to make of it, and everything was terribly fragile and uncertain. To make matters worse, the ascension came and finally took Jesus away from them. Suddenly even that bit of comfort from Jesus' resurrection was also gone!

But one thing they kept clinging to: HOPE! That wonderful word that can give one a new vision for the future. They carried an unquenchable hope in their hearts, because Jesus made great promises to them. So they sat with beating hearts and waited for the promise to come true. As the days approached for the fulfillment of Jesus' promise, the excitement grew!

Finally, that unforgettable Sunday arrived, that Sunday when the Holy Spirit was poured out on humanity. Suddenly, the confused Peter and his fisherman friend had brand new strength, so much so that after Peter's speech that day, three thousand people were converted and became true disciples of Jesus.

However, it didn't just stop there. This young "mustard plant" began to grow very quickly until its branches covered all of Israel. But even there it did not end, because the branches continued to spread to reach even

Samaria and later also Greece, Rome and the whole world.

The question is: How did this "mustard plant" function? Simple: It's roots were firmly anchored in the One who planted the seed, Jesus. All the strength, nourishment and stimulation that this "plant" needed, he could get in abundant measure from this inexhaustible Source.

And then there was the tribe: the apostles and men like Paul who could channel this source of power to all the branches. They had a huge task, to be able to give direction to the church. These men received a three-year intensive training from the greatest Teacher of all time. They were able to use all the knowledge and inspiration they gained from this training to steer the church in the right direction.

But then there was probably the most important part of this "mustard plant," without which the plant would be useless: the ordinary people, the believers! They didn't

just passively hang on the tree. These people actively lived out their task and constantly "recruited" new members, so that the church could grow from a tiny mustard seed to a giant tree within a very short time. Often they had to take great risks to spread the Gospel, because anyone who spread the Word was cruelly persecuted. Still, they continued diligently and undaunted.

And today? To a large extent, the tree has stagnated. Yes, the roots are still properly anchored. And yes, the tribe is still there, and it functions. But in most cases the branches and leaves have become totally passive. They receive nourishment from the stem, but the power is not used.

Let's make a decision today, to once again start working on channeling the power, the inexhaustible power we get, in the right direction, and use it to expand God's Kingdom. There are many ways to do this. Pray for wisdom to use your talents that God has given you to expand His Kingdom.

Prayer:

Lord, I stand guilty this morning, because I have stagnated. Please give me the will and zeal to work actively in Your Kingdom.

The Storm

Mark 4:35-41

Trembling with fear, the Israelites stand gathered on the beach of the Sea of Reeds. In front of them lies the vast expanse of water, and behind them they can see the army of the Egyptians advancing in a giant cloud of dust. Today is the day that the entire nation here will be wiped out! As the sun sets, the Israelites see the rows and rows of chariots with their cruel horsemen rushing towards them, and the people whine in anguish. But then the first miracle of nature happens: a pitch-black cloud bank descends in front of the onrushing Egyptians, so that they cannot see anything in front of them. But the miracle is not over yet, because on the Israelites' side this same bank of clouds is brightly lit, so that it is almost like daylight to them. In Genesis 14:19 we read: "The Angel of God, who had always gone before the army of Israel, then moved behind them." (By

the way, the Angel of God refers to the Son of God, thus Jesus.)

But still it is not over, because at God's command Moses stretches out his hand over the sea. A strong east wind arises that splits open the water of the sea, so that a wide road is laid dry through which the Israelites can escape from the oncoming danger. Like one man, the people move through the sea right through the night. On either side of them they see the bank of water standing like a wall of glass.

When the sun begins to rise the next morning, the last of the Israelites set foot ashore on the other side of the sea. When they look back, they see the Egyptians with their chariots on the other side of the road on the sea-bed. This same path that God had just made for them to escape from the enemy, now becomes the path for the enemy to pursue and destroy them! But then a breathtaking miracle happens, when the wheels of the fearsome Egyptian chariots

suddenly start to come loose and fall off. A huge confusion prevails among the onrushing force. The final blow comes when the wall of water on either side of them begins to crumble, and they are swallowed by the sea!

Many years later there was again a group of Israelites who were in great need, and once again it would only be a miracle that could save them, a very big miracle!

It all started when Jesus told His disciples that they should sail to the other side of the lake. The Sea of Galilee is actually just a large lake with calm water. But this is extremely deceptive, because on the other side of the lake there are many strategically located ravines that can channel winds across the lake like funnels and cause sudden, violent storms. Within minutes, the lake can change from a peaceful little pool to a boiling pot. While they were on the lake, Jesus lay down on a bench and slept. Then one of those sudden storms hit them. Giant

waves tossed their boat back and forth and crashed over the side of the boat. The water poured into the barge Faster than they could scoop out.

Terrified, the men shook Jesus awake: "Master, don't you care that we perish?"

And then the miracle happens when Jesus addresses the storm: "Be still, subside!" Immediately the wind died down, and a great silence fell over them.

In the newspaper The Beeld, a certain rev. Cruywagen once wrote that it does not help to pray when you are in need. It is no use praying for rain, because it is only the forces of nature that can make rain!

This pastor, it seems to me, has never really read the Bible. He did not read about Moses, and about how Jesus calmed the storm when His disciples were in need. And he didn't read about Elijah praying for it to stop raining either. And after the terrible drought, he prayed again for rain, and then everyone had

to flee because the big rain was there! Does he not know then that we serve an Almighty God for Whom absolutely nothing is impossible?

Over the years, I have experienced the answer to prayer numerous times, about things that I cannot help but attribute to God who listens to my voice, and answered my prayer. Yes, for sure He doesn't always give what I ask, but I often see the answer to my prayer in a surprisingly different way! Then I know that God knows better than I do, and that my prayer is answered in a different way.

Could Moses have ever dreamed that the Lord would answer his prayer in such a miraculous way? And could the disciples have ever dreamed that Jesus had the power to change even the forces of nature?

I "accidentally" read the story in Die Beeld before I wrote this daily piece. Accidental? No! A thousand times no! Nothing is "accidental"! This story came in answer to my prayer to give me the words for this daily

piece. If this was not an answer to my prayer, then what was?

The two examples from Scripture this morning are some of thousands of examples of Divine intervention on people's prayers. Jesus is described here by Mark as God for Whom nothing is impossible. Today He is still exactly the same as in Moses and also Mark's time. He is almighty! And He listens when we pray!

Prayer:

Lord, thank you that I can talk to You and also bring my needs to You. Thank you that I can be assured that you listen to my prayer.

The Possessed of Gerasa

Mark 5:1-20

Still trembling from the terrible storm, the disciples arrived with Jesus on the other side of the lake. Now they were no longer in Jewish territory, but in the territory of the Gerasa. Here everything was different, and here different religious laws applied. Hardly had they set foot on shore, when big trouble came running in the form of a possessed man. When the men saw those wild eyes, they wished they had stayed behind in the storm! The demonic forces that took over this man's life made him as strong as a beast. Chains could not restrain him. He broke them like strings of yarn! The people of Gerasa did not want this wild man near them, so he had to make himself at home among the graves. For the Jews, a cemetery was of course an unclean place. So bad was the poor man's obsession, that he hit himself with stones.

When their boat landed in Gerasa, the possessed immediately recognized Jesus. He ran up to Him and fell down at Jesus' feet, while the demons in him cried out for mercy: "Leave me alone, Jesus, Son of the Most High God! I swear to God, don't torment me!"

"What is your name?"

"My name is Legion, for we are many!" The name is related to a Roman legion, a division of between 3000 and 6000 soldiers. So this poor man fell into the clutches of the devil. The unclean spirits, or demons, were tools of the devil, and an overwhelming force of them dominated this man's life. When they saw Jesus, they immediately realized that they had no chance against Him, and therefore they begged for mercy. "Please don't send us away from the region!" In Gerasa they flourished, because here God was not worshipped because the inhabitants were of course pagans.

Jesus' power is depicted very clearly in this story, because here we see how the demons,

who absolutely abused their power and had full control over this strong man, suddenly realized that they stood absolutely powerless before the gentle Jesus.

Jesus granted the demons' request, and they were sent into a herd of 2000 pigs that were grazing nearby. The pigs ran down a mountainside and fell into the sea and drowned. The herders got the fright of their lives, and ran as fast as their little legs could carry them. Trembling with fear, they shouted as far as they went: "The most terrible thing has happened to us!" Everywhere they told of what had happened to the possessed and that his demons had all been cast out and that their herd of pigs had gone!

Later, a delegation from the town came to Jesus and asked Him kindly, yet urgently, to please go back to where He came from. They certainly did not need Him in their lives, because He cost them too much! Again Jesus granted their request. He and the men

got into the boat and sailed back to the other side of the lake.

And the possessed? Suddenly he was freed from the terrible long-term domination of the Evil One. He was free! But then how could he stay here where everyone knew him as the "mad man?" He wanted to go with his Saviour to serve Him and be with Him every day. "I am going with You, Lord," he insisted when Jesus got into the boat. But then came the surprising answer: "No!" Jesus granted the requests of the devils and the pagans, but someone who wanted to follow Him, a very noble request, He refused! "Go to your home, to your people, and tell them all that the Lord has done for you and that He has shown you compassion."

He had to tell all the people of his region the good news of Jesus. In such a pagan country it was a huge task! One moment he was still demon-possessed and the next an evangelist! The man performed his task with full dedication! Mark tells that he went

throughout the entire Decapolis (ten cities) to tell about Jesus. And everyone was surprised by that!

This task of his was not without reason. A few years later, when the Christians were brutally persecuted in Jerusalem, many of them fled to the Decapolis region and were welcomed there with open arms, purely because of this ex-possessed's testimony.

What does this story mean for us as believers today? Is this a recipe for exorcising demons? Not at all! The main thing is the wonder about Jesus, the Son of God. Jesus' omnipotence is demonstrated here once again, when even evil is powerless against Him. Today, Jesus still has full power to free people from the domination of the devil and his evil forces. What a wonderful privilege to have that same Jesus by my side today!

But then we also have to learn from the story, that our noble requests are not always granted. The reason is that God may have a

greater goal in mind for us, and just as the possessed had to do the preparation to give the Christian refugees protection, so maybe He also has a big task for us. So be obedient that day He gives you a task. Thirdly, we can learn that even a very new believer can testify. If this newly converted heathen could do it, so can you and I!

Prayer:

Lord, please make me obedient to do what You ask of me - make me willing to carry out the task You give me.

Jairus' Frustration

Mark 5:21-34

Jairus is a very important man - he was elected to one of the highest status positions in the society of the town. As councilor of the synagogue, his job is to make arrangements for services in the synagogue. He is responsible for ensuring that everything is maintained and that everything progresses in an orderly manner.

But Jairus is now a very worried man, because his darling little daughter has become seriously ill, and he has to watch helplessly as her condition deteriorates by the minute. Day and night they watch by her bed. Many people have come with advice, but nothing wants to work, and Jairus has to watch helplessly as the life flows out of his little girl. It is a totally hopeless situation.

And then the news reaches Jairus' ears: Jesus is back in town! "This is our last chance!" he said to his wife, and then Jairus ran down the street to where he heard Jesus was. "If that Jesus could heal Simon's mother-in-law, and the paralyzed man, surely He can heal my darling child too!" The poor man is desperate.

However, when Jairus comes close to Jesus, he sees to his great dismay a huge crowd gathering around Him. He pushes his way through the people: "Excuse me, please let me through. It's urgent!" Systematically, he worms his way through the hordes, until he finally sees Jesus standing right here in front of him. In despair, the important councillor falls down before Jesus, pleading: "My little girl, she is dying! Please, just come and lay Your hands on her so that she can get well and stay alive...."

The crowd is excited, Jesus agrees to go with Jairus. Here they are going to see a great miracle again today! However, to

Jairus's great frustration, it is extremely difficult, because everyone wants to be close to Jesus to be able to hear what He is saying. People crush each other and bump into Jesus, and the procession moves forward at a snail's pace.

In the meantime, however, there is another very big drama that is playing out right behind Jesus' back. With fear and trembling, the woman made the decision that this was her only and last chance. If only she could get to Jesus! For twelve years now she has been struggling with this terrible cross, almost as bad as leprosy. She suffers from a blood flowing, and this causes her to be classified as permanently unclean. She may not touch anyone. Doctors had tried every advice under the sun, and financially she was completely wiped out. If only she could live a normal life again.....

What she is doing here is a huge risk and is actually risking her life to push through the people like that. She pulls the shawl lower

over her face so that no one would accidentally recognize her. If she is caught, they will stone her! Her heart beats wildly in her chest, when she suddenly sees Jesus here right in front of her. "If only I could touch His clothes!" She trembles with fear. People bump and squeeze her from all sides, while she holds out a trembling hand.

The moment she touches Jesus' clothes, it feels as if an electric current flows through her body. Instantly the pain and discomfort of so many years is gone, and she knows: "I am healed!"

Instantly Jesus stops. He turns and looks her straight in the eyes: "Who touched my clothes?" His disciples find it a comical situation, because everyone then pushes and squeezes their Master, and now he asks who touched his clothes? That's ridiculous!

She stands there trembling, scared white because she has been caught out. Her knees go numb. Then she falls down before Jesus, and in a stream of words she tells her sad

history, about the doctors, the rejection, the terrible stigma that sticks to her.

"Daughter," comes Jesus' wonderful words of comfort, "your faith has saved you. Go in peace." Then Jesus assures her that her illness is cured for good. She is a normal person again after all these years.

Meanwhile, Jairus is standing and tripping around in distress. His little daughter is dying, and Jesus is only now getting busy with a woman! She has been carrying her illness around with her for twelve years, couldn't it have waited a little longer? Now it is completely too late!

The question now is, did the woman's faith save her? Jesus says so! What exactly did He mean by that? Naturally, this was a Divine healing, because Jesus healed her. But where does her faith come in?

Through her faith, she opens the doors so that Jesus' power can flow through her. That's how it still works today. God is the One

who gives healing, deliverance, strength, wisdom etcetera, but at the same time He asks you and me to take the step of faith and open the door for Him to make the miracle happen through us. "If only you had the faith of a mustard seed," Jesus once reproached His disciples. Of course He is able to do anything without our faith, but God wants us to have that full trust in Him, and with the full knowledge that absolutely nothing is impossible for Him.

And Jairus' little daughter? We'll just have to wait until monday to see what happened next!

Prayer:

Lord, I am often so unbelieving when I ask You something. Please teach me about true faith!

Jairus's Daughter

Mark 5:35-43

Jairus stood and tripped around with impatience. His little daughter is dying and Jesus is only now getting involved with a woman whose long-term illness could have waited a little longer! Doesn't Jesus realise the seriousness of the matter?

And then, while Jesus was still calmly talking to the woman, some of Jairus' people came running. He could see right away from their faces that there was very bad news. "Sir, your little girl has died!" Jairus turned deathly pale. "Why did Jesus linger so long? He might still have been on time, if it hadn't been for this woman...."

But Jesus heard what it was about and then He calmly turned around and said to Jairus: "Don't be upset - just believe!" How do you keep believing under such circumstances?

It's too late to believe! It's over! She was dead and nothing could bring her back! Did these thoughts go through Jairus' head? Perhaps these would be the thoughts that would go through your confused mind and mine if someone gave us such words of "false hope", because I think that is exactly what Jairus might have been thinking at that moment.

Jesus motions to the crowd to please leave Him alone. Then He takes Peter, James and John with Him to Jairus' house. There he meets all the family and friends. It moans and cries and mourns, something all-terrible. But it is not just the family who mourn: there are also all the professional mourners. Two men play sad music on flutes while a group of women sing graveyard songs that will even give even the dead chills!

"Why are you so angry?" asked Jesus, annoyed at the crowd.

"Doesn't He know that Jairus' little daughter is dead? How can He be so insensitive? In any case, we're just doing our job!"

Then Jesus drops the bomb: "The child has not died, she is only sleeping."

Everybody bursts out laughing: "What does He know? He wasn't there when the child died! We saw with our own eyes how the poor child suffered and how she let her last breath out. And now this Man stands mocking death! It's outrageous!"

However, Jesus is not finished with them: "Please go out, everyone!" Jesus takes Jairus, his wife and the three disciples with Him into the room where the little girl's body lies.

Through his sad tears, Jairus sees Jesus taking his beautiful daughter's cold, limp hand. "What is He going to do?" Jairus is heart broken. "He can't bring her back to life, can he? It's over! She's dead!"

"Talita, cum!" (Little girl, I say to you: Get up!) He heard Jesus say. Then Jairus saw how his daughter's eyes flickered. She opened her eyes, and immediately the colour returned to the pure white deathly face. Immediately there was power in the little hand Jesus was holding. The twelve-year-old sat up straight in front of the surprised faces of her parents and then she got out of bed - perfectly healthy, as if she had never been sick!

Jairus was dumbfounded. How is that even possible? He grabbed his wife, and tears flowed down their cheeks. "My little girl lives!" is all he can get out. Their joy knew no bounds!

"Give the child something to eat," Jesus commanded the mother. Outside, the people trample each other to see what happened. Their mouths are unashamedly open in surprise when they see the little girl sitting there alive with a bowl of food in front of her.

"How on earth is this possible? We then saw for ourselves that she was dead!"

What do we learn from this story? What message is locked up here for us today in the moving story?

First, that Jesus had superhuman strength at that time, and still has it today. Humanly speaking, this was a totally impossible situation and so was the one of the woman in the previous meditation. Nevertheless, Jesus changed it to an ordinary situation. At the same time, we see that the Kingdom of God has indeed come, because those people were stunned by the events. They could not comprehend it. Today we accept it as a miracle, because we know that Jesus is the Son of God and we can only bow before Him in absolute wonder.

The second message that Mark sends out is the role of faith. We often narrow our faith down to "believe in Jesus as our Saviour." However, faith involves more than that. There are other facets that we need to take note of.

Faith also means that a person who comes into a situation where everything seems desperately impossible, can reach out to God in the expectation that He can help. That minister who preached that it does not help to pray has never discovered that faith and trust in God does not disappoint you. To simply say that we believe in Jesus, but we do not put our total trust in Him - even that He can do the impossible, is to limit Jesus' power in our life to just one single area. I invite you to trust Him fully!

Prayer:

Thank you Lord, for the breathtaking miracles that You did then, and still do today. I put my full trust in You today.

Rejected in Nazareth

Mark 6:1-6

January 2005. I am excited: Mosbolletjie encouraged me to go back to the place where I grew up to see what looks like, a farm near Waterval Boven. But the first disappointment hits me as soon as we enter the town. Almost all the famous landmarks are gone! The town is not the same anymore! Grandpa's bakery from many years ago is still standing, but it is now a furniture store. Maybe I expected something different?

We drive to the railway station. In my mind's eye I see again the many steam trains that I stood and watched in awe as a child. Here I stood every Saturday and marveled at the old fiery colossus dragging its heavy loads up the steep mountains to Johannesburg. And the busy shunting yard with its rows and rows of tracks, where trucks are pushed back and forth to reach the right destination. Here

too I am bitterly disappointed. Not a single locomotive and the shunting yard is deserted!

With a heavy heart we drive past Elandskrans to the farm where I grew up. My heart is beating wildly - our old farmhouse is still standing! But the rest of the farm has changed beyond recognition. The beautiful fruit orchards with their juicy clusters of peaches, plums, apricots and pears are all gone. Even the old farmhouse has also changed completely. I'm looking for my old playgrounds from my childhood, but I hardly recognize anything. Then I notice Grandpa's old stone kraal - at least it's still standing, and not a single stone has changed!

I feel bitterly disappointed, even rejected!

There must have been great excitement with Jesus when He finally got the opportunity to perform in Nazareth, the town where He grew up. Here, as a young boy, Josef trained as a carpenter, in all the finer arts of the trade. It was Jesus' duty as the eldest son to take over the workshop. A carpenter was a

noble profession, and it placed him somewhere in the middle on the social ladder. At the top of this ladder were of course the intellectuals, such as the scribes and councillors of the synagogue. Because Jesus did not have this kind of "learning", He and His family did not have a place on that level.

Jesus' reputation as a "Miracle Worker" had already preceded Him, and everyone knew about the things He had done elsewhere, all the healings, and the wonderful "stories" He had told. So it was only natural that they would ask Him to lead that Sabbath in the Synagogue. It was any full-grown man's prerogative to do so.

Mark elaborates on how the people were moved by Jesus' words, and how impressed they were with the miracles that Jesus did. "How does He do these things?" they asked each other. "What wisdom has been given to him, that such mighty deeds are accomplished by his hands?"

Everyone was ecstatic about Jesus. But there was a problem: His origin! "Is He then not the carpenter, the son of Mary and the brother of James, Joses, Judas and Simon? Do his sisters not live here among us?" An ordinary middle class family! There was a very strict social structure and everyone had to know their place in this ranking! Jesus' actions belonged to the highest social sport, but His origin was elsewhere. He was therefore out of His place, and the people could not reconcile themselves to that!

You will still remember that Mary and Jesus' brothers wanted to come and get Him on a previous occasion because He supposedly "had lost His head". He brought shame on His family because He would have elevated Himself to a higher social level.

Despite all the miracles and the wise things that Jesus preached, his own people rejected him. Mark tells us that in the end Jesus did not perform a single miracle there in Nazareth. It would not have convinced them

anyway, because they knew about all these things. However, they turned a blind eye to His "second-rate" origins.

Today, Jesus is still rejected for basically the same reasons. The simplicity of the Gospel makes many people not want to accept Jesus. They are looking for something much more elevated. The simple "Believe in Jesus, and you will be saved," cannot possibly be enough to enter the gates of heaven. That is why Jesus is rejected. Then there are those who know everything about Jesus, who have been taught all the things of faith since childhood and have heard countless sermons. But to become part of that "Christian culture" is a humiliation, because "what will my friends think about it?" That is why Jesus is rejected, because He does not fit into that social culture!

Have you really come to Jesus? Have you accepted Him for Who He truly is? Have you already said "Yes" to Him when He wanted to make you His child?

Prayer:

Lord, my prayer goes out to everyone who knows who Jesus is, but does not want to accept Him. Please open up hearts to the Saviour today.

On the Mission Field

Mark 6:7-13

It's still early in the morning, and the men are excited, because they can see from Jesus' attitude that He is planning something special for the day. Then He beckons them closer: "The time has come for you to put into practice the things I have taught you."

"But Master, we've barely started training!"

They still try to protest, but Jesus thinks otherwise. If you just learn and do not practically apply what you learn, you will never master the task properly. "You are going to tell the people out there that the Kingdom of God has come near."

"Oh, we're going fishing!" Now a light suddenly dawned on Peter. "That day when brother Andrew and I were called by Jesus, He said that He was going to make us

fishermen of men. And now our time has come!"

"Today I give you power over evil spirits."

The thought is almost too great to comprehend. "But it's only the Master who can do such things!" Thomas is very sceptical about this - how can Jesus expect them to do the same as Him? But the very young John's chest simply swells with pride.

However, Jesus' further instructions make the men realize very quickly that this is no picnic! It's not a morning trip to practice some "fishing". They will be travelling for a whole week. "And all you may take with you is a walking stick," Jesus explains.

"But Master, how are we going to survive? Surely we will have to take food for the road, and clean clothes?"

"No!" Jesus does not want to give in. "No food, money or clothes, nothing! Only the

clothes on your body and the shoes on your feet!"

Now the men do not understand at all. Here they are sent into the wilderness for a whole week, and they are not even allowed to make provision? So what now? Jesus explains that wherever they are in a town, there will indeed be someone who will offer them accommodation. They will be taken care of, they just have to trust!

The first purpose of this exercise was therefore that the men had to learn how to truly trust God for everything. They had to realize that they were fully dependent on the Lord for their entire existence. With no money, no food and no place to stay, one feels totally helpless. But if you then realize that your help is not from people, but from God, who uses people for His Kingdom, then you begin to learn something about dependence.

But there was a second lesson that the men had to learn: to be satisfied with what you

receive. Jesus' instruction was that when they came to a town, and someone offered them accommodation, they had to stay there for the entire period.

It's a strange instruction! However, if you think about it carefully, you realize that it is often the poor people who are truly hospitable. Now, if you are received in such a small house, and your sleeping place is meager and uncomfortable, then the temptation is very great to accept instead if someone offers you a better place to stay! Missionary work is not about self-enrichment or comfort, but purely about the proclamation of the Word. In this way the men had to learn that their own comfort came second. It's something they would need a lot in their later life, because they eventually had a hard road ahead of them!

Then the men had to learn that they would not be welcome everywhere. "But if a place does not welcome you or the people do not listen to you, leave and shake the dust off

your feet," says Jesus. Not only would this be an announcement of judgment for those who did not want to accept Jesus' Gospel, but with this they also had to forget the humiliation and continue with their task.

Can we learn something from this passage today? Surely there is a very clear message for us. First of all, it wants to tell us that mission is not just an afterthought for the church. This is perhaps the most important reason why the church exists. The church is there so that it can be sent out into the world.

The second important lesson we learn is that we cannot undertake the missionary task in our own strength or on our own. This must happen in the first place in full dependence on God, and of course with God's authority. And as Jesus made this an organized exercise, missionary work must not be done at random, but must be properly organized.

When you do missionary work, you are most definitely going to get rejection. But then you just have to forget about it. Don't let it get you

down. Stay focused on your task. In addition, you must also be prepared to endure discomfort at times. There must be no ulterior motives of self-enrichment or selfishness in someone who does missionary work. Everything must be about the Kingdom of God alone.

But then you must know that if you place yourself fully in God's hands, and perform the task in dependence on Him, then He will give you the strength and wisdom to carry out your missionary task as He would like it. The twelve men experienced it, and you will too!

Prayer:

Lord, my prayer goes out today for everyone who is in the mission field, people who have given up a lot to work in Your Kingdom. I pray that Your blessing will rest richly on everyone, and that they will get the necessary strength and wisdom for their huge task.

A Gruesome Ending

Mark 6:14-29

King Herod Antipas is very upset: "It's John - I tell you it's John who has come to haunt me! He rose from the dead!" His advisers try to calm him down, but Herod gets more and more excited: "That Jesus - He is none other than John's ghost!"

Everything started with a sneaky love, a burning desire. It was his half-brother Philip's provocative wife who awakened these things in him. Nor was she really unwilling to co-operate, she and that voluptuous daughter of hers, Salome with her writhing body! Herod got his way as usual. Herodias threw Philip away like a dirty rag and moved in with Herod. Of course, after he got rid of his first wife first!

Then that desert barbarian, John, came and spoiled everything! Wild creature with his

ferocious beard and hair. They say that the man lived on locusts! How horrible! And he stood and preached to Herod! How dare he! When Herodias heard about this, she was furious! She demanded that John be executed right then and there. Of course, this would cause a lot of trouble, because John had quite a large following, and Herod could not afford to clash with them! Moreover, he had a secret fear of John, because this was a man of God, he could see that very clearly. So he threw John in prison.

Herod spoke often with John in the prison. Each time it ended in a fiery indecision, and then he stormed out angrily. But he was back again and again, because this man said things that struck him deep in the heart, and hurt him inside.

And then that night happened, the night Herod would rather forget! But no matter how hard he tries, the nightmares come back again and again, and then he jumps up, drenched in sweat.

It was his birthday, and his seductive wife organized a big party for him. Everyone was there, all the Roman dignitaries, even grumpy old Pontius Pilate. He hated that Roman, but he had to put up with him for the sake of peace. The tables groaned under the heavy loads of exotic dishes. And the wine flowed like the Jordan River in flood. Herod and his high guests delighted in the scantily clad dancers who danced seductively. Everyone was very happy! Then Herodus leaned over to his beautiful wife: "Honey, what do you think, won't that voluptuous daughter of yours dance for us?"

Herodias saw her chance to take revenge. "I will call her". Then she disappeared. Unholy things were whispered in Salome's ear, instructions that made the girl shudder! but if Mom asked so nicely, who was she to refuse?

Salome was a master in the art of Oriental dance, and she charmed the guests with a breathtaking performance. When the music

stopped, she finished her dance right in front of her stepfather. She shuddered as she looked into his dull eyes!

"Just ask what you want," he drawled, "I'll give you just what you ask!" She knew exactly what she would ask, but she gave him a little more time. "Half of my Kingdom is yours!" Herod bellowed drunkenly.

Then she dropped the bomb: "John's head on platter!"

There was a shocked silence over the whole hall. Suddenly Herod was shocked sober! "Do you really mean it?"

He still wanted to dismiss it as a sick joke, but Salome stuck to her request. Herod felt the blood leave his head. And then, with a trembling voice, he gave the order that John should be beheaded. A short time later, the prophet's bloodied head was carried on a tray and shown to all the guests.

Herod will never forget that terrible night. And now this Jesus is here! Isn't it perhaps John who has returned from the dead?

A horror story! A story that shows that even great power and wealth cannot buy happiness.

Mark inserted this story right in the middle of his description of the sending out of the disciples. Jesus warned them that they would face opposition. Did Mark want to emphasize how bad the opposition could become? Today, anyone who preaches the Word honestly can also expect opposition. The devil wants to stop the spread of the Gospel with all his might. He did it with John, but it didn't work, because the Gospel was like an unstoppable tsunami. Even in prison, John continued to say what was on his mind, despite Herod's tirade.

The question is: are you and I going to let a little opposition get us down? If someone mocks us for our point of view - is that going to shut us up? Jesus told His disciples that

they simply had to shake off the dust from their feet. They had to forget about it. The problem is that we are often too sensitive. If you want to spread the Gospel, you have to be thick-skinned. We can learn about this from the Jehovah's Witnesses! But we can also learn from the many people in the mission field and people who fearlessly spread Bibles and the Gospel in countries where it is totally forbidden. Let's risk for Jesus!

Prayer:

Lord, I am often so afraid to dare to spread Your Word. Forgive me, and please give me courage!

Food for a Crowd

Mark 6:30-44

Sarie, a good friend of ours, is involved in Campus Crusade for Christ. A few years ago she and some friends went to Turkey on an outreach of the Macedonia Project. Their goal was to distribute Bibles and Christian literature in a country where it is forbidden.

It was definitely not an easy outreach! They were watched all the time with hawk's eyes, and they did not dare make contact with any of the inhabitants, because Christians stood the chance of being brutally persecuted. There were many anxious moments for the group when a man from the law walked up to them and wanted to know what was in their big bag. The bag was full of Bibles! After a meaningless answer, he decided not to even look in the bag. The tension ran unbearably high the entire time, and they had to spend hours in prayer for strength to complete their

dangerous task. After returning from their stressful journey, they were exhausted. But the knowledge that the Gospel had reached many new hearts was more than enough!

Jesus' disciples came to the end of their excursion, where they had to put into practice what Jesus had taught them. As with Sarie's outing, this one was no picnic either. But if they thought that they could now rest a little, they were wrong, because with Jesus there was no chance. People flocked to Him all the time, and the men had to run around to control the crowd. There wasn't even time to eat!

Jesus decided that they had had enough, so then they got into a boat and sailed to a quiet place to catch their breath. But the people saw what their plan was, and when they got to the remote place, there were already a lot of people waiting for them. Furthermore, they also saw the stream of curious people who came running from a distance. The news of

Jesus spread like wildfire. Their plans for a break would not happen!

Jesus let His eye pass over the sea of hungry faces, and He deeply pitied them. They looked completely like a flock of lost sheep without a shepherd. Without even taking a proper breath, He began to teach them, while the crowd grew larger and larger.

The twelve men spoke softly among themselves: "Men, I am worried: it is already getting very late, and here we are far from any town. These people are getting hungry, what are we going to do?"

"Let's send someone to town to buy bread."

"Don't be silly! There are thousands of people here! I just tried counting, and are easily 5000 men alone! Then I haven't even counted the women and children. I estimate that there cannot be anything less than ten thousand people here. Where do you think we are going to get money to buy food for everyone?"

Then someone is delegated to interrupt Jesus in His preaching: "Master, the people must eat..."

Jesus smiled at him: "So now you men must give them something to eat!"

He returns to the men: "The Master says we must give them food! How does He expect us to feed such a large number of people? He said we should see what's here. Who does He think is going to sit here with baskets full of food?"

A boy overhears their conversation: "I have five loaves of bread and two dried fish that Mother gave me for food for the road. You can have it!"

Half jokingly they take it to Jesus. To their great surprise, the Master is satisfied with their find. He takes it from them, looks up to heaven and asks for the blessing. Then Jesus begins to break the loaves and fish into pieces and gives them to the disciples to distribute among the people. Everyone to

whom the bread comes breaks off a piece for himself, and then he gives the rest to his neighbour. And so the bread and fish spread throughout the whole crowd until everyone had enough.

And then follows an old Jewish tradition: not to waste anything. All the leftovers are collected, twelve baskets full!

The disciples have just come back from their very successful practical outreach where they themselves were able to heal people and even cast out demons. But then it seems as if they fail hopelessly when Jesus gives them a "simple" assignment. However, despite their clumsiness, Jesus still uses them to make this miracle happen. The message here is of course that Jesus, the Son is at the centre of the miracle. We must never forget it.

For me, however, there is also another message that clearly comes out here. As each person took the bread, he broke off a piece for himself and sent the rest on. In the

same way, every believer received a "piece of bread", the bread of life. It happened when Jesus' body was broken like a piece of bread to pay for our reconciliation with God. The question is, what do we do with it? Do we keep that bread of life that Jesus gave us for ourselves? But then we are very selfish! Just as those people forwarded it, it is every believer's task and duty to also share the bread of life that we get with others. The big wonder is that that bread never runs out either! So we can give out abundantly! There will always be enough left over.

Prayer:

Lord, please give me the will and strength and vision to freely share the bread of life that you have given me with others.

Jesus Walks on the Sea

Mark 6:45-52

It was getting very late, and the men were desperate for some rest after their huge task of feeding ten thousand people. Jesus saw that the men were done, so He sent them to sail to the other side of the lake for the time being. Actually, it was a relatively short distance, because from Bethsaida-Julius they only had to row to Bethsaida, probably not much more than two kilometres. He told them that He would send the people who were still gathered there in their thousands home. He would then simply join them later on foot.

By the time they got into the boat, it was deep dusk. But then there was trouble: a gale started to rise, and the poor men rowed right into the wind. Meanwhile, Jesus went up the mountain to pray. From where He stood on the height, He could see Peter and the men wrestling against the wind. And then

darkness overtook them. They trained and sweated and rowed and wrestled, but it felt like they weren't even moving!

I know that feeling! One day when I was just a young boy, we went fishing in Mozambique in the mouth of the Limpopo River. We went down the river in a rowing boat to the mouth, where we slept on the beach for a few days. When it was time to return, we all got into the boat, and the oarsman, a boy no older than ten years old, struck his oars in the water. It was already deep twilight too, and I remember how the water glowed brightly every time his oars struck it. However, when we reached the middle of the stream, there was a problem: it felt like we couldn't move forward, no matter how hard the little guy paddled.

And suddenly the realization hit me that the tide was going out, and we were being sucked into the deep sea by the mass of water from the mighty Limpopo. The boy rowed furiously and the phosphorescence

illuminated the water misterious blue glow. "We're getting drenched here today!" ran through my head. In addition, the troubled river was polluted with crocodiles and monster sharks!

Finally, the little guy realized that he would never reach his destination this way. And then my heart skipped a beat when he put down his oars and jumped out of the boat. "What is he doing now! Is he going to leave us to our own devices here? Is he going to swim home now?" I was scared out of my mind! However, the boy stood right behind the boat and started pushing. I could not believe my eyes. Then we all burst out laughing. The river was barely knee deep here!

However, Jesus' disciples had a slightly bigger problem. That lake is much deeper than knee deep, and the wind was now so strong that it forced them completely off course. Instead of rowing to Bethsaida, they were now fast on their way to Gennesaret, a

full ten kilometers away. In favourable conditions it wouldn't be a problem, but this was an oncoming wind, and they just couldn't make progress. The hours passed and still they fought against the wind and waves.

It was twelve very exhausted men who shortly before dawn exerted their last strength to reach the land. But then something happened that almost stopped their hearts. In the mist of the stormy sea, they saw a figure coming onto the water. The men grabbed each other: "It's a ghost!" screamed Johannes. "We are doomed!" They screamed in sheer terror as the figure came closer and closer, heading straight for their boat. It was still too dark to see properly, but they could clearly make out that it was a human figure. They clung to each other when they saw Him walking right next to their boat.

And then the "Ghost" spoke to them: "Be at ease, it is I. Don't be afraid."

When Jesus got into the boat with them, the storm immediately subsided, and they were able to row to the side.

Mark wants to emphasize Jesus' Divinity with this narrative. Despite the fierce storm, He calmly walked across the sea. In Job 9:8, God is described as the One who walks on the waves. Here Jesus shows His disciples that He is truly God. And when He reassures them, He says: "It is I!" - the same words with which God introduced Himself to Moses. If they ever doubted Jesus' Divinity, they should have understood it by now. But still they did not understand it.

Jesus did not want to scare the men. He wanted to assure them of His Divinity and also of His protective presence. Today it is still equally true. Often we want to hide from God in fear and trembling, because He is going to punish us for our missteps. No, that's not even close to true! He is a loving Father, and He wants to assure us of His omnipotence and His infinite Fatherly love for

us. The disciples experienced these things first hand, but still they could not understand. Nevertheless, Jesus does not reject them. So often we can't understand, and we can't grasp the extent of God's grace. But be assured that He will not reject you and me either. All He asks is that we believe in Jesus.

Prayer:

Thank you Lord, that You are great and almighty. And thank you for accepting me in love just as I am.

Traditions

Mark 6:53-7:13

After the storm, Jesus' party arrives in Gennesaret. They move through the whole region and visit all the hamlets, villages and farms. It is incidentally interesting that Jesus' ministry takes place mainly in the countryside, while Paul worked mainly in cities.

The news spread very quickly and people from far and wide brought their sick to the village market places, even on sleeping mats, so that they could just touch "the hem of Jesus' garment", and every one of them was healed. The people were open to receive Jesus, and He did many miracles there!

But there was a snake in the grass! In stark contrast to this positive picture, a group of very sour Pharisees and Scribes conspired together. The highly learned Jewish Religious

leaders had their knife in for Jesus, and in every area of life they found fault with Him and tried to catch Him out. They watched Jesus and the men very closely to see if they might break a law somewhere, so they could get a stick to beat them with.

And there they get exactly such a very useful stick. The men ate with unwashed hands! How terrible!

We are shocked when we read this, because it is a triviality! For the Jewish cult, however, it was a very important matter. There were a multitude of instructions that had to help them distinguish between clean and unclean. Most of these things did not come from the instructions of Moses, but were customs that were added over the years, the so-called "tradition of the ancestors" we read about in Mark 7:3. To the Pharisees these customs were as good as the Bible itself.

Of course, it is good to wash your hands regularly for hygienic reasons. However, these instructions were for a completely

different reason. It was not because your hands were dirty, but it was a ritual for spiritual purity. The reasoning was that you might have just accidentally become unclean by something or someone in the marketplace. So you had to wash your hands properly every time you came from the market square. Even if a Samaritan's shadow fell on you there, you were unclean, even if he didn't even touch you!

The motive behind this whole purity ritual was to make you acceptable to God. And that's why the Pharisees hammered on it, and tried to force everyone to observe it promptly.

It would almost appear as if Jesus deliberately set out to disregard these purity regulations. Jesus touched a leper - already a mortal sin! He allowed an unclean woman with a flow of blood to touch Him - absolutely terrifying! But it got even worse when He touched a corpse, that of Jairus' young daughter! Then came the disgusting deed

when He went to eat with tax collectors and unclean people. But the icing on the cake was that He went to preach His message in a pagan region! How terrible!

And now the church leaders come to confront Jesus about His handling of these customs. Actually, they wanted to try to prove that He was a bad teacher. They wanted to try to humiliate Him in public to try to undermine His work in this way. They had already tried to argue with Him about doctrine several times, but each time they came second best. Maybe humiliation would work?

However, they clearly did not take Jesus into account, because He answered them in a brilliant way. Not only did he answer their question, but he also told them straight up that their problem lay with their hypocrisy! Then he took a quote from Isaiah 29:13 from the Scripture they knew so well: "This people honours Me with their lips, but their hearts are far from Me."

Jesus wanted to tell them that there is a very big difference between sincere Religion that comes from the heart, and a superficial Religion that is just lip service. You should not try to present things invented by men as if they were God's command. The worst thing is that they neglected God's real commandment at the expense of traditions. "You abandon the commandment of God and cling to the tradition of men." (v. 8). They have perfected the art of making prescriptions that bypass God's prescriptions, as is the case with the so-called "corban" prescription. This was a cunning prescription with which you could rob your parents of their rightful share by claiming that you actually intended it for the temple. After their death, you could change your mind again and keep it for yourself!

It is time to rethink our Religious traditions. Even the church must look again at her traditions. Aren't many of the "handover customs" simply man-made customs? Aren't these things we do simply out of habit?

Prayer:

Lord, please teach me to do the things that I do in Your Kingdom for the right reasons, and not just out of habit or tradition.

What makes you Unchaste?

Mark 7:14-23

The Pharisees tried to denigrate Jesus' authority with their comments about the purity laws that Jesus and His disciples so blatantly disregarded. This forced Jesus to explain to the crowd what it was really about.

When he has everyone's attention, he says: "Listen to me, all of you and understand! There is nothing that enters a person from outside that can make you unclean, but the things that come out of a person, that is what makes you unclean." (Mark 7:14,15)

The people looked at Jesus in a daze, they did not understand at all. All these years they and their ancestors were taught that there are certain things that you simply dare not eat, because they are unclean. Did Jesus want to come and draw a thick, bold line through the teachings of the Pharisees?

Could you just eat whatever you wanted?
They were confused!

That night, Jesus and His party stayed in someone's house. The men's minds were full of tormenting questions. "Master, we don't understand this thing about clean and unclean food at all. What exactly did you mean?"

It must have been very difficult for Jesus that these men who would later have to take responsibility for the entire church of the world, were so slow to understand. He so badly wanted them to learn and understand and grow spiritually, but it didn't happen. They could not get away from the old deep-rooted traditions and doctrines. They distrusted everything that was new. They would first have to get the Holy Spirit to truly open up their minds.

Then Jesus explained that so-called "unclean" food cannot make you unclean. What you eat does not even come close to reaching your heart. Your food and drink

have absolutely nothing to do with the essence of your relationship with God. And one could also draw this through to the external cleansing laws in yesterday's meditation. External cleanliness therefore also has nothing to do with your relationship with God.

The implications of this statement of Jesus are enough to make the hair of any sincere Jew stand on end. Mark casually mentions in verse 19 that Jesus thereby declared all food clean. Then what about all the rows and rows of prescriptions about meat you may not eat? Among other things, there is probably the worst of all: pork! A Jew would not even touch a pig, let alone eat its meat! It makes you cringe!

I think that the twelve men heard what Jesus told them and then conveniently forgot about it, because it was really just too bad. It was only much later that Peter was confronted with this again, when he had the dream of God's command that he must slaughter and

eat unclean animals. Only then did he begin to understand this vaguely. We read in Acts 10 about Peter's dream, and how the Lord tells him that he must not declare unclean what God has made clean.

Jesus explained to the twelve that it was not about food or purity laws or any external thing. It is not about the prescriptions and rules that must be followed promptly. Everything revolves around your inner attitude which must be pure. "For from within, from the heart of men, come evil thoughts, immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, cunning, obscenity, jealousy, slander, pride, foolishness," Jesus tells them in verses 21 and 22 .There are probably many other things one could add to this terrifying list.

For most believers today, "unclean food" is not even an issue anymore, although there are still a few who have a problem with it. However, we have shifted the emphasis a little to a series of do's and don'ts. The great thing is that your heart must belong to God. If

this happens, your whole life will change profoundly. We must not try to prescribe to other believers what they may and may not do, as if it were a divine command. It is a personal matter for every believer between him and God.

It is interesting, and at the same time also very important to see how Jesus teaches the men, and with what authority He does it. Unlike the other rabbi's who could only teach the people about things from the Old Testament and handed-down customs, without really understanding what it was about, Jesus understood the meaning exactly. He was therefore able to give the men an explanation of it, but much more: He has the authority to amend or lift even the Old Testament prescriptions, as He did with the purity laws because they were obsolete.

So let's reconsider our religious customs and our do's and don'ts very carefully. What is it really about? Is it honest to God? But even more important: let's take a look at what our

innermost looks like. Am I truly giving God glory? And the biggest of all: do I live out love as God asks of me?

Prayer:

Lord, please open my eyes so I can see what my innermost looks like. Help me to be pure from within, to Your honour.

The Syro-Phoenician Woman

Mark 7:24-30

Jesus was totally exhausted from a never-ending job. Remember, He was physically an ordinary person like you and me! The continuous stream of thousands of people with all their problems and ailments who came to Him day after day for help, from early in the morning until late at night, must have put a tremendous pressure on Him. In addition, there were the Pharisees and scribes who tried to capture or get rid of Him at every opportunity.

Moreover, there was nowhere where He could hide to get a break. Wherever Jesus came, the people already knew Him and overcame Him. So Jesus was obliged to go to an area where He was totally unknown. So he lefts for Phoenicia, and he recided in a house somewhere in the vicinity of Tyre, a port city on a peninsula off the coast of

Phoenicia, about 50km. north-west of Capernaum.

But even here abroad there was still someone who recognized Him, a Greek woman of Syrian descent, therefore a pagan woman. When she recognized Jesus, it was like manna from heaven for her, because she was distraught over her darling little daughter. The child was possessed by an unclean spirit, and no one could do anything about it. We don't know if it was really demon possession because all mental disorders were classified as possession, even epilepsy. All we know for sure is that this little child was the victim of an incurable condition.

The woman must have known about the Jewish taboo, that Jews could not mix with gentiles like her. So she took a big chance to go find Jesus. She went to look for Jesus in the house where they stayed and then made her request. Jesus had to please cast the unclean spirit out of her little girl. The reports reached her ears that He had already

performed many similar healings in Palestine. Why wouldn't He be able to do that for her here in Syria as well?

Jesus' answer is surprising: "It is not nice to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs."

What did Jesus mean by this? That He was sent to the people of Israel, the people with whom God made a covenant. Here the great act of reconciliation had to take place, because God had decreed it so long before the foundation of the world. He prepared this people to receive Jesus, His Son, and now the final preparation came during Jesus' three-year ministry. Through Jesus' preaching and ministry, this nation had to produce people who could take the Gospel to the world. Naturally, the whole world outside, i.e. paganism, would eventually also be confronted with the Gospel. However, the time was not yet ripe for that, and everything had to be established in Israel first.

Jesus uses imagery to explain His dilemma to her in one short sentence. However, her insight is amazing, because she immediately understands exactly what it is about. But she is desperate, and she doesn't let this deter her: "Lord, at least the puppies under the table are eating some of the children's crumbs." She would even be satisfied with the leftovers! Indeed, she realized all too well that she was not part of the chosen people of God, and she recognized that the Jews had to be given preference. But all she wanted to ask for was a few crumbs so her little girl could get well. Didn't He just want to come?

If we look back at the story so far, we only see again and again the absolute inability of the Jews to understand. They simply could not grasp even the most basic. They couldn't see who Jesus really was and their minds crashed down every time He performed a miracle. They had implicit faith in the miracles and did not see the Person behind the miracles. Even the twelve men who Jesus trained so thoroughly and who went

through all these things with Him every day, were still totally in the dark. Now comes this gentile woman who has never even met Jesus and she understood the things that the Jews thought were totally stupid. If we read between the lines, we can conclude that what this woman had was pure faith!

Jesus sent her home. Her request was granted and her little girl was already healed. Once again we see Jesus' breathtaking omnipotence, because the little girl was healthy without Him even being near her!

We are today in the wonderfully privileged position of having the Gospel spelled out for us in the Bible, far more clearly than the Jews or even that Phoenician woman ever had. The question is: what do we do with it? From childhood we are taught everything, but how strong is our faith really? Have we truly taken to heart what we have learned over the years? Have we made it our own like that woman? I work with these things every day, and yet my faith is often so small.

Let's trust God with all our heart and being!

Prayer:

Lord, forgive me that my faith sometimes wavers and that I get scared when I notice the waves around me. Please strengthen my faith, like that of that Phoenician woman!

Jesus Heals the Deaf and Mute

Mark 7:31-37

In Isaiah 35, the famous prophet sings a prophetic hymn about the coming of the Messiah, Jesus. Here are some excerpts: "Let the desert and the dry land rejoice, let the Araba rejoice and blossom like a tulip..... Strengthen the weak hands, strengthen the tottering knees. Say to those who are anxious: "Take courage, do not be afraid! Then the eyes of the blind will be opened, and the ears of the deaf will be unstopped. Then the lame shall leap like a roe deer, and the tongue of the dumb shall rejoice; for in the desert water will burst forth, streams of water in the Arabah." (Isaiah 35:1-6)

What a touching song! And here, right before the eyes of the disciples, this prophecy comes true. They see all these things

happening - so unreal. And yet the things Isaiah sings about happen!

Jesus returned from Phenicia, and now He once again found Himself in a non-Jewish area next to the Sea of Galilee, the Decapolis. The last time He was in this region, the people asked Him to walk because they were afraid. It was after Jesus healed the possessed man and the pigs were driven into the sea by the demons. You will remember that this man went throughout the Decapolis area preaching what Jesus had done. Perhaps the people were now more receptive to Jesus because they had heard about him from that man.

Now the people brought a deaf man with a speech impediment to Jesus, and asked Him to please lay His hands on the man. Jesus took the man aside, pressed His fingers into the man's ears, smeared spit on his tongue and said in Aramaic (His mother tongue): "Effata!" which means "Open!" Instantly the

man was healed and he could hear and speak normally.

The people were in awe! A murmur went through the crowd: "He has done everything well - even the deaf He makes hear and the dumb speak." That's much more than any of the so-called miracle workers of their country could ever manage. The word spread like wildfire, until everyone in the region knew about Jesus.

With this narration Mark wanted to emphasize that Jesus was not just one of the miracle workers, but that He was much, much more. Today we must also fully realize that Jesus is very special. He is big enough that we can and must sing His praise, as Isaiah did: "The desert, the dry land, will rejoice, the dry world will rejoice!" (Isa. 35:1 - 1983 translation)

We are so inclined to just take Jesus for granted. He is only there once and He will be with us through all circumstances! Yes, we have indeed known this for a long time, but

do we ever really realize the greatness of Jesus? When we sing His praises, are we truly doing so knowing that we are doing it for King Jesus, the greatest of all kings of all time? Do we realize every day Who He really is? And do we really show Him all the respect He deserves?

Have you ever sat outside on a freezing Karoo night and witnessed the wonder of creation - Jesus' creation? When you look up at the sky, shivering from the icy sky, you no longer tremble from the cold, but from wonder at the immeasurable, breathtaking beauty of it all. The color wonder of the millions upon millions of stars, too much for the human mind to process. It leaves you gasping for breath and you just want to keep looking and looking and drinking in its beauty and preserving it deep inside forever. Then you realize that Jesus, Creator God, made all this with the speaking of a single word. Just as He used one single word to heal the deaf and dumb man.

And have you ever spent a night in the Bosveld sitting next to a crackling fire and listening to the music of the forest? To the mighty lion's roar that floats miles away across the field on the evening breeze? The giant elephant's trumpeter and deep, deep rattles when they frolic in the Crocodile River at night? A red fox's nostalgic song when he calls his mate? And the soft "Coor-coor" of a barn owl somewhere in a thorn tree? Music that brings tears to your eyes - music that sings the praises of Jesus like no symphony choir can! Music that tells of the fine handiwork of a Creator who not only made the immeasurable sky, but also the elephant, the lion and the tiny old kicking owl, each one absolutely perfect, as only the Master could do it.

And when you sit there so fragile and at the mercy of the mighty forest with all its dangerous animals, you realize that this same Jesus - the Almighty Creator God - is also the Omnipresent. Then you come to the realization that He is here next to you - with

you. That He cares for you and loves you infinitely. That He has a plan - a finely worked out plan for your life and that He made you His child out of grace.

Then you want to celebrate it with Isaiah of old: "The desert, the dry land, will rejoice, the dry world will rejoice!"

Prayer:

Lord Jesus, I adore You, because You are great and good and Almighty. No song will ever be able to sing Your praises. I praise You with all that is within me!

Jesus Feeds a Crowd Again

Mark 8:1-10

Jesus looks at the crowd of people sitting in front of Him, and then He feels deeply sorry for them. The scene that unfolds here before Him is a repetition of what happened a while ago, when He and the men were also at a remote place, and the people were hungry afterwards. This time, however, He is on non-Jewish territory, the Decapolis. For the last three days, the crowd of "heathens" have been sitting on benches here before Him while He teaches them. The little food that was left has long been gone, and He can see that hunger is now starting to take its toll. Then Jesus calls the men together: "I am very worried about these people. Some of them have come a long way. If we send them home now without giving them anything to eat, a few of them might die of hunger somewhere along the way!"

Then the incomprehensible, the amazing, the same throwing up of hands thing happens from a few months before when they were in exactly the same situation. The men helplessly ask Jesus where they should get food for such a large number of people in this desolation? Their Master must at least remember that there are no less than four thousand people sitting before them. How then does He now expect them to suddenly conjure up food for this crowd?

How short are their memories! Have they already forgotten about the previous occasion? When Jesus fed a crowd of at least ten thousand people with only five loaves of bread and two shrivelled little fish? Have they already forgotten, that afterwards they gathered twelve baskets full of leftovers? One feels that you can take those twelve men by their shoulders and shake them so that they wake up and see Who they are dealing with! Can't they understand then?

If I were Jesus, I would surely burst out right there and scold the men for their unbelief, their spiritual blindness and their inability to understand.

But Jesus does not. He understands. He knows how difficult it is for them to understand. He also knows that their time has not yet come to truly have insight into all these things. Later they will understand, and then they will set the world on fire with their faith! Without reproach, Jesus asks them patiently: "How much bread is here?" They can scrape together seven loaves of bread, that's all! And with this they have to feed four thousand people?

Jesus takes the bread from the men, and then He looks up to heaven and thanks God for the food, while four thousand pairs of hungry eyes stare at Him and wonder what is going on now? Now what would this Rabbi want to do with the bread? His action makes them raving with hunger! They watch Him with interest as He breaks the bread into

pieces. Then He gives it to the twelve men to distribute, together with a few fish that someone "donated".

And once again the multiplication miracle takes place. The men keep handing out and the food just doesn't get any less! The more they distribute, the more the bread and fish become, until four thousand hungry people are satisfied and there are still seven baskets full of leftovers left!

How must the men have felt after this? Were they ashamed of their unbelief? Did they then begin to realize that Jesus is truly the Messiah? That He is omnipotent? How many breathtaking, astonishing miracles did they still have to see before it could sink in?

Jesus sent the people home and then He and the men got into a boat and sailed to the Dalmanuta area.

Noticable when we read this story is Jesus' care. He deeply pitied the people, even though they were not even Jews and even

though they were not part of God's covenant people. But equally noticable is Jesus' patience with the men who experienced the many miracles day by day, but just could not understand. How many more times did He have to explain it to them? Was there a way to make it clearer to them? But Jesus did not get impatient with them: He understood.

And you and me? Shouldn't He have become impatient with me long ago already? How many times have I disappointed Him in my life? How many times have I asked: "Lord, forgive me," only to commit the same sin again tomorrow? I get discouraged with myself, but Jesus just stays patient with me. He understands! And if I question the things He does, as if I might know better than Him? If I were Him, I would have damned this creature long ago. But He doesn't! His mercy and love are far greater than any human mind can ever fathom. And like those twelve men, I see the miracles, often breathtaking miracles happening around me every day.

But then I still stand in disbelief and whine
when the slightest problem comes my way!

How indescribably great is Jesus' care and
patience and love and understanding and
mercy!

Prayer:

Lord, please open my eyes so that I can see
Your greatness and omnipotence and love
and care!

Pharisees Seek a Sign

Mark 8:11-13

The twelve men travelled with Jesus, rowing the long distance from the Decapolis area to the Dalmanutha region in Galilee. Freshly burned in their memory, is the large crowd of four thousand pagans whom their Master has just fed with a mere seven loaves of bread.

When they set foot ashore, they are met by a group of troubled Pharisees. In stark contrast to the pagans on the other side of the lake, who listened to Jesus very attentively, all these learned men seek is confrontation. Jesus must perform a miracle from heaven for them here and now!

Have they not already seen more than enough miracles from His hand? Will they ever believe if they see one more? But actually they are not at all interested in these

"ordinary" miracles that Jesus does, they want to see something happen from heaven! They want to see something convincing from God Himself to confirm that Jesus is truly the Messiah!

We know that such miraculous signs have indeed already occurred, such as the day when Jesus was baptized and the heavens were torn open. There God audibly confirmed that Jesus is His Son, and everyone heard it. But of course the Pharisees were not there. They were too busy with "more important things." Actually, the Pharisees are not really interested in the miraculous sign itself. All they are trying to do is to unmask Jesus and humiliate Him. They want to put Him to the test to prove once and for all that He is not Who the people think He is. How terribly wrong they are!

Jesus refuses their request, and then He calls them "this generation." In Genesis 7:1 and Psalm 95:10-11, the exact same words are used to describe people who have turned

their backs on God. And this is exactly what these Pharisees are doing: They reject God! They turn their backs on Him. Right there, Jesus and the men get back into the boat and row to the "other side", to Bethsaida-Julius.

Miracles or miraculous signs will not convince people to believe! It actually works the other way around, because you first need faith to truly appreciate miracles. Let's take an example: When I look up at the sky in the evening, I am filled with its wonder, and the immeasurable scope of creation makes me stagger. The unimaginable greatness and omnipotence of God the Creator of it all leaves me gasping for breath.

The unbeliever looks at exactly the same miracle, but he simply wants to analyze it scientifically as the result of the big bang, a tremendous explosion that took place 15 billion years ago and formed the universe as we know it today. Science does not know

how it happened, but they are trying very hard to find an answer!

The famous author, Gideon Joubert, looked at the exact same theory through completely different eyes. The big bang theory made sense to him, but he sees it as the beginning of God's creation. In his book, "Die Groot Gedagte" (The Great Comprehension), Gideon describes how it would be totally impossible for the universe to form without a very definite plan for its composition. Even the famous Einstein noticed this fact. If the big bang were a reality, then it could only happen from the formative hands of God! But the unbeliever does not see it that way, and nothing will convince him otherwise! The miracle passed him by!

The numerous social media reports that are sent into the world with so-called evidence that the Bible is true, will not convince any unbeliever either. This leaves only believers with greater certainty. The sad thing is, however, that most of this "evidence" is false,

such as the classic one with photos of giant human skeletons that would prove that the giants described in the Bible were a reality. These photos were manipulated by a group of students as part of a task. Such "evidence" does more harm than good, because it tells the non-believer that believers try so hard to prove their faith as genuine, and that they even use false material to try to believe. Please check before forwarding such things!

Actually, this whole matter goes even further: No one can prove that Jesus is really the Son of God and the Messiah. There are not even many extra-biblical references to Jesus as a historical figure. Only a few such as the Jewish historian Josephus briefly refer to Jesus. We can only accept it in faith.

But what is faith then? Hebrews 11:1 puts it very clearly: "But faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen." So faith cannot be built on visible things. However, it is strengthened by visible

things, when you already have the faith, such as for example the wonder of the universe.

The Heidelberg Catechism states that faith consists of knowledge and trust. Of course you can't believe if you don't know what you believe. There must be knowledge of these things. But then comes the important thing, there must be trust - a firm trust. Not only do you have to trust that Jesus is truly the Son of God, but you have to put your full trust in Him, and surrender yourself in a relationship to Him in total dependence, otherwise it can never work.

Prayer:

Lord, thank You for giving me faith. Teach me to trust You totally in everything.

Leaven

Mark 8:14-21

When I start talking about pot bread, I get really carried away! One of the great pleasures of a visit to the bush is, of course, that soul-blissful stretching out by a charcoal fire, and then drinking in the sounds and scents of the veldt. To watch the little flames as they jump and dance and hop and conjure up all kinds of images, takes you away to a fairy-tale world. When your steak fries peacefully on the embers looking tempting, and soaking up that finger-licking delicious aroma of the smouldering wood like a sponge, then it almost can't get any better! But everything only becomes perfect when there is a pot bread to one side steaming on some tranquil embers!

Such a pot bread does not just happen by itself. To get it so golden brown, light and fluffy, you need a few important things such

as flour and salt, maybe some herbs for the flavour, but without leven it will taste like a brick. The leven must be properly kneaded through the dough, then the miracle begins where the white dough starts rising before your eyes after half an hour, until it eventually tries to escape over the brim of the dish. It's amazing how just a few grains of leven can turn a whole basin of dough into a delicious, fragrant, steaming, mouth-watering bread. When you lift the lid of the pot after an hour of baking, everyone around the fire sighs: "Aaaaah!" Pure amazement! That's when you completely forget about the expensive steak on the embers...!

I've never really been able to fathom, exactly how leven works. All I know is that it affects everything it comes in contact with and that it is a living organism. If you pour a teaspoonful into a basin of dough, it starts to bubble and grow. Put some leven in a bucket full of water, sugar and ginger, and that weak water will soon become a witch's brew that ferments until it bubbles and boils and

steams! The end product is often something with a kick like a donkey if you leave it too long! It's the leaven that turns the calm water into a very angry brew. During my military service, one of the cooks sneakily made a few bottles of ginger beer and hid them in the warm ceiling. A few days later, one bottle exploded. When he took the rest out, the stuff had a kick like a mule! Poisonous!

Perhaps it is precisely this influence that made the Jews see leaven in a negative light. They believed that leaven in a sense caused deterioration. During Easter, all leaven was thrown away at home as a symbolic action. During that time bread was baked without leaven. I don't think it was very tasty! In the New Testament, leaven is usually used in a negative sense, with only one or two exceptions. In Mark 8, Jesus warns His disciples against "the leaven of the Pharisees and the leaven of Herod".

Just as a small amount of leaven has a great influence, one single person often has an

influence on many people. Hitler was a powerful "leaven", which influenced millions of people. In the same way, a single negative person can sour an entire congregation. I remember the Sunday when a congregation member stood up during the service and announced that he no longer wanted to listen to the pastor's "nonsense". Although the pastor had a good message, the whole worship service was totally ruined that Sunday. One person's negative attitude can drag an entire congregation down its dark path.

But leaven can also be seen in a positive light, as described in Matt. 13:33. Just think of the fragrant pot bread. One single person can positively influence an entire congregation with, for example, love that radiates or joy or enthusiasm. Try it: walk into a room where a bunch of depressed people are sitting. Start by greeting the people cheerfully and warmly with joy radiating from your heart and face, and within minutes the whole mood of that group changes. People

who are totally aloof will even start talking to each other. That's how good leaven works!

The wonderful thing about leaven is that it is a living organism. Unlike baking powder which can only make the dough rise for one batch at time, leaven can go on and on. If you save a bit of the leavened dough, you can still activate dough with it tomorrow and the next month. In the same way, a believer's positive leaven is also not just a once-off thing, but it must be a way of life of positive inspiration and joy that goes on without stopping, even through hard times. In this way you also give other people courage and most importantly: hope!

However, the important thing to remember is that no one can do this on their own. God the Holy Spirit alone can give you the strength to persevere with being good leaven and baking fragrant "pot breads". But equally important is that you do not take the credit for yourself, but will proclaim where your strength comes from.

Prayer:

Lord, please make me a good leaven in Your Kingdom, and give me the strength to live it out to Your glory.

Blindness

Mark 8:14-30

You will remember that Jesus and His disciples got into the boat and sailed back to Bethsaida-Julius after His confrontation with the Pharisees. However, it happened in such a rush that the men completely forgot to buy bread. Now they sat with one little bread loaf amongsh them. And the men were hungry! There followed a reasoning about their dilemma, and then Jesus warned them: "Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees." The poor men could not understand this at all, and then they began to grumble. "What is the Master trying to tell us?"

Jesus is discouraged with them: "Do you not understand? Do you not understand at all?" How many more miracles must He do now before their little minds will understand Who He really is? A day or so ago, He fed four thousand people with seven loaves of bread.

And not long before that, these very men themselves distributed the five loaves and two fish to ten thousand people. And how many baskets full of bread were there left each time too? And now they are worrying themselves again because there was only one loaf of bread for their group?

"You who have eyes, do you not see? And you have ears! Do you not hear then? Don't you understand then?" The men are speechless. And ashamed!

That boat trip over to Bethsaida-Julius probably took place in a very uncomfortable silence, with a group of men who were thinking very hard about what Jesus had just said to them. Are they then spiritually blind to all that they have experienced?

And then, upon their arrival in the town on the other side of the lake, more salt is rubbed into their wounds, because the first person they are confronted with is indeed a blind man, as if the spiritual blindness of which

Jesus had just spoken was being thoroughly rubbed in!

Jesus took the man by the hand and led him out of the town, and then He "treated" the blind man's eyes with spit. And suddenly the man could see! But there was a problem, because all he could see were blurry images. The people looked to him like trees walking around. I think the poor man's courage sank in his shoes, because if that was how he was going to be cured of his blindness, it certainly wouldn't have helped much. But Jesus was not done with him yet: He held His hands over the man's eyes, and when He took them away again, the blind man's vision was clear and normal. From blind to normal. What a breathtaking miracle!

It reminds me of the story of Dereck's housekeeper. They noticed that she knocked things over and was just very clumsy. Eventually they concluded that it must be her eyes. They took her to the optometrist, who gave her glasses. And for the first time in her

life, the woman could see normally. She was really beaming! She couldn't believe what had happened to her. But there was a big question mark on her face. "What's bothering you?" Dereck wanted to know. No, she was just wondering: what kind of medicine had this man put in the glasses that she could now suddenly see?!

The twelve men with Jesus also needed medicine for their eyes to be able to see properly. After they had been with Jesus for a while, a faint light dawned for them. They realized that they were dealing with a very special Rabbi who could do and say the most wonderful things. But their vision was like that of the blind after the first session, still disappointingly dim. They could see the movement, but they still could not recognize Jesus at all. Something very special would have to happen first before they would recognize Jesus for Who He truly was.

Oh yes, there were moments of a single flash, a faint flicker here and there, where

they only thought for a fleeting moment that they had seen the real Jesus. Such a moment came one day while they were walking from one village to another. Jesus caught them completely off guard when He asked: "Who do people say I am?" It was an easy question, because they must have heard how the people described Jesus as a Prophet, or even as Elijah. Herod even thought that Jesus was John the Baptist who had risen from the dead. Absurd!

But then Jesus surprised the men completely: "But you, who do you say I am?"

It was Peter who answered without thinking. Oh, he often did! "You are the Christ!" he heard himself say. It would still take a long time for Peter to realize what he had said that day, and what it really meant!

Believers also often go through life like the disciples with very poor eyesight. Do we ever see Jesus for Who He really is? Do we ever realize what Jesus truly went through to bring about our reconciliation? We say so easily,

so lightly: Jesus died for us on the cross. Do we ever think what it really means? Do we realize what hell He had to go through during and before the horrible death? My prayer is that every believer will put on those "glasses with the medicine" and see Jesus in His full glory and that we will realize a little something of that great atoning act of His!

Prayer:

Lord, please clear these dull spiritual eyes of mine clear.

You are the Messiah!

Mark 8:27-33

Yesterday Jesus asked the disciples who they thought He really was. "You are the Christ," or the Messiah, Peter declared unequivocally, without thinking twice. This is undoubtedly the highlight of Mark's story, so we don't dare run through it so quickly. In all the previous chapters, no one has yet referred to Jesus as the Messiah, apart from the evil spirits that occupied people's lives. They were well aware of who Jesus really was, and they lived in fear and trembling at this thought.

But what exactly did Peter mean when he made this earth-shaking confession? Today we know that when we speak of the Christ or Messiah, we mean that He is the Son of God, the third Person of the Divine Trinity. The Jews understood it a little differently. They could never in their wildest dreams imagine

that God would personally come to earth, so they painted for themselves a picture of the promised Messiah as a very special Person, almost someone like the great King David. This Messiah would usher in a new period for the Jewish people, as the prophets had predicted, a period of glory and peace. Possibly this is also what Peter had in mind. Some Jews also linked other expectations to the Messiah, such as that He, like King David, who delivered the people from the Philistines and other enemies at the time, would now also deliver the people with power from the Romans.

Jesus was well aware of what Peter and the others were thinking. That is why He made a very dramatic announcement that He would experience suffering! Peter wanted to cover his ears when Jesus began to tell the men in great detail about the terrible suffering that awaited Him. With disapproval, Peter listened to how the family heads and the church leaders would reject Jesus. It didn't make sense to him, because he had just

discovered that Jesus was the Messiah, and then he heard about total rejection! It couldn't! All the national leaders must accept the Messiah as Leader!

However, it got even worse, because he had to hear that this Messiah of his would be killed. Jesus indeed mentions that He would rise again three days later, but that thought did not even register with Peter, because he did not understand it at all. Jesus wanted the men to understand that He would indeed die, but that death would not have the final say. So he would finally conquer death!

This was certainly not how Peter imagined a Messiah should be. At least Jesus had to realize that the Messiah was a Leader par excellence, and certainly not a suffering figure! If Peter had perhaps had the background of a Scribe, he would perhaps have known that there were often references in the Scriptures to righteous people who had to suffer. Then he might have realized that Jesus was this Great Suffering Righteous

One. However, Peter was just a simple fisherman!

Peter took Jesus aside where the other men could not hear, and rebuked his Master harshly. At least he had to start realizing that if he wanted to be the Messiah, he had to make the right noises! Did He then not know what the people expected from the Messiah?

Jesus turned around, and as He looked at the other men, He said these shocking words to Peter: "Don't stand in my way, Satan! You don't think about what God wants but about what the people want." Peter felt the blood leave his face! He wished that the earth would swallow him right there. He could bite his tongue about the things he has said. Yes, and it would not be the last time that Peter would say such things without even thinking properly. He would later want to bite his tongue off again.....

But today it is not Peter we want to talk about. We don't want to look at the picture he painted of the Messiah for himself. This story

asks of every believer to do introspection. What does the picture I paint for myself of Jesus, the Messiah look like? Is He truly to me God Almighty. Do I recognize Him as the Creator of the universe? The One who sits on the throne and rules over everything and everyone? The One for Whom nothing, absolutely NOTHING is impossible? Is He also for me the Omnipresent - the One who rules in heaven, and is also at the same time present here with me where I sit and read this meditation? Do I also regard Him as the All-Seeing and All-Wise, the One from Whom I cannot hide, and Who knows everything about me? Is He also for me the One who designed and perfected love? Is Jesus truly the One in my life who loves me so indescribably? Is He really the One who listens to me, despite the pathetic wish lists I so often rattle off for Him? Yes, He is much more than that because He cares deeply for me and He hears every sigh of my heart.

Prayer:

Lord Jesus, please teach me Who You really are.

To Follow Jesus

Mark 8:34-9:1

Shock is clearly visible on the faces of the twelve men. Jesus had just told them about how He had to suffer, and that He would be totally rejected, that He would even be killed!

"What will become of us?" They saw when Peter took the Master aside to speak with Him. They saw that harsh words were spoken. They also saw that the talkative Peter was deathly pale and speechless when he rejoined them. What was said - Peter does not want to speak. But that he is very upset is very clear! And Jesus? He still looks as calm as ever, as if nothing ever happened! "How does he get it right?"

Jesus beckons the crowd closer. They have already started gathering again in large numbers. He sat down on a large stone, and then He said: "If anyone wants to come after

Me, he must deny himself, take up his cross and follow Me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it; but whoever loses his life for the sake of Me and the gospel, will save it."

The people grumble and look at each other with questioning eyes. "Now what does this Rabbi mean? Now who would become someone's follower, just to put his own life in danger?"

However, Jesus does not ask of His followers more than He Himself is willing to do. We have already heard how Jesus described His own suffering, and what He was willing to go through. Messiahship demanded of Jesus his total life. It left absolutely no room for self-interest or to even think about Himself, His own safety or own comfort. It required Him to give everything to bring about the Great Atonement!

So when Jesus asked His followers to deny themselves and take up their cross, it was not an unfair request. Denying yourself

means putting your own interests aside entirely for the sake of Jesus. To take up your cross, go one step further. This means that you will not only declare yourself willing to suffer, but will even be willing to pay the highest price - to die for Jesus. So if you really want to follow Jesus, you must realize very clearly that there is not necessarily a comfortable life waiting for you. Your whole life must be directed towards the Gospel and you can be sure that this will result in suffering.

A very good example of someone who lived these words of Jesus to the tee was Paul. He had a very good future ahead of him. He was a brilliant young man with a reasoning ability that was unparalleled. He probably would have served on the Jewish Council, and could have held a high position had it not been for the fact that he chose to follow Jesus instead. And right there his crusade began! He was mercilessly persecuted, flogged, imprisoned numerous times, stoned, rejected, chased out of the city - and so we

can go on. Finally he also died for his faith. Paul was not the only one either - many of his contemporaries had to pay the same price!

Why does Jesus expect so much from His followers? He explains in verses 35, 36 that someone who gives everything to secure his earthly possessions and life can easily lose his place in eternal life. What is most important? Your short life on earth or a life of eternity in the afterlife? It would be foolish to give up eternal life at the expense of a pleasant earthly life!

The problem is that in practice it is not an easy choice. There are some of Jesus' followers who will recoil from Him and His words and they will be ashamed of it. But then they must so realize that when Jesus returns, He will also be ashamed of them!

By the way, these same words of Jesus are so often misused in social media to make you feel guilty if you would not forward a

certain message. I loathe people who abuse the Bible so blatantly, so shamelessly!

Jesus concludes with a promise that has given many people headaches: That some of the people present there would not die until they saw the Kingdom of God come. Was it a mistake? Then Jesus' return did not take place? There are two explanations for this: The first is that an expectation of a second coming was created among the believers, something that we still have today. If we read the "signs of the times" today, we are now closer than ever to the second coming. The second explanation is that Jesus referred to one or more of a few very important events. The first was His glorification on the mountain (Mark 9:2-8). It could also refer to His crucifixion. One of the most important things that happened there was the climax when the veil of the temple was torn and the separation between God and man was torn away for good. On that occasion, the Roman officer confessed that Jesus is the Son of

God, a great truth that even the disciples could not understand!

I think that Jesus' words call for introspection from each of us. How far am I really willing to go to follow Jesus?

Prayer:

Lord, please prepare me to walk the full path for You.

Glorified on the Mount

Mark 9:2-8

It was not a very good week for Peter. Jesus' words were constantly running through his head: "Don't stand in my way, Satan!"

"Why do I always say the wrong things in the wrong place? Will my Master ever forgive me?" But this is not all that bothers Peter. He actually has a sore lump in the pit of his stomach because of His suffering. The Jews are going to do terrible things to Him. And they are going to kill Him! Peter almost wants to think that he was right to rebuke the Master about His statements!

Peter looks up and then he sees Jesus' friendly face. His eyes seek Peter's. He beckons Peter closer. "Come Peter, come along!"

He sees James and John standing with Jesus. "Where are we going?"

"We are going to climb this mountain, just the four of us."

The other men look after them questioningly: "Then why don't we go together? What are you going to do up there?"

"I don't know, I think the Master is going to pray again...!"

The climb is not easy. Loose pebbles constantly slide out from under Peter's sandals and threaten to make him fall. In silence, the four make their way up the steep mountain, with Jesus in front. When they are practically at the top, Jesus stops. Peter looks back over the breathtaking view. The silence is deafening, away from the constant crowds of people that make his ears ring. Alone, just the four of them. "We are probably very close to heaven here," he wants to say, but then he changes his mind - before he says the wrong thing again!

And then Peter becomes aware of something that is happening. He gets the feeling that

God is very close to them here, as if he were standing on holy ground. "Yes, that's how Moses must have felt when he stood on the mountain with the Lord that day!"

When Peter turns around, he is startled. His Master's countenance has changed completely, His face is radiant, and His clothes - they are indescribably whiter than white and shiny! No one has ever seen Him like this! The three men stand speechless and their mouths hang open shamelessly.

"What's going on?"

"I don't know, but something very big is happening here!"

The men tremble with fear, or perhaps uncertainty, wonder, surprise. Their minds are too small to comprehend what is happening.

But that's just the beginning! The biggest is yet to come!

Suddenly, out of nowhere, two very old, wise men appeared and stand on either side of Jesus. Peter has to pinch himself to make sure that he is not dreaming - everything is so unreal! The two grey old men look like heavenly beings, and they have the appearance of wise men. Their clothes give the appearance that they must be prophets. Then Peter says: "It's none other than Moses and Elijah there with Jesus!" The three disciples stand stunned and watch as the two wise men stand with Jesus and talk as if they were old friends!

Peter is the first one to regain his speech: "Rabbi, it is a very good thing that we are here!" He babbles unrestrained with a voice that trembles with emotion and confusion. "Let us build three huts here: one for You, one for Moses and one for Elijah!"

(Mark's comment on Peter's statement is that Peter certainly did not know what he was saying, because he and his two companions were totally terrified.)

But this is not the end either, because while they are standing there in a daze looking at the heavenly scene unfolding before of them, a heavy cloud suddenly casts its shadow over them. Then an authoritative voice comes from the cloud: "This is My beloved Son!"

The men cower in fear! They immediately realize that it is the voice of God, and they tremble with fear. "Will we ever survive this?"

Then the voice continues: "Listen to Him!"

Suddenly everything is over. The cloud is gone; the voice is gone; Moses and Elijah are gone. Only the deafening silence of the mountain remains. And the memories of the unforgettable day's events that were etched into the men's memories with fire. How can they ever forget that!

Jesus wanted to open the curtains of heaven just a little for the inner circle of His disciples. They finally had to realize that He was not the Messiah that the Jews expected. Their

expectation was a special Person and strong Leader. However, Jesus was much more than that! With Elijah and Moses, two very respected people from the Old Testament who were already in heaven, Jesus wanted to show them that He was at home in the heavenly atmosphere. And then, that voice of God from the cloud - with that God personally wanted to come and tell them that Jesus was much more than just an earthly Messiah. He is indeed the Son of God! Now there is absolutely no doubt anymore. But there was also a very clear command: "Listen to Him!"

The message of this event is simple: Jesus is not only the Suffering Messiah who had to die for our sins. He is also the Son of God who sits triumphantly on the throne. He is in heaven, and He rules over the universe. But He is at the same time also in His omnipresence here on earth with you and me. For Peter's mind it was just too big to comprehend. I also cannot understand it and it makes my mind freeze. But I accept it in faith.

Prayer:

Lord, Your Being is far too great for my mind to understand. But I believe, Lord!

What about Elijah?

Mark 9:9-13

Peter' life is like a small boat on a rough sea - one moment at the top of the wave, the next at the very bottom, then at the top again on the next wave! No sooner had Jesus told him that he was in the same fold as the devil, then he once again experienced an exclusive meeting with Moses and Elijah!

"What did I do to deserve this?" Peter can't wait to get back so he can tell the others about this incredible experience. Wow! To be able to meet Elijah and Moses! Peter gives a little jump over a large stone out of pure exhilaration. And to be able to experience his Master's glorification - His shining clothes, His shining countenance - can you ever forget that?! "I just have to go and tell! The men are going to be so jealous!"

Then Peter remembers the voice of God from the cloud. He would rather forget about that, he was so scared!

Jesus reads Peter's mind. "You must not tell anyone about what you saw today, under no circumstances!" There is a great urgency in Jesus' voice.

"But Master, why not?" Peter is bitterly disappointed.

"You can proclaim it after the Son of Man has risen from the dead, then everyone must know about it!"

John whispers in Peter's ear: "What does He mean by that, that the Son of Man will rise from the dead?"

"Yes, I want to know too!" James grumbles. Peter shrugs his shoulders, he doesn't understand either. This Master of theirs speaks in great riddles sometimes.

Jesus walks a little way ahead of the three men. He must not allow this secret, that He is

the Son of God, to leak out now. The time is not yet ripe. If the men have to blurt it out now, it will have the wrong effect. The crucifixion lies ahead! Jesus shudders when he thinks about it. But He does not dare shy away from it, because without it the reconciliation simply cannot take place. If the secret leaks out now about Who He really is, it will distract from the crucifixion. It dare not happen! Many people are already seeing Him as the Messiah, but they have the wrong idea of who the Messiah really is. It is such a shame that they will be very disappointed when they have to see that their Messiah is not who they think. Yes, they will have to see the crucifixion, experience all the pain and terror of it before they will understand that the Messiah did not come to live in pomp and splendour. After all, he did not come as a political ruler and to drive away the Romans. The true Messiah came to suffer!

Once He has risen from the dead, then the secret can and must be trumpeted forth for the whole world to hear! Then these three

men with Him, the men whom He loves so deeply despite their faults, can tell everyone about what they experienced here today. Maybe then they will also understand what it was all about.

"Master!" Peter has a big question mark on his face. "Master, why do the scribes say that Elijah must first come?"

Now poor Peter's mind is messed up again. Here he had just seen Elijah in person on the mountain, but then why didn't Elijah stay behind? Shouldn't Elijah then have prepared the way for the Messiah? He is now sure that his Master is indeed the Messiah, but then shouldn't Elijah have come down with them? And now he's back in heaven! He doesn't understand....?

Jesus explains that the scribes are absolutely right that Elijah had to come first. But then He emphasizes again the suffering that the Messiah must go through. The men's minds remain so centred around the "glorious Messiah" that they do not see the true facts.

So He first hammers in a few more nails to make them understand. "I tell you: Elijah has already come and they did to him what they wanted, as it is written about him."

Yes, poor John the Baptist did not have it easy as Elijah's successor. And he had to pay a big price for his task. Horrible how he met his end, but at least his suffering wasn't long. A swift sword and all was over. He was fortunately spared the humiliation of his bloody head being displayed on a platter in front of all of Herod's mocking, drunken guests, because by then he was already in heaven with his predecessor, Elijah. In a certain sense, John's suffering also pointed ahead to what Jesus would still have to go through before His earthly task would be completed.

Today we are so privileged to know the true facts about Jesus: He is the Son of God and He is the Saviour. However, the question is whether we truly carry this knowledge in our hearts? However, it must be much more than

just knowledge! It must also be trust and a living relationship. Because we know who Jesus really is, and believe in Him, it cannot be otherwise than that our faith will lead to a full, unconditional trust in Jesus, the Messiah, the Son of God, Creator of the universe as well as involves a living love relationship with Him.

Prayer:

Lord, You are everything in my life. Thank you for loving me dearly despite all my faults!

Jesus heals a boy

Mark 9:14-29

Peter skips down the mountain. He still cannot believe that he was able to be a part of this wonderful experience on the mountain. He truly saw heaven opened! Elijah, Moses....! He so wants wait to tell his friends. But he can't - Jesus prevented them from uttering a word about this!

However, Peter is suddenly back in reality when he runs into a large crowd of people who are waiting for them at the foot of the mountain. He simply sees: there is great trouble here! His mates are peppered by a group of scribes, and Peter only hears here and there about "Your total inability" and "Where is your so-called strength then?" When the people see Jesus' party, they run closer, they are very excited.

"What are you arguing with My disciples about?" Jesus is calm.

A man steps forward and he tells Jesus about his son who is so terribly afflicted by an evil spirit. The poor child has epileptic fits, and then his body goes into convulsions. "He even fell into the fire," cries the father.

Then Jesus must hear that His disciples tried very hard to cast out this evil spirit, but they were powerless. "Unbelieving generation! How long must I put up with you?" Jesus sighs: these men simply cannot do anything right, and this after He taught them so well! They were even very successful when He sent them out. "Bring him to Me!"

"If You can do anything, have mercy on us and help us!" The poor man is desperate!

"If You can?' All things are possible to him that believe!"

"I believe! I believe! Help my unbelief!"

Jesus commands the spirit to leave the boy, and after a few violent convulsions the child lies dead still.

"He's dead!" A shocked whisper echoes through the crowd. A deadly silence falls over the people. All eyes are on the boy lying there lifeless. Jesus bends down and takes the boy by the hand. A groan of amazement echoes through the crowd as the boy stands up, perfectly healthy and freed from the evil spirit!

With this description, Mark just emphasizes once again what Jesus meant when He said that the Kingdom of God has now come very close. It could only mean something very good for humanity. But Mark also wants to highlight two other matters that are of utmost importance: faith and prayer.

The disciples' unbelief is primarily responsible for their inability to drive the evil spirit out of the boy. Jesus is discouraged with them, because after all the things He did and taught them, they still do not have the

confidence to heal the boy. We have already mentioned on occasion what faith means, and that it is not only knowledge, but that it goes hand in hand with an unconditional trust. The disciples were well aware that they could only do these things through God's power. It was not them but God Almighty who worked through them to bring about healing, or in this case, the exorcism of an evil spirit. However, the disciples did not have the necessary confidence that God could really use them.

The second important matter that has passed them by is prayer. When the disciples later asked Jesus why they could not cast out the spirit, Jesus' answer was not, as we would expect, that they did not have faith, but because they did not pray! They committed a very big mistake, by trying to drive this evil spirit out of the boy in their own strength. You cannot tackle the devil without gloves, and least of all in your own strength! You're going to come off ugly second best! Only, as we have seen above, in God's power can this

happen. However, to position yourself as His instrument requires communication on your part with God. And you communicate through prayer.

I don't think we realize the value and the power of a believer's prayer every day. And now I'm not talking about the wish lists that we often rattle off, that's not prayer! Prayer is a deep, faithful and intimate conversation with God. In prayer you can also declare your total dependence on God, and place yourself in His hands. This is apparently something the disciples did not do at all! They just tried to plod along on their own.

For a believer, prayer also has a great value, that it strengthens the bond between you and the Lord. The more time you spend in prayer, the more you become aware of the Lord, and the more space you give Him in your life. And the more this happens, the more you realize your total dependence on Him. At the same time, you also realize that He can use you as

He wants. Then you also begin to realize that He can make miracles happen by using you!

Prayer:

Lord, please teach me how to truly pray, and put my full trust in You.

Humbleness

Mark 9:30-37

After the episode on the mountain, Jesus and the disciples left quietly for Capernaum so that no one could see them. It was very necessary that they could get some precious private time where they could talk alone for a change. And Jesus also used the opportunity to teach the men. They were constantly so busy controlling and caring for the crowds that they never got around to this essential teaching. Then Jesus casually mentions: "The Son of Man is delivered into the hands of men, and they will kill Him"

Peter wants to cover his ears. "How could He want to say such a thing?" He doesn't understand it, and he doesn't want to hear it. Jesus is such a gentle person, and He does so much good for others. But it's those stupid Pharisees, the hypocritical, white-washed tombs! One day he will do another

irresponsible thing if one of them tries to intimidate his Master like that again!

Peter is so upset by Jesus' comment that he barely hears the rest of the sentence: "But three days after He is killed, He will rise."

There follows a dead silence. The men are too afraid to say anything. Thomas whispers to Peter: "What does He mean?"

"No, I don't understand either!"

"Ask Him, Peter!"

"No!" The rough fisherman flatly refuses. "I'm not making a fool of myself again!"

Jesus looks at the twelve with sadness. How he wishes he could explain the whole truth to them. But then it will spoil everything. No, they will understand after His resurrection, that's enough!

The last bit of the road to Capernaum Jesus walks in front and the men gather behind Him. Jesus sees that here unholy things are

brewing and boiling among the men, but He leaves them to talk it out. When they are relaxing peacefully at home, Jesus unexpectedly asks: "What were you talking about along the way?"

Suddenly Peter feels very guilty: "Oh no, nothing at all Rabbi..." How can he now tell the Master that they actually had a heated argument about which one of them should be the leader? He knows in his soul that he is actually the most important among them, because who has to do the talking every time? And who is it that must ask the questions on behalf of the others if they want to know something? Him! Peter! And then Judas comes and wants to pretend that he is the most important because he carries the purse and has to take care of their finances. There is something in Judas' sly eyes..... no, maybe he is imagining it! And then there is John, who imagines he is smarter than the rest, and more important. Pipsqueek! Barely dry behind the ears!

Peter's thoughts are interrupted: "If anyone wants to be first, he must be last of all and servant of all." Peter turns white in the face when he hears Jesus' accusing words. "Did He read our minds then?" He was completely shocked.

Then a little child came running through the door, between the men, laughing. "Go play outside!" one of the men yelled at him. "We are dealing with serious things here!"

Peter is highly annoyed with the child. "Children don't belong in adults' company. Why doesn't his mother control him? He needs to be taught manners!" He is just fed-up with this interruption. But when the mother wants to grab the little child, Jesus puts His arm around the little boy and hugs him lovingly: "Whoever welcomes in my name one of these children, welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me, welcomes not only me but also the one who sent me."

Peter is devastated. That's unheard of! How can the Master burden Himself with children?

They are just property! They are not yet human!

We shake our heads in pity at the twelve's ignorance, and especially at their actions. However, Mark's aim with this narrative is not to put the men in a bad light, but rather to make us think about ourselves. What does my attitude look like?

Perhaps the men had more reason not to handle things properly, because they still did not understand what it was all about. Today we learned that knowledge from childhood and we still read it in the Word. We hear it from the pulpit every Sunday, but still we do not truly apply what Jesus teaches us.

Now take the issue of leadership. How we don't fight in every situation to be the leader, and to be more important than someone else. How often do we look down on others! Poor, beggars, tramps, street children - they are in a "lower class" and we look down on them!

Jesus practically set the example of how to, despite your high position in life, still be the least and never consider yourself higher than anyone else. For example, look at how He did the unheard of and started a conversation with the hated Samaritan woman. Such a person was avoided at all costs! And Matthew the sly tax collector? Jesus did the unspeakable and went to eat with him! In addition, there were a lot of other publicans and dirty sinners at Matthew's party too!

Let's go live that example of Jesus today, and make a difference in someone else's life.

Prayer:

Lord, please teach me what true humility is. Help me to live humbly!

Tolerance

Mark 9:38-50

John came running out of breath: "Master, there is trouble here!" The young disciple is very upset! "Here is a guy who casts out evil spirits in Your Name!" Jesus looks at John with a smile on His face, without saying anything. "Master, You don't understand! He is not one of our people!" Still Jesus does not respond. "We tried to stop him, Master - he's not allowed, is he? He is not one of our group?"

John's memory is very short, because shortly before he and his friends had their hands cut off when they themselves could not get rid of an evil spirit. And now this man who is not even part of their exclusive group, comes and he casts out spirits. How dare he?!

Jesus puts his arm around John's shoulders: "Be calm John, don't try to stop him. Whoever is not against us is for us!"

Jesus teaches the men, and for us today, some valuable lessons in life. The first is tolerance. That man who cast out evil spirits was not one of their group, but the important thing is that he did it in Jesus' Name, and not by his own power. So he was indeed also a follower of Jesus.

We are often like John: I think my own church is the only one that truly has all the right answers! If someone else also manages something, I get jealous and summarily shoot him down! Here in Ballito, a group of men meet weekly with a cup of coffee. They represent just about every denomination you can think of. Nevertheless, they pray and talk together about things that affect believers, bear each other's burdens and encourage each other, all while respecting each other's different views on matters of faith.

Jesus' second valuable lesson is that you must take care of the "little ones." Now those are the ones who are weak in the faith. As a strong believer, you must be particularly careful how you interact with such a person, and that you may not cause him to stumble with your actions. Someone who is young in the faith is particularly fragile, and he can very easily go astray. Jesus is so serious about this matter, that He tells the men that someone who causes such a "little one" to stumble, should rather be thrown into the sea with a "donkey's millstone" i.e. a millstone around the neck . With a millstone around your neck you sink like a stone!

Thirdly, Jesus teaches that there must not be things in your life that prevent you from following Him properly. If you want to follow Him, there are certain sacrifices you must make. Jesus of course uses imagery, and it does not literally mean that you should cut off your hand if it causes you to stumble. Let's cite an example: You are offered a very good position with a salary that most people can

only dream of and the benefits are phenomenal. However, this involves doing things that go against biblical principles. What will you do? Shut your eyes and continue? What Jesus is teaching us here is that it is better to turn down such an offer and make a great sacrifice with it, rather than stand the chance of losing your salvation through it! If promotion requires you to give up your principles, you better refuse it. And if it can cause you to drift away from the Lord, then you should rather reject it. "And if your eye makes you lose your faith, take it out! It is better for you to enter the Kingdom of God with only one eye than to keep both eyes and be thrown into hell. There 'the worms that eat them never die, and the fire that burns them is never put out.'" (Mark 9:47-48)

Fourth, you must be willing to suffer. As a young boy, I stood wide-eyed and watched the farm implements being repaired. The iron is heated red hot in a hot fire. Then it is hit on an anvil with a hammer so that the red sparks fly. Slowly it is moulded until it is sharp

and has exactly the right shape. But the heat unfortunately softens the iron, so that it wears out very easily when it is used. To get it hard again, it is put back in the fire until it is red hot and then quickly dipped in ice cold water to purify it so that it can be hard and usable.

In exactly the same way, believers must be prepared to take the beatings. It is precisely the painful things of life, the fire and hammer blows, that shape you spiritually. Then comes the "hardening process" which can involve things like Bible study and courses, because that's what makes us pure and spiritually strong. In other words, you must be prepared to suffer for the sake of Jesus and the Gospel. The bonus is that it makes you grow spiritually.

The fifth lesson that Jesus teaches us is to pursue peace. He uses the image of salt. Salt gives taste to food, but salt also heals wounds and disinfects them. Believers must give "taste" to their relationship with other

believers, and thus preserve peace between them. We believers need each other very much, because we carry each other, encourage and teach each other and make each other strong. If the bond of peace between us is broken, it can be disastrous, so we must do everything to keep our relationship with other believers "elegant."

Prayer:

Lord, teach me true love and tolerance towards believers who are different from me!

Divorce?

Mark 10:1-12

The twelve-year-old girl's mother rushes in excitedly: "I have very good news for you!" Immediately the child is all ears: what is it that makes Mom babble like that? It must be something very important! "My child, you are getting married!"

The poor girl's heart almost stopped. She is just starting to enjoy life! She is in the prime of her childhood, and now she has to get married! "Who is he, mother?"

Then she must hear that it is the son of a wealthy distant relative who lives in Jerusalem. She had never seen him, never even heard of him. "He is only sixteen years old, but his father will provide well," Mom continued. The poor girl doesn't have a choice! Dad has already done the negotiations, and she has no say in it. She is

forced to continue with the marriage, even though there is no talk of love or romance.

That's how most marriages started in ancient Israel, and that's how it's still done, by the way, in some of the Eastern countries. And this was probably also one of the big reasons why people wanted to divorce at that time. Mismatched couples were thrown together against their will in a matrimonial cauldron. Making such a marriage work took a lot of hard work.

Jesus and the twelve men were travelling from Capernaum to Jerusalem, the place where Jesus knew His greatest problems would await. However, he did not shy away from God's plan for Him, but deliberately travelled to the place of His condemnation.

And it is precisely here, on the way to Jerusalem, where Jesus is confronted by a group of Pharisees. They asked a simple question, but they had no good intentions with their question: "May a man divorce his wife?" This is a very clever trick question,

because there were many different opinions about this at the time. They want to force Jesus to take a stand, and whatever He would answer, He would step on someone's toes. They especially hoped that He would express Himself against the tradition of the Old Testament. And of course there were also political motives, because poor John had lost his head recently because he dared to broached the subject in King Herod's presence.

But once again the Pharisees did not reckon with Jesus. He answered them with a counter question: "What does Moses say?" The men knew the Law well: In Deuteronomy 24, Moses wrote that a man may divorce his wife if he finds something "indecent" about her. But the question is: what exactly does this "indecent" mean? The scribes argued while the sparks flew over what Moses meant by this. The interpretation varied greatly. Some thought that adultery could be the only reason for divorce. Others believed that almost any reason could be good enough,

such as if the woman burned the food, or even if she could not produce children quickly enough, this was reason enough for some to be allowed to divorce. Laws, laws and more laws! This is the mould that these men's whole lives were cast on.

Jesus' answer to them was that Moses allowed divorce because of the hardness of people's hearts. And then He emphasizes how incredibly important God considers marriage.

Once Jesus has become part of your life and you have experienced His acquittal, you must no longer allow your life to be dominated by all kinds of rules, regulations and laws. Then you do what is acceptable to God, to honour Him. And because God sees marriage as so important in a believer's life, it would be wrong to divorce, not because Moses or some other law says so, but simply because it is important to God.

What does this mean in practice today?

For a start, unmarried people must be very careful when choosing a life partner. This must not be done lightly. If we don't like our spouse, we just divorce again and choose someone else! Everyone does it nowadays.....

Once you are married, it takes hard work to make the marriage work. We must work seriously and positively to pursue and live out God's intentions for a marriage.

What if there are problems, and a divorce threatens? A believer divorces only if there is no other way out. Go for counselling and attend a marriage enrichment event. Do everything possible in your power to save the marriage. Always keep in mind what God's feeling is about marriage.

And what if you are already divorced? Forget about the past. Yes, it is wrong to divorce. Similarly, it is wrong to tell a lie or gossip. It is not an unpardonable sin! Accept God's forgiveness and move on with your life. By this I do not want to say that a divorce can be

taken lightly! On the contrary, any planned sin is serious. You can start all over again and become a useful Kingdom citizen under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, even if you are divorced.

Prayer:

Lord, please give me the strength and wisdom and will to keep my marriage alive.

Jesus and the Children

Mark 10:13-16

In New Testament times, children, especially boys, were important within the family, but out there they were simply seen as the father's property, therefore at the very bottom of the social ladder. No decent Jew would pay any attention to a child, and if you also had the status of rabbi, you wouldn't even bother with a child!

With this in mind, a scene unfolds before us where Jesus is talking to a crowd of people. And then the inevitable happens, someone got it into her mind to show Jesus to her children. They are immediately attracted to this kind Man, and the woman allows them to go to Jesus. The men sees this, and they are startled: "No, that's not allowed! We dare not allow our Master's precious time to be wasted by worthless children!" In short, the children are removed, and the mother is

properly scolded for their nonsensical actions. She knows it's not allowed! Children have no place here with their Master!

But Jesus feels differently about the matter - He is outraged by the men's actions and He calls the children back. "Don't stop them," he exhorts the men, "the Kingdom of God is precisely for people like them." Jesus does not let himself be bound by social norms. The men are not happy at all: how can their Master stoop so low? Every Jew knows that children have not yet reached the first rung of the social ladder. He is playing right into the hands of the Pharisees.

Jesus reads them like a book: "Whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will certainly not enter it." He explains to the bewildered men.

With that He lovingly draws the children closer and puts His arms around them and blesses them. For the first time in their lives they feel that they belong somewhere!

This event gives Jesus the opportunity to teach the people something very important: **EVERYONE** is important to God! It is of utmost importance that believers pay special attention to those who are usually despised. They need it so much more than anyone else!

Have you ever experienced how someone who has been knocked around in life, blossoms when you pay attention to that person? Make him feel that he is also someone, and that he is a full human being? Someone's Jesus action can give unworthy people their human dignity back and make them blossom! Yes, of course there are many chancers in life who play with your feelings, but who am I to judge? The success stories of people who give even beggars and outcasts a second chance in life are legion, and one single case makes it thoroughly worth the effort!

It is difficult for us to imagine the situation of that time. Today, children are no longer 100%

dependent on their parents. Early in the morning they are already in school in the care of teachers. After that it is again the sports coach who looks after them and on Sundays the Sunday school teacher who has to teach them about the Lord. Parents often only see them at night! In those years it was different: Children were totally dependent ONLY on their parents. Of course they did have a status within the family. If it wasn't for the parents' kindness, a child would be totally lost on his own!

Perhaps it is precisely this thought that Jesus wanted to bring home to the people, that believers must begin to realize that we are just as dependent on God as those children were on their parents. A few years ago I was really brought down to earth when all my earthly securities were taken away from me, and I practically had to experience how it feels to be stripped of everything and stand before the Lord in full dependence. I didn't know where I would find a place to live, because without an income I couldn't pay for

it. The Lord has provided. When there was no money for food or fuel, He provided every time in the most surprising way. But I had to learn to be fully dependent on Him. It is especially difficult to realize your dependence on the Lord if things are going well for you financially.

However, it is not only in the mortal realm where one must realize one's dependence on the Lord. It is also equally important in the spiritual field. Someone said to me one day: "I will go to church when I feel the need." The problem is that one feels that need less and less. Sometimes you have to force yourself to come to church, read the Bible or pray. If you say to yourself that day: "Today I don't need it," then you are moving on very thin ice. Then you really want to say: "I don't really need the Lord in my life right now!" We must realize very thoroughly that we cannot exist for a single moment without the Lord.

My prayer for you today is that you will realize your dependence on the Lord every moment of the day!

Prayer:

Lord, give me a heart and a passion for those who are low on the social ladder.

The Rich Young Man

Mark 10:17-31

Yesterday we heard that you just have to realize your complete dependence on God, then you are on the right path. But now we hear the opposite today, that it is extremely difficult for someone who is rich to get into heaven. Note: not impossible, just DIFFICULT!

After the incident with the children, Jesus prepares to resume their journey to Jerusalem. At that moment, a young man came running out of breath. We can see from his clothes that he is very well-off - expensive designer clothes. He came and fell on his knees before Jesus: "Good Master, what must I do so that I can inherit eternal life?"

Many people have asked me that same question! It is a wonderful privilege when someone comes and asks you like that! What

a wonderful privilege to be able to share the gospel message with such a person!

We have become accustomed by now that when someone comes to ask Jesus a question, there are ulterior motives. They want to try to question Him or provoke Him into saying something that will get Him into trouble. However, this man is different from the Scribes and Pharisees, because this question comes from deep in his heart without any ulterior motives. "Why do you call Me good? No one is good but One, and that is God!" It almost seems as if this man realizes who Jesus really is, that He is the Son of God and not, as most people thought, that He is only a prophet.

"You know the commandments, 'Thou shalt not commit murder; you shall not commit adultery; You may not steal; you shall not bear false witness; you shall not commit fraud; honor your father and your mother.'" The young man reacts violently. Yes, he makes it his task to fulfill all the

commandments promptly, right from childhood. We get the feeling that he is simply a devoted believer who throws his full weight into the church. Mark tells us that Jesus loved him very much because of his devotion.

But then Jesus makes a shocking announcement: "One thing you lack - go sell everything you have and give it to the poor, and you will have a treasure in heaven. And you, come here, follow Me."

Jesus' condition is just too much for the man. He has the true desire to gain eternal life, but his possessions are far too important. That's too much to ask!

When Jesus asks him to make this sacrifice, He does not add an eleventh commandment to the ten. No, He asks of the man a completely different kind of religion. Would he be willing to sacrifice his security? Would he be willing to stop relying on his own achievements, and trust in God alone? Would he be willing to simply give away the

property and luxuries for which he had worked so hard his life and live in total dependence on God alone?

It's completely too much to ask, and he turns and walks away sadly. His possessions took over his life. When Jesus sees him walking away with his head upside down, he says to the men: "How difficult it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!"

The disciples are bewildered: "Then who can ever be saved?"

The Jews saw wealth as the reward for a good life. Just look, for example, how Job of yore was rewarded after the devil took his things away and he still continued to believe. The Lord gave him back double what he had lost! Rich Jews also gave a lot of alms and paid for the upkeep of the synagogue, with the result that the thought arose that such exemplary rich people have a much better chance for heaven than ordinary poor people. That's why the disciples are so upset, because if the rich can't manage to get into

heaven, then the common man will never have a chance!

But then Jesus explains: "With men it is impossible, but not with God, because with God everything is possible." If you're willing to let it all go, you'll end up getting a lot more in return. You first become part of God's family, but also in the afterlife you will be richly rewarded.

The question is: Should we take Jesus' statement literally? What does He want to say to you and me today? We live in a society that is absolutely focused on security. We spend a lot of money on policies and pension funds. We invest in expensive properties. Ultimately, we feel satisfied with ourselves when we can sit back and say that we have everything we need. Unfortunately, it is usually precisely that security that makes me forget about my dependence on the Lord. The question is then, are rich people lost? Can anyone be saved at all?

What often seems impossible to us is possible with God. He can change anyone's heart. He can make you realize that your precious possessions are only loan-gifts from Him, gifts that you should not jealously cling to, but should share with others who do not have that privilege. When you start to open your hand that way for the day, you will mentally get back much more than you gave away.

Prayer:

Lord, please teach me how to truly deal with my possessions!

Place of Honour in the Kingdom

Mark 10:32-45

A dark cloud hangs over the twelve men. The road is difficult, and they must run to keep up with Him. To them it feels as if something is driving Him. The Master said that they should go to Jerusalem, and then He started walking. He walks far ahead of them, and the men are very worried. Getting from Capernaum to Jerusalem is definitely not an easy road. It's about a 130km walk, but it's not the long distance that makes it difficult, it's the terrible climb. From Capernaum, a coastal town on the Sea of Galilee, you walk down the Jordan Valley to Jericho, one of the lowest towns on earth - 170m below sea level. From there it is uphill to Jerusalem, more than 700m above sea level. It is therefore almost a kilometer of vertical climbing over rough and extremely dangerous terrain, a mountain desert with difficult roads.

But still this is not what bothers the men so much. Their nightmare is that they know that there is great trouble waiting in Jerusalem. The scribes are antagonistic towards their Master. They prefer not to think about what will happen to Him. It is therefore a very worried twelve who are steaming some distance behind Jesus, up the dangerous mountains.

When they stop for a much-needed break, Jesus explains to them the seriousness of the matter. Yes, they are on their way to Jerusalem. And yes, He knows that the scribes are waiting for Him there. To cloud their minds even more, He tells them that He will be delivered there to the chief priests. Even worse: He is going to be handed over to the gentiles, and they are going to condemn Him to death. The Master prepares them thoroughly for everything that will happen to Him in Jerusalem, also that He would be mocked, that people would spit on Him out of disgust and that they would beat Him and finally kill Him. It must have been

terrible for Jesus to know exactly what awaited Him - what hell He would have to go through!

The men listen, but it doesn't want to sink in. Everything is so terribly unreal. They had such great expectations of Him. They even thought that He was the great Messiah who would free them from the Romans. But now He tells them these terrible things. It does not make sense! They don't even hear when Jesus tells them that He will rise again from the dead. Three days after they killed Him, He will live again! But it doesn't sink in. The terror of death is an impenetrable wall for them so that they cannot see life after death at all!

Isn't it often like that with us today? Death is such a terrible finality for us, that our mind cannot comprehend that death is only a door to true life.

But then it is again time for them to walk on and once again it is Jesus who walks in front of them and the men who have to struggle to

keep up. The two brothers, James and John, conspire while walking: there is a deep conversation between them and the others can see that something is not very kosher. Then the two walk hastily to Jesus. "Master, we have a request," they panted. "When You reign as King, we want to sit on either side of You next to Your throne!" Very clearly these men do not understand what this is all about. Didn't they hear what Jesus was trying to teach them all along? It is about positions of honour for them, here at the most critical time in Jesus' life!

Jesus then immediately tells them that they do not realize what they are asking. They are actually asking that they will suffer and die with Him. Are they up to it? Are they really prepared for the cross and all that goes with it? "Oh yes, they do!"

Very clearly the two have not the faintest idea what Jesus is talking about. "The cup that I drink, you will drink!" Yes, He already knew that they would be cruelly tortured years later

and that they would also suffer a lot for the gospel. But about the positions of honour - no, those would not be granted to them. God alone can determine who will sit there.

We do not know today what happened to John. We can only guess that he was killed. James was killed by King Agrippa.

The men are outraged by the two brothers' arrogant request. Jesus calls them closer, and speaks to them very seriously. He explains that not the same kind of leadership systems work with believers as with the world, where someone is the boss. Abuse of power just simply does not happen among believers! With believers there is rather a competition about who can serve each other! The big key word is SERVICE. Jesus is the example for all believers. He dedicated His life to serving - we see this throughout Mark's story. And this is what every believer should strive for!

If we scroll through the dusty pages of church history, we see that very little came true of

Jesus' teaching and that there was much struggle for the highest leadership position. Today it still happens often. The time has come now we will make Jesus' words our own more than ever and that we as believers devote ourselves to serving each other rather than wanting to be leaders in positions of honour.

Prayer:

Lord, please teach me how to truly serve!

Bartimaeus, the Blind

Mark 10:46-52

Behind Peter lies the city of Jericho, according to some the oldest city on earth. The city is located in the Jordan Valley, near the top of the Dead Sea. Peter's heart shrinks when he leaves the city behind, because in front of them the mountains of Jerusalem tower. It is a steep climb ahead, but that is not what bothers him - it is what awaits them in Jerusalem, the city of David, that gives him the chills. Are they all going to be killed there with the Master? Their little group is followed by a large crowd of people, who all want to hear Jesus, or who hope to be healed of some ailment. Perhaps they hope to see some breathtaking miracle!

But Peter's thoughts have long since ceased to be with the crowd roaring around him: "The city of David!" it flows through his mind, "How wonderful it must have been to be able

to live in that great king's time!" In his mind's eye he walks through the city. How he loves that ancient old city with its magnificent walls. And then of course there is the breathtaking temple building. Every time he sees it, he gasps for breath and tears of affection stream down his bearded cheeks. He would rather forget that Herod built this temple.....

Peter reminds himself that he once heard a sermon where the Scribe spoke about Ezekiel. That prophet said that the Lord would send His servant, David, to serve as the shepherd over His flock. And then the man said that Ezekiel actually meant that this "David" is the Son of David, the Messiah! "Isn't our Master perhaps this very Son of David?" wonders Peter for the umpteenth time.

They reach the outskirts of Jericho, and then a voice is heard somewhere along the road: "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!"

Peter smiled: "Isn't it a coincidence?" Yes, he still remembers what that old Scribe said that

day that the "Son of David" would usher in a new era for Israel, and that He would not only rule, but would heal the sick and heal the blind.

"Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" The voice sounded louder and more urgent from up the road.

Peter can't see the man - there are too many people, but he's getting slightly annoyed now! "Oh shut up!" Peter heard someone rebuke the man. But he just calls out louder: "Son of David, have mercy on me!"

The Master stands, and then He turns around. "Here comes trouble!" Peter thought. "Call him closer," Jesus commanded the people.

Peter heard someone whisper: "It's Bartimaeus. He has been sitting here begging for years."

"Do you know him?" his friend asked.

"Yes, it's one of Timaeus's sons - blind, the poor wretch. Never been able to earn an ear in his life. He only lives on begging."

"Oh shame!" his friend whispered. "What a life!"

"Take courage, Bartimaeus," Peter heard someone shout, "take courage, Jesus is calling you!"

A pathway opens through the crowd as Bartimaeus is led closer. He trembles with excitement. His day has finally come! He has heard so much about this Jesus, and now he can finally see the Man in person. See? Well.....

"What do you want me to do for you?" he hears Jesus ask.

With a voice trembling with emotion Bartimaeus asks: "Rabbi, that I may see!" That's all he wants in life, just to be able to see. To also be able to be normal like other

people and to be able to take care of a family. Oh, how his heart yearns for it!

Jesus' words hit him between the eyes - literally! "You can go. Your faith has saved you."

The next moment a light suddenly dawned on Bartimaeus. He can see! His eyes are normal like any other man's! Peter's mouth hangs open in wonder, how many times has he witnessed all these breathtaking miracles, and still each one is new and fresh to him and fills him with wonder!

And Bartimaeus? After having to sit and beg on one old spot for so many years, he leaves his begging cup right there and runs after Jesus. He simply has to follow this Man! After all, he is the Son of David, the promised One!

Mark shows us in a masterly way how one must really believe. In the first place, this means that you must have that expectation that Jesus can turn that situation around which you yourself cannot do anything about.

Secondly, he describes how faith overcomes obstacles. The people wanted to silence Bartimaeus, but he continued. He couldn't even see Jesus, but still he called out. And thirdly, Mark shows that faith leads to following Jesus. Bartimaeus literally followed Jesus to Jerusalem. As a believer, you and I must be prepared to follow Jesus on the spiritual path to "Jerusalem", where hardship and persecution may be part of our lives - suffering for the sake of the Gospel. Are we really willing?

Prayer:

Lord, please make me willing to follow You, even if it also means hardship, suffering and persecution!

The Entrance

Mark 11:1-11

Peter's heart beat in his throat. Here from the village of Bethany, a short distance from Jerusalem, he sees the impressive walls of the old city towering. Between them and Jerusalem there is another village that they must pass through first, Bethphage. The crowd of people around them begins to get more and more excited. There is a feeling of anticipation, as if something very big is going to happen here today. Suddenly the thought hits Peter, that Jesus warned that they were going to kill him. But surely that can't be why everyone is so excited? It's probably just the approaching Easter! This is what makes everyone milling around like this, it's Easter! However, Peter still just can't get rid of this terrible lump on his stomach. He senses that something terrible is going to happen!

From Bethany it is a brisk climb to Bethphage. Jesus calls two of the men closer. They are instructed to fetch a donkey foal from the village for Him. They will find the animal where it is tied up. And if someone wants to know why they are taking the donkey, the men should simply say that the Lord needs him.

"Now what would the Master want to do with a donkey?" Peter wondered. Here they have been climbing the mountain for a whole day, and as soon as they get to the very last hillock, then He suddenly wants a donkey to ride on. It does not make sense! But if he thinks about it, then nothing makes sense to him anymore. Why must all these things happen? Why does the Master want to drive right into the trap? And that on a donkey?

They found the donkey just as Jesus predicted, and when they untied it, it was also exactly as Jesus said it would happen. His owner wanted to know what they wanted to do with the donkey, and when they said

that the Lord needed him, he said that they could just take the donkey. "How did He know?" they wondered.

Peter watches as Jesus mounts the donkey. Now the people are getting excited! "Something's cooking!", Peter thought when he saw someone throw his clothes over the donkey's back so that Jesus could sit on it. Peter feels slightly embarrassed when he sees the big fuss the people are making of Jesus. They even take off their cloaks and throw them on the road so that Jesus can ride over them. "They want to make Him king!" Peter realized suddenly. Those who are sorry for their clothes, break off green twigs and pave the road on which Jesus must ride with green leaves. The crowd gets more and more excited and they prompt each other. "Hosanna!" they sing. "Praise Him who comes in the Name of the Lord!"

Secretly, Peter wonders if these people ever realize what they are doing? Suddenly he thought back to that breathtaking day on the

mountain with James and John, when Moses and Elijah came from heaven. Everything is still so unreal! Wasn't it just a dream? No! It really happened! He still heard God's voice from heaven, and he remembers how terribly he trembled with fear. The Master was glorified there on the mountain by God Himself, Personally! And now, on top of that, he is also witness to the thousands of people who also glorify Jesus, right here in front of Jerusalem.

"Hosanna! Blessed is He who comes in the Name of the Lord!" the singing rumbles from thousands of mouths. "Blessed is the Kingdom that is coming, that of our father David! Hosanna in the highest!"

The feeling of anxiety that threatens to eat Peter' stomach gives way to a wonderful feeling of pride. Oh how wonderful it is to be part of the inner circle of the Master! All singing and dancing, the procession moves through the village of Bethphage. Then they wind the long descent down the slopes of the

Mount of Olives to the bottom of the Kidron Valley. In front of them are the majestic walls of the city of Jerusalem, and of course that magnificent building that brings tears to Peter's eyes, the temple.

At the northern entrance to the temple grounds, Jesus dismounts the donkey. They walk through the great courtyard with its pillared corridors that surround the temple grounds. Peter's mouth hangs unashamedly open in astonishment. Everywhere he sees small groups of young men sitting in the shade between the rows and rows of pillars, each with a Rabbi who is busy teaching them. Peter smiles, then shifts his gaze to the main building. He gasps for breath, and a song of praise spontaneously begins to bubble from his lips.

It is already late afternoon and the temple building is already casting long shadows. Jesus jerks the twelve back to reality: "Come, we still have to go back to Bethany to find a

place to sleep for the night. We will come back tomorrow."

When Peter and his companions climb the steep Mount of Olives, on their way back to Bethany, his emotions are overflowing. What a wonderful privilege it is to be part of the people of God, and to be able to share in all these things!

Can you and I say the same today? How great is God's grace upon us as believers, that we may share in all the riches of God's Kingdom. Sometimes, when I think about it, tears run down my cheeks, tears of gratitude. He is great! He is good! He is merciful!

Prayer:

Lord, thank you for giving me a place to have in Your wonderful Kingdom. I realize today that all this is only grace, and that I do not deserve any of this. Thank you, thank you Lord!

Chaos in the Temple

Mark 11:12-26

With thoughts of the beauty and majesty of the temple buildings still fresh in his mind, Peter and his companions walked from Bethany back to Jerusalem early on Monday morning. Jesus is on a mission, Peter can see that very clearly. Peter smiles when he sees how the palm trees along the road have been stripped of their branches. That march yesterday caused a warm feeling in his heart. What adventures do not await them today? Master said that they would go to the temple again.

Along the road stands a fig tree - strange, yesterday he didn't even notice it. Too bad it's not fig season now. Their breakfast this morning was very skimpy, and he could certainly do with a few juicy figs! Apparently his Master also has the same idea, because Peter sees Jesus walking straight to the fig

tree and rummaging among the leaves. "It's not fig time," he still wants to tell Jesus, but then he sees that Jesus has already figured it out. "No one shall ever eat figs from you again!", he hears the Master say to the tree. "It's unfair," Peter thinks. "Now how can Jesus expect figs out of season?"

The rest of the way Peter walks lost in his own thoughts. When he looks again, they are at the gates of the temple. His heart thumps excitedly. On the temple grounds everything is in chaos this morning. Everywhere he looks he sees stalls of traders: some sell sheep, others doves and others exchange money. Peter walks to one of the money changers and takes a few coins out of his pocket. On one the face of the emperor is depicted, and on the other there are depictions of Greek gods. Peter shuddered when he looked at the coins: "Am I ever allowed to throw these things into the temple treasury? The law says very clearly that you may not make an image of any person or idol, but here it is clearly on the coins!"

"What does it cost to exchange my money for Tire coins?" Peter knows that Tire coins do not bear those images. However, when he hears what the exchange rate is, he almost has a heart attack. "That's robbery! You steal poor people's money!"

The changeling shrugs. He knows that Peter must have that money, and he is not going to get it anywhere else!

Then Peter hears a great commotion elsewhere on the temple grounds. People shout and curse indignantly. His heart almost stops once more when he sees that it is no one else but his Master who is busy overturning the tables of the money changers and peddlers! "You make a robbers' den out of God's house!" he hears his Master shout.

He had never seen Jesus so angry! Peter's heart shrinks when he sees a group of Chief Priests and Scribes standing aside. "Many unholy things are hatching!" he says to himself. "Those men are definitely not planning a birthday party..."

That night in Bethany, Peter lies tossing and turning, he just can't sleep. The day's events run through his head. Those traders are exploiting people! They know that people often travel very far with a sheep to sacrifice at Easter, and then the sheep is no longer in such good condition when it arrives in Jerusalem. Then they exchange it for a fat sheep, but they ask an exorbitant price for the animal. And the pigeons they sell to the poor people - one can almost buy a sheep for the price they ask for a silly pigeon! Peter is simply upset all over again. Yes, his Master certainly did the right thing!

The next morning it is again up early to go to Jerusalem. Master said that he wanted to preach to the people on the temple grounds. It's going to be exciting! Peter wonders what wonderful stories Jesus will tell the people. He enjoys Jesus' stories, even if he doesn't always understand them. When they walk past yesterday's fig tree, Peter has to look twice. He does not believe what he sees: "Master! Master, come and see!" Only

yesterday the tree was leafy green; today it is dried up down to the roots, without a sign of life. "Rabbi, is that the same tree you cursed yesterday?" Peter has a huge question mark on his face.

Jesus sees that the men do not understand at all, and then He begins to explain: "You must have faith in God." He explains that by faith you can move mountains, and that God answers the believer's prayer. He further explains about forgiveness, and that God forgives the believer's sins. But at the same time, it also means that you must forgive those who have done something to you, because how can you expect to receive God's forgiveness if you yourself are not willing to forgive someone else?

"But Master, what does this have to do with the fig tree?" Peter wants to know.

Maybe you are also saying this morning that these things just don't make any sense to you right now. But use a little patience. In our next devotional we will take another look in

perspective at the events of these two days during the last week in Jesus' life.

Mark wrote a "sandwich": the cursing of the fig tree and its withering are two slices of bread, and the temple cleansing is the filling. These three must be read together, but we will look at them in the next meditation.

Prayer:

Lord, my faith is often so trivial. Please give me also that faith that can move mountains.

Fig Sandwich

Mark 11:12-26

To understand the events surrounding the cursing of the fig tree, we must also read about the events where Jesus cleansed the temple as well as the withered fig tree as a whole. Indeed, Mark wrote a "sandwich"! If you read the first part on its own, it makes no sense at all, Jesus' actions are incomprehensible, perhaps even unjust.

It is important to know that this act of Jesus was a symbolic act. What did He mean by this? Jesus wanted to show that the Jewish people and the city of Jerusalem could be compared to this fig tree that did not bear fruit. God expected them as His people to bear spiritual fruit, but there was none. God even went so far as to send His Son, Jesus, to tell them for three years that His Kingdom had arrived. He didn't just trumpet that wonderful news with words, but He showed

them in a practical way with the things He did that the Kingdom was there. Breathtaking miracles were the order of the day, but they rejected Him!

The worst was that the church leaders, the people who were responsible for leading the people on a religious level, constantly opposed Jesus. Instead of encouraging the people to follow Jesus, they tried to kill Him. By cursing the fig tree, Jesus symbolically shows that He rejects the part of the people who refuse to follow Him.

Soon after, we see Jesus at the temple, where He overturns the money changers' tables and chases out the merchants. To understand what happened here, it is necessary to realize that the temple was the pivot around which everything revolved in the Jewish Religion. It was, as it were, the heartbeat of the church and the people. Unlike most church buildings today, where it is closed six days a week and nothing happens, the temple was different. There

was always a hustle and bustle. Sacrifices were made and people brought their gifts to the temple. Teaching was given in the pillar corridors and it was a gathering place.

But something very tragic was happening, because absolutely nothing came of the temple as the centre that had to trumpet forth the coming of the Son of God. Life simply continued as it had continued every day for the past several hundred years. Although Jesus himself preached the Gospel in the temple, no one paid attention to it. No one in the temple - the house of God - paid attention to the coming of the Son of God!

Actually, it was much worse, because the Temple had in a certain sense degenerated into a robbers' nest, where the robbers plastered very pious faces and made people believe that they had actually done them a favour. Meanwhile, the poor people were exploited with exorbitant prices that they had to pay for the privilege of being able to make an offering to God.

With Jesus' cleaning campaign, He not only wanted to expose the robbers, but He also wanted to show how far the "pious" people who staffed and visited the temple had really strayed from God.

In the third section we see how the disciples discover that the fig tree withered overnight. The curse has become a reality! The message is very clear: If you ungratefully reject God's grace and love, the danger is that you may eventually be rejected by God as well.

What was going on in the temple was very beautiful and noble on the surface. Sacrifices were made to God and people were helped in an organized way to get money and animals to sacrifice. However, underneath it was rotten! It was empty, because God was not in their Religion.

Today it is also a warning to us, the church of Jesus, that Jesus must always be the centre of our worship.

Jesus also calls the disciples up to the true religion. He gives them three very important keywords: Faith, Prayer and Forgiveness. What does it mean to believe in Jesus? There are a few elements summed up in the word "faith". Of course, the most important thing is to believe that Jesus died for me and that He is my Saviour. But there is more: Faith also means, among other things, that we fully trust Jesus for who and what He truly is - God Almighty. He wants us to have faith in His power, and that even the impossible is possible with Jesus.

The second key word is of course prayer, because it is precisely through a believing prayer that Jesus gives us access to His power. However, we must remember that He does not give us free reigns to perform all kinds of "circus tricks" with prayer. What we ask must be in accordance with the will of God.

The third key word, forgiveness, is probably the most beautiful word in our language,

because God forgives all our sins in Jesus. But this places a very big responsibility on the believer, because just as God forgives us, we must also be prepared to forgive other people. Can we expect God to forgive us if we selfishly refuse to forgive our fellow-man?

Prayer:

Lord, please give me a forgiving heart.

Jesus' Authority

Mark 11:27-33

The next day they are back at the temple. For Peter it is wonderful and he delights in everything that happens there. But then his heart shrinks when he sees the group of serious Pharisees walking right up to his Master. With them there are a few other men who seem very important, probably scribes and heads of families. What are they going to do? Are they now going to capture his Master as He predicted? But then Peter calms down when he sees that they are not going to attempt anything. Peter stands closer to be able to hear what they are saying to Jesus. Then he hears that they are actually asking Him a question, and Peter has already learned that if these brood of vipers ask questions, it is certainly not because they want to learn something!

"On what authority do you do these things? Or who gave you this authority to do these things?" They sound very upset!

Peter wonders how Jesus will answer this little question?" If He tells the truth, then they will certainly arrest Him, because if He says that He is doing it with God's authority, then they will say that it is blasphemous. What will He say?

Masterfully, Jesus answers their catchy question with a counter question: "The baptism of John, was it from heaven or from men?"

Peter wonders why he didn't think of that? He laughs in his sleeve and he wonders how the smart men will get out of this one? No matter which way they answer, they're going to be in trouble!

With a naughty smile, Peter watches as the men grumble among themselves to get an answer. Finally one turns around: "No, we don't know."

And then Peter gloats when he hears how his wonderful Master answers them: "Then I don't tell you either on what authority I do these things."

Jesus saw through the wise men! He knew of course that they were not really interested in an answer, they just wanted to try to catch Him. Would it have made any difference in their lives if He had told them that He was not only the long-awaited Messiah, but also the Son of God? Would it really have changed their lives if He revealed to them that He is the Almighty God who became man? I sometimes wonder if Jesus might not have been burning to trumpet this out to the world. But who would believe Him? Most definitely not the Pharisees! This would only give them reason to immediately stone Him for blasphemy!

However, Jesus knew that there were only a few days left before everything could be revealed, so much so that even the Roman soldier at the cross would cry out in

amazement: "Truly, He was the Son of God!" Jesus also knew that through silence He would win another round against the devil and the men who thought they were so terribly clever!

Today, of course, we know exactly by what authority Jesus did all these things. And especially after we have read Mark's Gospel up to this point, you begin to truly realize Jesus' authority. Just think of the miracles we read about, how He fed thousands of people with only five loaves of bread and two little fishes. The breathtaking healing miracles that Jesus performed take your breath away: a blind man who could see instantly without a complicated operation; a man who has been paralyzed all his life, suddenly hops and jumps around like a young boy; a child who was already dead and then suddenly comes alive and healthy. Isn't that enough to prove Jesus' authority? But then we also see how He could not only intervene in human lives and make a change, but also exercise His authority even over nature. A raging storm

subsides instantly when Jesus orders it to be still. He makes all natural laws null and void when He walks casually on the sea over the waves!

However, Jesus' authority extends much wider than the things here on earth! We saw how heaven was torn open during His baptism, and how the Holy Spirit descended upon Him from Heaven. God spoke with an audible voice from Heaven so that the people present there could hear it. Later it was again Moses and Elijah who came down from heaven to pay homage to Jesus on the mountain, and once again God spoke to Jesus from heaven and glorified Him.

To answer the Pharisees' question: Jesus truly acted with God's authority. We can only respond to Jesus' authority in one of two ways: We can reject it, as the scribes did, or we can accept it in faith. If you reject it, then you forfeit the wonderful privilege of being part of God's family. However, if you accept it

and make it your own, then you share in all the privileges of His family.

Prayer:

Lord, thank you for opening my eyes so that I can see who Jesus really is. Thank you for making me part of your family out of your great grace!

God's Vineyard

Mark 12:1-12

The "wise" men were still standing around arguing about how they could actually capture this Jesus after their previous defeat against Him, when Jesus beckoned them closer. He wanted to share a story with them! A large number of curious people stood around Jesus.

When all the old wise men, now the leading priests, scribes and heads of families, were present, Jesus told his story, which was about a farmer who planted a vineyard.

This farmer put a lot of effort into making the vineyard special. He built a stone wall around it and went to great lengths to carve out a wine press so that the harvest could be processed. He even took care of the security and had a watchtower erected so that they could look out for thieves who wanted to

steal their harvest. Instead of using his investment himself, he leased it to a group of farmers, with the understanding that he could get a share of the harvest every year.

But this is where all the trouble begins, because when he sends a slave after the harvest to collect his agreed share, he is beaten and sent back empty-handed. He sends a second slave, and this one is hit over the head. The third slave is killed!

The farmer was discouraged! Then he decided to send his beloved son to resolve the situation. However, those farmers grabbed his son, killed him and threw him out of the vineyard. They thought that they could keep the vineyard for themselves, because the heir had been eliminated. However, they did not take the farmer into account. He came and executed them and gave the vineyard to someone else.

The learned men stood still and listened to Jesus' story. They realized all too clearly that Jesus was hinting to them with the story.

They were bitter! This Jesus had to be removed as soon as possible! They wondered amongst themselves: "How are we going to arrest Him?" Little did they know that their chance would come much sooner than they realized and that that same Jesus would hang on a cross only three days later.

There was now an urgency among the church leaders to get Jesus behind bars. On the other hand, there was also an urgency with Jesus to get everything done in time before that terrible Friday. There was still so much that He wanted to say to the disciples and all the other people, but the time was so short.

The big question is: why did this story upset the church leaders so much? What exactly did Jesus want to say to them?

The farmer in this story is of course God. He put a lot of effort into the vineyard, the wall, the winepress and the watchtower. It alludes to the people of Israel. From the earliest times, the Lord has built that people. It

started with the tough old pillar of faith, Abraham. The Lord saw to it that in Abraham there was someone to whom the people could refer with compassion and pride as the forefather of the people. Years later, the Lord led the people, who by then already numbered in their millions, to the land He had already promised to Abraham. He settled and pampered them and made them strong. He gave them kings like David, as well as prophets to lead them. He gave them prosperity and made them exclusive. After all, they were the people of God!

But what do they do? The prophets that God gave them to guide them on the right path are abused, rejected, beaten. Poor Elijah had to hide in the desert to escape the clutches of the queen, Jezebel. Other prophets were less fortunate! The last prophet John, is without his head into eternity after he was first chained in prison, and that simply because he spoke the truth!

Jesus tells this story specifically to the leading priests, scribes and heads of families. Obviously, they were the people who had to lead the people of God spiritually. They were therefore the representatives of Israel, and it was within their power not only to make decisions on behalf of the people, but also to influence the people in their thinking and actions. If the people were to perish, it was the fault of these leaders! It is precisely these people who were directly responsible for Jesus' crucifixion!

With this story, Jesus wanted to emphasize how ungrateful God's people were. With the cultivation of the vineyard, He thought of absolutely everything, and gave them the very best. How has God not over the centuries also showered Israel with goodness and mercy! But again and again they rejected Him. But God's patience is not unlimited, and eventually He would punish those who continued to trample on His mercy. This applies to Israel, and it also applies to us today.

However, the parable concludes by placing Jesus in a special position. Yes, they rejected Him. And yes, they even killed Him. But precisely in this rejection, God comes in a surprising way and uses it to achieve salvation for everyone who believes in Him. The Stone that was rejected by all, becomes precisely the Cornerstone on which the entire building of God's Church is established.

Prayer:

Lord, this morning I can only think once again in great wonder of Your grace that knows no end - that You even use the rejection of Your beloved Son to deliver people from misery!

What about Taxes?

Mark 12:13-17

Jerusalem, and especially the temple, is now becoming too much for Peter. A few days ago he still enjoyed admiring the temple, and he enjoyed all the things that were going on there, but now the traffic is starting to become hectic, and it makes him nervous. Every now and then there is someone who tries to trap his Master with catchy questions. He doesn't know how the Rabbi manages to get out of the spring-trap every time. Just now it was the bunch of church leaders who wanted to know where his Master got His authority from. Peter laughs in his sleeve when he remembers how they left there, slinking off. His master had masterfully thwarted their trap! Peter shudders when he thinks what they might be planning next!

Then it's just that time again! Purposefully, the group of men walked towards them,

unmistakably Pharisees, accompanied by a few of those half-baked Herodians. That lot annoys him to no end! They try to force their eternal laws on everyone. What are they going to confront Jesus with this morning?

"Sir, we know that you are someone who expresses your opinion honestly."

Peter almost burst out laughing. He had never heard such flattering words from a Pharisee's mouth! The flattering is being used liberally! But they are not done yet.

"You are faithful to the truth and thus you make known the will of God."

Peter can hardly believe his ears! What happened to the men? Surely they can't be serious? They have never had a good word for Jesus! Why all the compliments all of a sudden?

"Is it right to pay taxes to the emperor?"

Peter froze! He knew it was too good to be true! Here comes an ugly trap! "Beware

Master, they want to lead you into a trap!", Peter still wants to warn, but then he remembers how Jesus very cleverly avoided those kinds of trap questions every time.

"Should we pay, or should we not pay?"

Peter's eyes wander to the group of Herodians who came with the Pharisees. "The traitors! They support the Roman domination!" Now Peter is steaming thoroughly, now he understands why the disgusting Herodians are here with the Pharisees! If Jesus answers this question incorrectly, they will accuse Him right there and then to old Herod. Viper broods! Thieves! Peter feels his sword tentatively. Inside him it boils. This lot whitewashed tombs are trying every trick in the book to catch out his Master!

"Why are you testing Me? Bring me a denarius so I can look at it."

"Then He really saw this coming!" Peter thought relieved. "But what would He want to do with a coin?"

But then comes Jesus' next question when he has a coin in his hand: "Whose image and inscription is this?" Everyone agrees that it is the emperor's, no doubt. "Then give to Caesar what is due and to God what is due to Him!"

Peter's mouth hangs open at Jesus' brilliant answer. "Now why didn't I think of that?" He has to restrain himself from bursting out laughing again when he sees the learned men's dejected faces. They don't know what hit them, totally deflated! "It will definitely teach them a lesson!"

For the Jewish people, the whole issue of taxes that they had to pay to the Romans every year was a great pain. And what made the matter even more painful were the coins they had to use. Jewish coins did not have an image of a person on them. However, they could not use these coins for tax

purposes. They were obliged to use the Roman Denarii, a silver coin with the emperor's head on one side, with the inscription: "Tiberius Caesar Augustus, son of the divine Augustus." On the back of the coin was a female figure with a crown, scepter and palm branches. To any devout Jew, these coins were something horrifying, because they violated the second commandment! The Zealots, a Jewish terrorist movement, flatly refused to pay any form of tax. The Pharisees did pay the tax, but not without very clearly expressing their displeasure!

When Jesus answers the Pharisees, He actually tells the men that those coins are Caesar's property. By paying taxes with it, you are actually just giving back to the emperor what belongs to him.

But then Jesus immediately adds that there is another very important matter that you must not forget: Also give to God what belongs to Him! Here Jesus stepped on

some painful corns, because their religion was about the law and about themselves, without truly taking God's will into account!

Today He also asks you and me to give Him what belongs to Him. No, and that doesn't just mean your money, but your time, your life, your everything! He therefore asks that we truly become part of His Kingdom and to live out our discipleship for Him.

Prayer:

Lord, I stand guilty before You today if I have to confess that I do not truly give You what is due to You. Help me to truly live out my discipleship.

Resurrection, A Reality?

Mark 12:18-27

The group of Sadducees came walking towards Jesus, and Peter could see that there was brand new trouble here again. "What would these men want?" Peter wondered. "They're not particularly interested in religious matters, are they?"

Do not confuse the Sadducees with the Pharisees! Unlike the Pharisees, they were very worldly, actually rather cultured people who held Greek civilization in high esteem. And this was something that a Pharisee would certainly never do! Sadducees were mostly wealthy members of society, and often very influential. For that reason, they usually occupied high positions, such as sitting on the Jewish Council, often next to their mortal enemies, the Pharisees!

Despite all their tricks, the Sadducees were religious in a certain sense. However, they didn't really bother with studying the Scriptures. In fact, they only accepted the five Books of Moses as Word of God! The Prophets and other writings were not at all important to them. They didn't even consider it part of the Word! And then there is the matter of angels, spirits, and the resurrection: these matters they rejected altogether. Angels and everything outside of tangible earthly life simply did not exist for them. If you died that day, that was the final end. There was no life after death, finished and done! Precisely because they believed so, there was a kind of fatalism with them. You were free to do whatever you wanted, as long as you worshipped God!

Peter still remembers how the Sadducees' hair stood on end the day Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead. The Sadducees must have seen the danger lights flashing, and then they decided together with their earthly

enemies that Jesus had to die. After all, he overturned their entire argument!

It makes Peter's hair stand on end when he realizes that these people often hold positions in the church. Many of them are priests! Most of the Sanhedrin was made up of Sadducees. Even Caiaphas, the High Priest and his predecessor, Annas are both Sadducees, certainly two very influential men! By the way, Caiaphas is Annas' son-in-law. Surely he should do what Father-in-law says, even if he is the high priest!

It is scary for Peter on the one hand, but at the same time also interesting to see that, although it is the Pharisees who are so poisonous against Jesus, and then there is the fact that they can never co-operate with the Sadducees, they still band together against Jesus. Peter secretly wonders which one of these two groups will be the main leader to execute his Master. But somewhere inside he feels sure that it will actually be the Sadducees!

Peter is pulled back to reality. This group of Sadducees comes to Jesus with an absurd situation, just to show that the whole idea of the resurrection from the dead is ridiculous. Their argument is based on the so-called levirate marriage described in Deuteronomy 25. According to this law of Moses, it is a man's duty, if his brother should die childless, to marry his brother's wife and father children on behalf of his brother. These Sadducees describe a ridiculous situation where a woman has been through seven brothers, and that all are dead, and still she is childless. At the resurrection - whose wife would she actually be?

Jesus' answer completely takes the wind out of their sails. First of all, God can do the impossible. It is within His power to raise people from the dead. But they must clearly understand that the heavenly life is not just a continuation of the earthly life. It is something totally different, a totally new form of life. So no one can imagine exactly what it will look like right now. This is a huge surprise for us!

But then Jesus further tells them that they do not know the Bible at all, because if they were to read the Scriptures, that is the part they do accept, then they would realize that God is the God of the living and not of the dead, and that in Exodus 3:6 it says that He is the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, three people who have already died, and who are now ALIVE in heaven.

Easter weekend we commemorate not only the death of Jesus, but also His resurrection. And if we also read with this what Paul writes in Colossians 3:1-4, that we have been raised from the dead with Jesus, and that we will share His glory with Him at His return, then we cannot help but to rejoice and be glad in the resurrection from the dead! Yes, there is no doubt in my mind that there is indeed a resurrection! And what is more: if I read what the Lord promises me in numerous places in the Bible, then I am very sure that I will have a part in this resurrection. He says that all who believe in Jesus have eternal life - not even one day, but today already! And I

believe, so I have that eternal life. And you?
Are you sure about that?

Prayer:

Lord, thank you that this morning I got the assurance once again that you have given me eternal life, and that one day I will also rise again from the dead!

The Greatest Commandment

Mark 12:28-34

Peter laughs in his sleeve when he sees the group of Sadducees walking away. Surely they did not think that they would trap-question the Master? Will these viper-hatchlings ever learn? His Rabbi has ten answers for each of their questions. But then Peter gets warm again under the collar when he sees the Scribe approaching. Apparently the man didn't get the message! However, to his surprise, Peter sees that this scribe has no ulterior motives. It seems as if he is honestly looking for an answer when he asks Jesus what the greatest commandment is. This man realized that Jesus answered the Sadducees very cleverly.

Actually, this is not such a stupid question at all, because if we take into account the multitude of laws that the Jews had to live under, it is a question that might have been

on every Jew's lips. If only there was one single law that could replace all the other laws!

Moses received the law of God, the ten commandments, on the mountain for the first time. Every Jew had to live strictly according to this law in order to be at all eligible for eternal life. Later, a long series of laws were added, such as what they could eat and what they couldn't. The laws of purity spelled out clearly what you may and may not touch, and what you may and may not do. And then the Pharisees added a bag full of extra laws on top of that, just in case. There were a full 613 stipulations apart from the 10 commandments! And we haven't even talked about all the sacrifices and rituals. There was almost a sacrifice for every situation. For the ordinary Jew these things were simply too much to comprehend. Even for this Scribe it has now become one too many! Isn't there maybe just one single commandment that can replace all of them?

Jesus immediately sees that this man has no ulterior motives: "The Lord our God is the only Lord," He begins. It is very important to understand that there is only ONE God. This also distinguishes the Jewish Religion from all other religions.

Jesus now goes on to take out two commandments that are equally important - one cannot be read without the other. The first comes from Deuteronomy 6:4-5, which says that you must give your complete devotion to God alone. You must therefore love God with your whole being. The second comes from Leviticus 19:18, which says that people should love each other, just as they love themselves.

The question is: How can two commandments replace all the others? Is it ever possible? Then what about the ten commandments? Is it now annulled? No, not at all! If we look carefully at the ten commandments, we see that the first four deal with how we should worship God. If you

truly love God, it is only natural that you will worship Him alone and that there will be no other gods in your life. Nothing will come between you and God, because you love Him. And of course you will honour His wonderful and holy Name! You will not use His Name lightly or mockingly, especially not as a swear-word (Oh my God!) Everything can be summed up as love for God.

The last six commandments say exactly the same thing in relation to our fellow-man. If you love him, you will respect his property and theft will not be an option. You will not hurt him in any way, let alone kill him. Adultery is something that causes bitter pain. This will not be an option either! And of course, you will not say anything bad about anyone else and certainly not gossip about him, because this can cause great harm and pain. And your parents? You will show them (and all your superiors) the necessary reverence and respect. It all comes down to loving your neighbour.

However, Jesus did not only state this matter in theory. He practically lived it! He actually went out of His way to live out that love of neighbour in all areas. In doing so, He set an example for His followers of what true charity looks like. He went the extra mile and sacrificed Himself for other people. He healed the sick, fed people, taught multitudes. He was humble, not only to scribes and Pharisees like Nicodemus, but also to ordinary people, even the outcasts of society! He threw everything overboard, even a good reputation, by associating with a despicable Samaritan woman of bad reputation and hated tax collectors and their dubious sinner friends.

This scribe understood very well what Jesus said. He even understood that it is more important to love your neighbour than all the sacrifices to God. "You are not far from the Kingdom of God." Jesus said to him. This man may have understood what it was about better than even Jesus' Apostles. There was only one thing that stood in his way to get

eternal life, one simple step: He had to believe in Jesus. Did he ever take that step? We can only guess.

In all seriousness, I want to ask you, dear reader, whether YOU have taken that final step? Many who are reading this meditation this morning have not yet come this far. One single step.....

Prayer:

Lord, I pray for everyone who reads this meditation this morning, who has not yet said "Yes" to Jesus. Please put an urgency in every heart to accept Jesus' offer of Eternal Life.

Spiritual Pride

Mark 12:35-44

Eventually the wise men began to realize that they could not question Jesus, and they left Him alone. So Jesus now had a chance to use His last few days to teach the disciples and other followers in the temple.

You will still remember that Jesus healed the blind Bartimaeus shortly before? (Mark 10:46-52) Bartimaeus sat by the side of the road and, to everyone's frustration, kept shouting: "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" These people who are now sitting around Jesus at the temple, surely still remember that incident, because how can you ever forget such a touching healing? But did they ever really understand what Bartimaeus said? And what about Palm Sunday, when they already waved palms to Jesus and sang: "Praise the Son of David!" Did they understand then? Moreover, the

scribes also teach the people that the Messiah is the Son of David. Jesus does not want them to get the wrong impression about that expression, that He is the Son of David, so He explains it to them.

One could easily misunderstand that the Messiah as Son of David might be subordinate to His ancestor David. So Jesus explains that this is definitely not the case. He quotes from Psalm 110:1 to make it clear to them what it is about. Originally, the Psalm was written to describe how the Lord would establish David's Kingdom on Mount Zion. But later it was also understood that it would describe the final victory of the Messiah. If that's the case, something doesn't quite make sense, because David then calls his own Son "Lord." The important point that Jesus wants to make is that the Messiah is not simply a very special king, as most Jews believed, but that He is in fact the Son of God, and that He is much greater than the great king David.

In the second part, Jesus warns against the hypocrisy of the scribes. We almost get the impression that Jesus has his knife in for these hypocritical men. However, that is not the case. Their religion in no way gave the glory to God. It was self-centred and the emphasis was on their own prestige. Everyone had to notice their beautiful clothes, and they had to get places of honour at great festivals and in the synagogue. They could recite the most beautiful, long, impressive prayers, and this while they robbed the widows of their property, which is an abomination in God's eyes, according to Exodus 22:22-24.

Did Jesus only want to warn the people to stay away from the scribes? It wouldn't make sense! Jesus wanted to warn people not to walk the same path as those "wise" men. For a believer, it is very easy to fall into the same trap as the scribes, especially if you have already advanced a good distance on the path of faith. You already know the Bible pretty well, and you know what kind of

meaning to attach to passages of Scripture. Your faith is strong, and you manage to renounce the troublesome sins. You have learned to pray well, especially in public. But now you start to get a spiritual pride!

You feel sorry for the poor wretches who still struggle with the basic things of faith, and you start to look down on them, after all you have progressed! You make sure that when you fast the day, that everyone who matters will know about it. After all, it's nice to get the attention! You make sure that people notice that you give your full tithe, and not a cent less to the church! And on every occasion that you can pray in public, you pray so that especially the poor guys who have not yet learned to pray properly can take note of what a prayer should actually sound like.

Meanwhile, you do things on the sly, where no one who knows you will see it!

It sounds terribly drastic, but it is a danger for every believer. We must watch and pray to follow Jesus' example and remain humble at

all times. Remember: if we do something good, we do it not for people or our own self-image, but only for God!

Then Jesus sits down near the offering box and He watches how people throw money into it. Many wealthy people pour in large sums of money. But then a widow arrives and throws in only two small coins. Jesus calls the men closer: "She poured in more than all the other people," remarked Jesus.

"Master, now how can Master say such a thing?"

Then Jesus explains that this woman gave everything she had to the Lord from her heart. She could have easily kept one coin back for herself, but she didn't. She is an example of true devotion to God. Unlike the scribes of whom Jesus had just spoken, her devotion is truly sincere. She couldn't impress anyone with her two coins. What she did, she did because she believed that it was for the Lord alone. Maybe she even felt ashamed that someone might see how little

she put in. However, she did her duty for the Kingdom of God!

This is what the Lord asks of us: to give everything to Him without making a fuss about it.

Prayer:

Lord, I am guilty before You, see myself as better or more advanced on the path of faith than others. Then I forget that everything is only grace!

The Temple Destroyed

Mark 13:1-13

For the umpteenth time in the past week, Peter marvels at the temple buildings and especially those giant stones that have been cut so perfectly by master craftsmen. The temple building towers over Peter's head, and he has to crane his neck to see the top. "Lord, just look at those impressive stones, and the magnificent buildings!" Every time he looks at it, it brings tears of pure wonder to his eyes. How he grew to love this architectural marvel! That this is the work of Herod, he prefers to put out of his mind. "That must be Solomon's temple! Herod just rebuilt it, didn't he?"

Then Jesus blows Peter's bubble with a bucket of ice-cold water: "Do you see these big buildings? No stone will be left unturned here - everything will be demolished."

Peter's mind does not want to process it. It's totally impossible! No one can totally destroy such a building! His Master is definitely wrong this time!

How wrong Peter was! A mere thirty years later, the Jews revolted against the Romans. A bloody war breaks out, and three years later the Roman general Titus takes the city. The temple is also in his sights, and in AD 70. the beautiful building is completely destroyed, so that literally not one stone is left standing on another. Today there is a mosque on the spot where the magnificent temple once adorned Mount Moriah.

Later that day Jesus and the twelve men walk back to Bethany. When they reach the top of the Mount of Olives, Jesus turns around and they sit down to rest a bit and enjoy the view. From where they sit, they look over the city. For the first time in a long time, the men have some time alone with Jesus. In front of them, across the Kidron Valley, stands the temple building. They look

down on the huge complex, and once again Peter is filled with the breathtaking majesty of the beautiful buildings. But Jesus' words from a while ago bother him. Could this be the end of the world that Jesus spoke of? "Rabbi, please tell us when these things will happen? And how will we know if this will happen? What signs are we going to see?"

Then Jesus explains to them that there will be very great times of crisis. There will be wars, uprisings and all kinds of terrifying things. People are going to come up with all kinds of rumours that the end has come. But they should not be deceived by that. All the disasters, earthquakes and famines are not the final events - however, they are all birth pains of the second coming.

However, things are going to get very difficult for them in the future. They will go through a time of cruel persecution because they dare to preach the gospel. They will be brought to justice and even the synagogues will persecute them. They will be beaten and all

kinds of terrible things will happen to them. It will go so badly, that their own family will turn against them and deliver them to justice. For any Jew this was terrible news, because family ties were very strong. You simply did not betray your family - you stand by each other through thick and thin!

However, the believers must seize all this persecution and hardship as an opportunity to spread the gospel. How wonderful that many of them did do it later. When Peter was accused before the Jewish Council, he used the opportunity to preach to them. When Paul ended up in prison, he talked to every soldier guarding him. Moreover, he writes letters by the dozens - letters that two thousand years later still encourage and teach and comfort and lead millions upon millions of believers around the world to Jesus.

However, there is also a very big bonus waiting for the men. None of them were learned men. It was only the rich who could afford to be trained in things like eloquence.

Peter, for example, was a simple fisherman who just kept saying the wrong things. However, something wonderful will happen: They will receive the Holy Spirit to help them when they end up in situations where they have to talk about the gospel. He will put the words in their mouths. Not only will they be able to defend themselves in a court of law in front of all the lawyers, but they will also be able to carry the gospel there, and thus spread it further!

How wonderful that the Holy Spirit is still available to every believer today. This meditation comes to you today, not because I am such a good writer or because I understand the Bible so terribly well. It speaks to you because the Holy Spirit uses me as His author. I try as best I can to listen to what He tells me, and I write in the full conviction that this message comes from Him. And no, I am by no means "special"! Every believer gets the gift of being able to experience the intervention of the Holy Spirit. But everyone experiences it differently.

However, the most important thing is: listen to what He tells you and carry out His instructions with joy!

Prayer:

Lord, thank you for giving us the Holy Spirit to guide and teach us. Make us willing to do what You tell us.

The Great Oppression

Mark 13:14-23

The prophetic address is probably one of the most difficult passages in Mark to understand, and there are many different opinions about exactly what Jesus meant when He predicted these things, and how we should understand them. However, there is a basic message, that there are many great hardships ahead before Jesus' Second Coming.

At about the same time when Mark wrote this Gospel, 67 to 70 AD, there was a very big crisis in Palestine. It was the time of the Jewish revolt, and the Romans simply did not tolerate it. They made war against the Jews, and I can imagine that horrible things happened, and there was a lot of suffering for the Jewish people.

In verse 14, Jesus says that everyone should flee to the mountains when "you see 'The Awful Horror' standing in the place where he should not be." In Daniel 9 we read of a similar description. Daniel's prophecy was about the Syrian king Antiochus IV who had the temple in Jerusalem desecrated 250 years before Mark's Gospel. He had sacrifices made there to the god Zeus and pork was even sacrificed in the temple for the idols. At that time it was called: The abomination of desolation.

However, Jesus is talking about something else. This will be the beginning of the tribulation. In verses 15-20 we see how bad this tribulation will be. During the Roman-Jewish war it was very bad, as Jesus described and the Christians had to flee Jerusalem in a hurry to a small town called Pella.

As it happens during such situations, there are usually the prophets of doom who announce that it is now the end of the world.

Among the Christians, there are those who in such times claim that the second coming is now here, and then they often even give a date when it will happen. Someone once wrote to me that she got a terrible e-mail from some pastor who made claims about an unknown planet called Niburu that would pass so close to the earth in December 2012 that it would destroy the earth and let it capsize (or something) and everything would be destroyed. According to the preacher, NASA knew all about this, but Obama forbade them to leak anything because it could make everyone panic. According to him, this would also be the end of the earth, and the Second Coming. It's funny that his allegations came just after the movie "2012" was made!

Of course, as you know, December 2012 came and went, and nothing came of his predictions!

The worst, however, is when someone starts claiming that he is actually the Christ who

has already come. "For false christs and false prophets will arise, and they will do signs and wonders to, if possible, cause the elected to go astray," warns Jesus.

Now I once received an e-mail that describes such a false christ. At first I thought it was another one of those junk mails, but then I went to ascertain the true facts. I even tracked down the man's website. He is somewhere in America, and he has a very large following. He claims that he is the Christ and that Christians are making a big mistake by looking for Jesus elsewhere. I felt sick after reading this!

What are we to make of all this? How should we understand Jesus' prophetic speech? Yes indeed, Jesus probably warned the Jews about the Roman war and that they would suffer heavily. But the prophetic reason also has eternal significance and it is still as relevant today as it was at that time. Jesus' return is imminent, but we simply do not know when it will happen. Jesus' warning

implies that His second coming will be preceded by a very great tribulation of Christian believers. In Mark's time it had already begun, and we know that later it got even much worse when Nero exterminated the Christians in Rome in disgusting and cruel ways. They were fed to lions and they were even smeared with tar and set on fire to serve as street torches.

Today, Christians are still brutally persecuted, especially in some Muslim countries where Christians must worship in secret or face prison. And if a Muslim converts there, it is practically a foregone conclusion that he will be beheaded if someone finds out. Can you believe that such things still happen in our modern times? Yes, even here in free South Africa, a Muslim who converts is not sure of his life. Not only is he totally excluded from his family and the community, but he is persecuted - even hunted!

The Second Coming of Jesus is near - everything points to it. However, we do not

know when this will happen. However, what is even more important is that the "coming" for each of us happens the day you die. It can often be very unexpected. It could even be today or tomorrow. The question is, are you ready for it?

Prayer:

Lord, thank you that I can look forward to Your return. Come soon, Lord Jesus, come soon!

The Son Comes Again!

Mark 13:24-37

In the third part of the Prophetic speech, the terrible tribulation before the second coming shifts to Jesus' second coming itself. This is the day that every believer looks forward to with great anticipation!

What will happen on that day? The Second Coming is preceded by a few events that certainly cannot be described as "natural phenomena": the sun will darken and so will the moon at the same time. The whole firmament will be disrupted, and the stars will fall from heaven. Soon after, Jesus will appear with His angels in glory.

All the emphasis now shifts from the hardship, tribulation and persecution - thus human experiences - to Jesus. Another very big shift in emphasis is that He is no longer the Suffering Servant, but His power and

majesty are depicted here. Up to this point, Jesus was the suffering Messiah who came to serve humanity and to give Himself as a ransom for the redemption of lost sinners. But at His Second Coming we see the true glory of the Son. Indeed it is still for the benefit of mankind, because He sends His angels to gather all the believers from every corner of the earth.

The question on everyone's lips is of course: when will it happen?

Verse 31 emphasizes that the Second Coming is an absolute reality. "Heaven and earth will come to an end, but my words will certainly not come to an end." So says Jesus. His word is trustworthy. However, the fact is that the Second Coming is a very big surprise and no one knows when it will happen. "Only the Father knows," Jesus emphasizes. But He presses on their hearts that they should expect it soon. The "signs of the times" will show them that the Second Coming is near: "Learn this lesson from the

fig tree: As soon as its branches begin to soften and put forth leaves, you will know that summer is near. So you too, when you see these things happening, will know that it is near, at the door." (v. 28)

Jesus wants to instill in His followers an expectation of His return: "Watch out and be vigilant!" What does it mean? Would that mean that they should sit down and wait for the Second Coming to take place? No, not at all! They must continue with their task with all diligence. He explains this with the help of the image of a man who goes away and leaves his slaves in charge of the household. They do not know when he will return. What do the slaves do in the meantime? Do they just sit around and do nothing while they wait for the owner? No, definitely not! They continue with their day job and take care of the household. When the owner returns unexpectedly one day, he will naturally find everything in order as he would like to see it. There won't be another last-minute scramble

to quickly get the place in order when he stops outside the door?

In the same way, believers must be ready at any moment for His Second Coming, because it can happen at any time.

But that was two thousand years ago, and we are still waiting! Many people have grown tired of waiting. The problem is that many believers no longer have a Second Coming expectation and that you rather expect your own death than the Second Coming of Jesus. It impoverishes one's faith life, as well as your relationship with God. We must begin again to look forward with excitement to His return.

However, we must be very careful not to come up with all kinds of speculations about Jesus' return. I have seen so many times how people manipulate certain Bible verses to link a certain date or period to the Second Coming, as is the case of December 2012 for example. And then on top of that there is the Antichrist being identified and everything that

goes with it. I want to repeat what I said above: No one knows when the time will come! Jesus makes it very, very clear! The fact is that we must be vigilant and live accordingly!

The question is: how does the Lord expect us to live today for a Second Coming? First of all, of course, He wants us to live according to His will. We must become estranged to sin and live in love with God and our fellow-man. But the important thing is that we will actively wait for His return. Active, in the sense that we will spread His Gospel to anyone who will listen. Precisely because Jesus' Second Coming is already so close, there must be an urgency with us to carry out the Gospel. There are so many lost souls out there - so many beautiful people who would be lost if Jesus were to come today!

What is the gospel message that we must preach? Of course in the first place of Jesus' salvation, and that that salvation is only in Jesus and no one else. But we must not

make it a sweet little message that implies that if you believe in Jesus then everything will be just fine with you. There are implications if you want to follow Jesus. The path may be strewn with persecution and hardship. But the end is something I would never trade for anything on earth!

Prayer:

Lord, please keep me vigilant every day and ready for Jesus' return. And cultivate in me an urgency to preach the Gospel at all times!

Jesus Is Anointed

Mark 14:1-9

It was two days before Easter, Jesus' last Easter as Man on earth. Immediately after the Passover came the Feast of Unleavened Bread. This festival lasted seven days, during which all leaven was banned from the Jews' homes. It was symbolic of a period of purity. However, Jesus would not have been able to take part in this festival, because by then He would have already been crucified. At this point, the chief priests and scribes were desperate to devise a plan to execute Jesus. However, they decide that it should wait until after the festival, because there would be too many people in Jerusalem during the festival, and they were very well aware of Jesus' following among the people. Little did they know that their problem would be solved much sooner than they expected, from the ranks of Jesus' own inner circle!

Peter and his eleven colleagues visit the home of Simon the Leper, in the village of Bethany on the hill just outside Jerusalem. The custom was that when a meal was served to people, an appetizer would be served first, but only after a slave had washed the guests' feet. Afterwards, the guests were pampered by sprinkling fragrant perfume. Only a single drop was enough to fill the room with a delicious aroma.

Peter is no longer used to such pampering. Three years of hardship with his Master had deprived him of these kinds of luxuries. Often they even had to sleep in the field and maybe only eat a piece of dry bread!

Then Peter sees the woman enter the room. His interest is immediately piqued when he sees the expensive alabaster jar in her hands. What would she want to do with it? Sprinkle a drop or two over each one? Whatever is in that jar must be very precious! It must have cost a fortune! There is a peculiar expression on the woman's face,

almost something like sadness. This scares Peter! She hardly even notices the men in the room, her focus is only on Jesus as she walks straight towards Him. "What is she planning?" Peter still wonders. She went to stand behind Jesus.

All eyes are on her. You can hear a pin drop! Everyone holds their breath - what is she going to do? She breaks off the thin neck of the jar, and immediately the heavenly scent of nard oil fills the entire room. Slowly she raised the jar above Jesus' head, and then she began to pour it's contents over Jesus' hair. Peter wants to jump up: "That's enough!" he wants to shout, but it's as if a hand is holding him back. His mouth hangs open shamelessly as he watches as the thin stream of peppery liquid seeps from the jar and drenches Jesus' hair with the precious oil from India. The overpowering scent of nard oil fills every corner of the house from floor to ceiling.

Only after the very last drop has drained from the flask, Judas flies up. He is furious. "How could you!" he yells at the woman. "Don't you realize what you're doing?" Judas is beside himself with indignation. "That vial of oil could have been sold for three hundred silver coins! We could have given that money to the poor, and now you come and waste it!" The other men agree vehemently.

Jesus silences them, and explains that He will not be with them much longer. This woman anointed His body in advance for His burial. Peter feels like a worm! No one asked the Master how He felt about this! Everyone just assumed.....

"You will always have the poor with you," explains Jesus. He sees their ignorance and the fact that they still cannot comprehend that He will be executed within the next few days. With melancholy He also looks at Judas. How hard He tried to make Judas understand the gospel. The man hardened his heart. He was disillusioned when he

realized that Jesus was not the same Messiah that he would have liked.

Jesus looks at the woman with compassion, and then He turns to the men: "Everywhere in the whole world wherever the gospel is preached, it will be told, in memory of her, of what she did."

It's two thousand years later, and the woman's selfless act that day still fills every believer with wonder and compassion. She gave her all for Jesus, without thinking of the consequences. Do you and I ever ask ourselves what Jesus would have wanted? So many times we do things - often very noble things - but we don't even seek the will of the Lord before we do them. Often the Lord asks us to do something that makes no sense to us at all, something we don't understand. I am very sure that this woman did not understand why she had to anoint Jesus. But she was obedient when God laid it on her heart. The men's minds told them

that the money had to be used practically, but that was not what the Lord wanted.

The Lord asks us to listen carefully to the whisperings of the Holy Spirit. We can only hear His voice if we truly become silent before the Lord and live in imitation of Jesus.

Prayer:

Lord, please help me to distinguish between my own will and Your will!

Judas – God's Pawn?

Mark 14:10-16

Many questions have been asked about Judas' betrayal, questions without simple answers! Was it something Judas did on the spur of the moment? No, it was indeed planned! Even before that night of the last Easter meal, he always went to offer his services to the chief priests. Moreover, he was never forced or talked into, but he did it of his own free will. Of course they were delighted, because suddenly their biggest problem was solved, how to finally arrest Jesus. And this from a most surprising and totally unexpected source.

It must have been terrible for Jesus to choose Judas as an Apostle along with the other eleven. He must have known before that time that Judas would betray Him. For the next three years He had to work with Judas and He had to teach him lovingly,

knowing that Judas would commit that abominable act.

But why exactly Judas? Why one of his inner circle disciples? Why couldn't it just be an outsider? It had to be one of His confidants to make Jesus' suffering so much worse. Remember: Jesus had to bear the punishment for the sins of all mankind. If it were just a light punishment, it would not really have meaning. Jesus' suffering already began at His birth, when He, the King of the universe had to see the first light of life in a smelly, dirty stable without any luxury and glory. Jesus' suffering was certainly not just the short time on the cross. It also included all the humiliation He had to go through, as well as the rejection, false accusations, the agony in Gethsemane and the humiliation that one of His own disciples betrayed Him. Therefore it had to be one of the Apostles whom He had trained with so much compassion and love for three years!

The big question is whether Judas was just a pawn in God's hand? Was he appointed by God as the one who had to betray Jesus? Should he then simply had done as God commanded him?

No, very definitely not! God in His omniscience knew in advance that Judas would betray Jesus and precisely for that reason Jesus chose Judas as an Apostle. Judas was certainly eager to follow Jesus at first. But presumably he, like many other Jews, was under the impression that Jesus would be a Messiah who would free them from Roman domination. When he noticed that Jesus behaved completely differently, Judas probably became discouraged. Jesus did not act with violence, but rather with love.

Judas was no longer heart and soul in this disciple thing. We also know that Judas was no angel. His own fellow Apostles suspected him of having long fingers, and of having let the money that was supposed to provide for

their subsistence disappear and put it in his own pocket.

The question we must involuntarily also ask is whether God has lost control? From what we have seen above, we cannot help but admit that God was in full control the whole time, because Judas acted exactly as God knew he would. Now the stage was set for the final events in this gripping true life drama.

But first there was something else that had to be completed before Jesus would make the great sacrifice, an extremely important legacy that He had to give. It would not only be for His disciples of that time, but also for all His followers in the future. For that He needed a large room in Jerusalem. But how would He obtain such a room there? But here too God was in full control. He prearranged the perfect room. Jesus simply sent a few men with a specific assignment to look out for a man who would carry a pitcher of water. It's a very unusual assignment, because men

never carried jugs of water around in that time, after all, it was women's work! So when they saw the man with the jug on his shoulder, they knew! Everything was meticulously planned in advance.

The men followed Jesus' instructions carefully, and followed the man with the jar to where he entered a house. There they knocked and asked the owner where the room was where they could eat the Easter meal with their Teacher. It was a strange man, but immediately he knew what they were talking about. He took them to an upper room that had already been prepared for their Easter meal. How did he know? The men's mouths hung open in astonishment!

Immediately they set to work preparing for the most important Easter meal of their lives. It would be a meal that would be packed with drama. It would be a meal that would cause them great shock and pain. But it would also be one they would never forget! Years after that, they would always think back with great

compassion to this meal, the very last one with their Master!

Today we know that nothing happens outside of God's control. He is in full control at all times, even if it sometimes seems otherwise to us. But we can also know that you and I are not just pawns in God's hand. Each person has his own free will to choose and do. Judas chose wrongly. Make sure you choose correctly!

Prayer:

Lord, thank you that today I can realize once again that You are in full control!

The Easter meal

Mark 14:17-25

The delicious aroma of roast lamb fills the upper room when the men walk into the upper room that Thursday night. The lamb was slaughtered that same morning and the blood was sacrificed as part of the Passover. The thirteen men lay comfortably around the table. It had been a hard day at the temple where Jesus taught people all day long, and everyone is tired. How wonderful it is to be able to taste the luxury of being able to stretch out like this and enjoy a meal in peace for a change.

All the Easter ceremonies are second nature to the men, they do it every year from childhood. The large dish of roast lamb stands in the centre and the men break off pieces of bread and dip them in the fragrant sauce.

Suddenly Jesus' face becomes stern: "I tell you: One of you will betray Me, one who eats with Me."

A shocked silence falls over the room. Everyone is too afraid to say a word. Surely that can't be true? Who would want to commit such a treacherous act? After all, it's only the twelve Apostles who are here in the room with Jesus.... No! He must be making a mistake!

Startled, the men look at each other. Peter breaks the silence: "Surely it's not me, Master?"

Jesus looks at him sympathetically. "Definitely not me!" declares John, very sure of himself. He would never do such a treacherous thing!

"Could it be me?" Disbelief radiates from Thomas's face in shock.

"This is one of you," Jesus says, and everyone can see that His heart is very

heavy, "the one who puts his hand into the dish with Me."

"But then everyone does it!" Peter thinks. "We all put our bread in the dish with Him!"

The men grumble among themselves, they don't understand at all now. Which of them could be the traitor? You can't trust anyone these days either!

"The Son of Man is going, yes, as it is written, but woe to that man by whom the Son of Man is betrayed. It would have been better for him if he had not been born." Jesus' words leave everyone speechless!

No one notices that Judas goes white in the face. He feels sick, but he dare not show it. The men will kill him if they know what he is planning. When he looks up, he sees Peter's face. He quickly looks down again - he is afraid of that man. Peter can sometimes act so impulsively, you never know where you stand with him. Judas avoids the others' eyes. A dark cloud descends over the men.

Nobody says a word. They continue to eat in silence, but suddenly the food has now become unpalatable!

It is Jesus who breaks a long, unbearable silence. He picks up a loaf of bread and after saying the prayer of blessing, He breaks the bread into pieces and gives each of the men a piece: "Take, this is my body." His words echo through the room and through everyone's mind. Peter feels sick, these sound like death words to him. Then Jesus takes the cup of wine and as He holds it up He prays again and utters a prayer of thanksgiving. After they say "Amen" in unison, Jesus hands over the cup so that everyone can drink from it. "This is My blood," Jesus' shocking words come. Judas almost chokes on the wine: "What am I doing?" it screams through his body. "It's too late now!" he thinks bitterly. "There is no turning back! What has to happen, has to happen!"

Vaguely, Judas hears Jesus' words continue, about His blood being shed and the covenant being sealed and that His blood is being shed for many people, but he wants to cover his ears. He doesn't want to hear anymore. This is not the Messiah he expected! He wants a Messiah who will stand up against the Romans! He wants a Messiah who is strong and will lead the people to victory. He has heard enough about dying and suffering and humility. "Excuse me," mutters Judas as he gets up and walks out of the room. All eyes are on him, but no one dares say a word.

For the men, that Easter meal began as just another Easter meal. But it turned out to be one that neither of them could ever forget. Yes, even today it is one of the most dramatic and sacred moments for believers around the world to be able to commemorate that meal of Jesus with His disciples. To be able to taste the bread and roll it around in your mouth, you see in your mind's eye how our Saviour was broken; how He was cruelly

abused; how He was mocked; that crown woven of thorn branches pressed into His scalp so that the blood poured down His face. It feels to me like the bread can never finish, and I swallow it hard. But how hard did Jesus swallow? The whippings, how He writhed in pain! And the nails, huge, horrible nails that were cruelly cut through His hands and feet and tore His flesh.....

And when I drink the wine, it has a bitter-sweet taste, because then I see in my mind how my Saviour's blood was shed. For me, wretched man! How hard He had to drink from that cup.....

Prayer:

Lord, never let me forget what You had to go through to pay for my sins.....

On the way to Gethsemane

Mark 14: 26-33

After the disturbing Easter meal, they sing a hymn. However, there is no praise in it for Peter, it rather feels like a funeral song! He is furious! Yes, it can only be Judas who will betray Jesus, such vermin!

They pack up and leave to look for a place to sleep for the night. They discovered a nice spot on the slopes of the Mount of Olives in the garden of Gethsemane. They have come to sleep here several times. The twelve had already become accustomed to sleeping somewhere in the veldt on the hard ground. As they follow the footpath in the dark through the Kidron Valley, Jesus is the first to break the unbearable silence. But His words cut through Peter like a knife: "You will all become faithless." In the dark, Peter tries to see Jesus' face - he cannot believe what he hears! However, Jesus continues

undisturbed: "it is written: 'I will strike down the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered'."

Peter wants to cover his ears. "No! It cannot be!" he wants to shout. How can the Master's faithful followers stop believing? Of course they will stand together!

In his imagination he sees a flock of sheep walking with their shepherd, and then suddenly a lion leaps out of the thickets and tears the shepherd to pieces. Dejected, he sees in his mind's eye how the sheep scatter in all directions and disappear. Is this what the Master means? Will the twelve scatter like sheep without a shepherd? He shakes his head violently to try to get rid of the picture.

Peter is so upset that he doesn't even hear when Jesus says: "After I am resurrected, I will go before you to Galilee."

Only much later would he remember those comforting words. Only then could Peter look

back on that evening with a smile. How great, how infinitely great is God's grace! Even if His disciples totally let Him down - He will never let them down! Yes, when Peter thinks back, he realizes that Jesus had to walk that lonely path alone without His friends. After the resurrection, He would once again establish a relationship with them and restore the entire beautiful relationship. Yes, only then did Peter realize that Jesus is truly the long-awaited Shepherd who would lovingly take care of His sheep forever!

But now Peter is trying to come to terms with the biggest crisis ever in his life. How can the Master accuse them so terribly? He, Peter would never allow such a terrible thing to happen! "Master, even if they all stumble, I, Peter, will never do that in eternity!" Peter is bitterly upset. What does the Master think of him then? He doesn't have a scared hair on his head! He will stand by the Master through thick and thin, no matter what happens!

The next moment, Jesus' words cut through his soul, "Peter, I tell you: Today, tonight, before the rooster crows twice, you will deny Me three times."

Peter wants to cry! How could the Master say such a terrible thing about him? "No! No! No!" it screams through his confused mind. "Master....." Peter's voice trembles with emotion. "Even if I have to die with You, I will certainly not deny You!"

"Yes, yes," all the others assent. "We will stand together as one man, and even if we also have to die, we will stay with You every moment and assist You until the end!"

There is not much talking on the steep path up the Mount of Olives. The men are tired, it was a very long, hard and emotionally exhausting day. When they arrive at their sleeping place in Gethsemane, the men fall to the ground gratefully. But still Jesus is not done for the day: "Stay here until I have finished praying." They grumble. They are tired and sleepy and now the Master wants to

pray again! And they have to stay awake? How can He expect this from them?

"Peter, you, James and John please come with Me." The men sigh heavily, but they walk together. A little way from the others, Jesus gives them a small glimpse into His terrible struggle: "My soul is deeply grieved, even to death."

The three men with Him are not only the leaders in the group, but all three have already confirmed on occasion that they would be absolutely faithful to Jesus. Two weeks before, James and John had said that they would be willing to drink the cup of suffering of Jesus with Him, and earlier that evening Peter had emphasized that he would never deny Jesus. But are they really able to live up to their loyalty? Now is the time to prove it!

"Stay here and watch."

Will they ever be able to stay awake? Will they be able to stand firm while their Master

wrestles in prayer? Will they really follow Him to the end? Tomorrow we read on further.

Prayer:

Lord, when I see how the Apostles acted, then I realize that they were wrong. But then I also realize that my own life often looks just like that of the disciples. Please forgive me Lord!

Jesus' Prayer Struggle

Mark 14:32-40

It is the longest night ever in Peter's life, where he sits with John and James against the scabby trunk of a gnarled old olive tree. He is tired to the core. A little way from them he sees Jesus kneeling on the ground in the faint moonlight. The entire evening's events are running through his head again. The shock of Jesus announcing that one of them would betray Him. He sees Judas' face again, ashen pale, guilty! It can only be Judas! Yes, he should have known that! He has never really been able to trust Judas very well! There's just something about that man.....

He hears his Master praying softly, and he can hear that Jesus is going through terrible spiritual suffering: "Abba Father, all things are possible for You." Jesus' pleading words floated to Peter on the cool night air. "Take

this cup away from Me - however not what I want, but what You want."

For Peter, it feels as if a dagger is piercing his heart, to hear his Master plead like that. He hears the raw pain in Jesus' voice, and it hurts terribly. Tears ran down Peter's cheeks. How his Master has suffered in the past few days! Every day he could see Jesus being spiritually exhausted. The tension was unbearable at times. But still Jesus joyfully continued to preach and teach people. There is an urgency in Him to finish as much as possible in a very short time, as if He only had a few days left to live.

And the incessant chief priests and Pharisees and Herodians! If it's not one, then it's the other! They are like little mongrels that just bark and bite, at one's ankles. What are they trying to do? The fire of hatred and jealousy constantly glows in their eyes. These men have only one thing in mind: to arrest Jesus and get Him in prison, just as it happened with John. Poor John!

The sleep overtakes Peter and he begins to dream, the most terrible nightmares. "Simon! Simon, are you sleeping? Were you unable to watch for one hour?"

With a heart beating wildly, Peter wakes up with a fright. "Sorry Master!" He feels very guilty. How could he sleep while Jesus wrestled with God?

Now the other two are also awake, and half asleep they hear Jesus admonishing them worriedly: "Watch and pray, so that you do not come into temptation. The spirit is indeed willing, but the flesh is weak." And with that He turns to continue wrestling with God.

Peter looked accusingly at the other two: "You guys swore the other day that you would drink the Master's cup of suffering with Him. When you were sleeping just now, I heard him pleading with God to take away that cup of suffering. It was heartbreaking to hear Him like that."

“What kind of friends are we? We are all failing Him!” John feels bitterly guilty. Then a deathly silence descends over them as they lie with pain in their hearts and listen to Jesus struggling and writhing in prayer. But the flesh is too weak for these three, and soon they fall asleep again.

In total solitude, forsaken even by His most intimate friends, Jesus, the Son of God, struggles through His greatest hour of crisis. Will we ever be able to comprehend the true extent of His suffering? Will we ever be able to understand what Jesus really went through that night? Luke tells us that Jesus physically sweated blood that night. Drops of blood fell to the ground as he struggled in prayer. Even though he was the Son of God, he was also fully human at the same time, with the same fears and feelings as any other human being. What made it so much worse is the fact that He knew exactly what would await Him in those next hours, the terrible humiliation and the unbearable pain when the soldiers whipped Him. I was terribly upset when I

watched the movie "Passion of Christ". It was especially the scene where they whipped Jesus, where I couldn't look any longer. Many people objected to those scenes. But isn't that just what really happened? And Jesus knew exactly what he was letting himself in for.

Then the crucifixion - total abandonment of friends; abandonment of family; forsaken..... from God! He would have to hang in the most excruciating pain imaginable, His joints shattered by thick iron nails.

The sins of all mankind would descend upon Him; He had to bear the punishment for the sins of the whole earth.

And His friends lie and sleep.....

Mark wants to encourage every reader of this Gospel, including you and me, to be a better disciple than these men were. To watch and pray that we will not be tempted. This call from Jesus to the men, echoed through the garden of Gethsemane, echoed throughout

the world, echoed throughout the ages so that you and I must also take note today. No, not just taking note, but that we are truly going to do what Jesus asks. The anguish He suffered that night was also for me and also for you. Are we truly grateful for it?

Prayer:

Lord, I will never be able to comprehend how great Your suffering truly was. But I want to live gratefully before You. Help me to be able to live out my gratitude practically!

Betrayal in the Night

Mark 14:41-51

Peter is once again roused from a restless sleep when Jesus comes to the three men the third time: "Are you still sleeping and resting?" Peter felt as if he could shrink with shame. Then he becomes ice cold at Jesus' announcement: "Enough! The hour has come. Behold, the Son of Man is being delivered into the hands of sinners."

Now James and John are also wide awake. "Master?" Johannes hesitates with a question he might rather not ask.

"Get up, let's go! Look, the one who betrays Me is near!"

Torch lights floats up between the trees. Footsteps of many people, muffled as if they were stalking someone. Peter' heart is beating wildly in his chest. "Now is the time to protect the Master at all costs! I have said

that I will stand by Him through thick and thin. I'm going to prove him wrong!"

When the procession appears before them between the olive trees, Peter immediately recognizes the man walking in front. "You lowly scum!" he wants to shout. "You viper brood!" But he doesn't make a sound. Helplessly he watches as Judas walks straight to Jesus. Peter feels like he wants to explode! Suddenly the silence is also gone and everyone speaks at once. Orders are shouted, and chaos reigns. The other men are also awake, startled by all the noise, and they come running to see what is happening.

Jesus is just standing there, like a Lamb meekly waiting to be slaughtered. Judas greets Jesus, stuttering: "Rabbi..." He has nothing more to say to his Teacher of the past three years. Jesus looks him full in the eyes - a look that tells Judas that He feels so deeply sorry for him. He exchanged eternal life for a few coins. Judas' hands tremble uncontrollably when he kisses Jesus. He

turns around. No one notices the tears in his eyes. Hastily he disappears among the people.

The whole lot that came with Judas rush forward to grab Jesus, a mixture of men, armed to the teeth. The few temple guards are the only ones who seem a bit organized. They approach with drawn swords. The rest wave sticks and canes around wildly to show their displeasure and their aggression.

Peter has just had enough! He draws his sword and charges wildly at the group. Today is the day he will save his Master from the hands of this bunch of villains, he will fight to the bitter end! He swings his sword wildly at the first man he encounters and hits the fellow hard on the head, causing blood to splatter. Now Peter is well worked up, and he is ready to take on the whole army!

"Simon! Stop!" Peter hears his Master's voice and slowly he begins to calm down. The high priest's slave stands moaning to one side, he is holding his ear, or rather where there used

to be an ear just now before Peter attacked him. Jesus beckons him closer. His ear is a mess and the blood is running down his neck. Jesus puts His hand on the wound and instantly the bleeding stops. When Jesus withdraws His hand, the slave's ear is completely healed as if Peter's sword had never been near him. The slave cannot believe his eyes!

Menacingly, the men now stand closer to take Jesus prisoner. Then He speaks, His voice speaks of calmness and acceptance: "Did you come out with swords and clubs like against a robber to take Me prisoner?" In the flickering torchlight, He recognized several faces who often came to listen to Him in the temple. "Day after day I was with you in the temple grounds teaching, and you did not take Me captive." Then Jesus smiles, because He knows exactly why they could not take Him prisoner - the time was not yet right! This was not how God planned for Him to be caught. God determined that it should be at night, and that one of His disciples, His

own friends, should betray Him. "The Scriptures had to be fulfilled!" Jesus explains.

Enraged, the soldiers now rushe at Jesus. Their egos are bruised! "Let's grab His fans too!" Terrified, the eleven men split apart. Even Peter! He is confused. He doesn't know what to do anymore, and so he just runs away with the others.

And so Jesus is arrested and roughly led down the steep path from the Mount of Olives, through the Kidron Valley to Jerusalem. A little way behind Jesus comes a young man, dressed only in a linen cloth around his body. He wants to see what they will do with Jesus. Then one of the temple guards notices him. "Grab that man!" The young man sees great trouble coming and he turns around. However, a temple guard grabs him by the clothes, and in a last desperate effort he pulls himself free. But he pays dearly, because in the process his only article of clothing, the cloth, is torn from his body. Laughing, the men look after him as he runs

down the street terrified and stark-naked and then disappears between the houses.

The procession marches straight to the high priest's house. Then Jesus' greatest suffering begins.

Prayer:

Lord, together with Peter we also want to get angry, angry at the terrible injustice that you had to suffer. But then we realize that without that injustice, we would not be able to taste salvation. Thank you for paying the full price for us!

Before the Jewish Council

Mark 14:53-65

In the early hours of the morning, long before the rooster crows, Jesus is brought before the Sanhedrin, the Jewish Council. For a start, this was an illegal trial, because according to Jewish judice system it was not legal to deliver judgment at night, and especially not to impose the death sentence.

The Sanhedrin consisted of 70 members. The high priest was the chairman. Furthermore, the Council was composed of priestly nobility (mainly Sadducees), heads of families (representatives of prominent Jewish families) and scribes (who were mainly Pharisees).

Long before the trial began, these people had already decided that Jesus was guilty. They had only one thing in mind, that He should be executed! He would certainly not

get a fair trial from them and these "holy" men would even go so far as to bring in false testimony against Him in order to succeed in their goal. All they had to do was get a charge that would prove Him guilty. However, it was a little more difficult than they had planned. The problem was that the witnesses they called could not agree with each other. According to the law (Deut. 17:6) it was mandatory that witnesses had to be unanimous, otherwise a sentence could not be carried out. And they couldn't go against the law now!

Mark singles out one specific testimony that was given. According to this man, Jesus would have said that He would destroy the temple, and within three days build another one, one that would not have been made by humans. Even on this testimony there was no agreement. By all rights, the high priest was actually obliged to throw out the case based on insufficient evidence. However, he does not do this, and thus he already violates

the second legal aspect, making the court illegal.

However, the high priest does not pay attention to the legality of the trial and simply continues undisturbed to question Jesus further. All legality is thrown overboard to let Jesus get into trouble.

Then the high priest asks Jesus: "Are you the Christ, the Son of the Praiseworthy?" For fear of accidentally using the Name of God in vain, he refers to God as "the Praiseworthy." Very law abiding in one respect, but in another he throws the law totally out the window!

Jesus answered him directly: "I am!" We have seen that throughout the Gospel of Mark, Jesus was very careful that the fact that He is the Messiah does not leak out. Now, however, He makes it public, because now the time has come to announce it. His time of suffering has now reached a climax, and the time is ripe for everyone to know that He is the Messiah, including the Jewish

Council. That's why Jesus continues and tells the high priest much more than he really wants to know: "You will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven."

The high priest is very upset! So bad that he tears his clothes, like Jacob of old when he heard that Joseph was dead. Jesus' words are pure blasphemy to him. For such a horror, only one punishment is good enough: the death penalty! Of course, it must first be ratified by the Roman authorities, because the Jewish Council is not empowered to carry out the death sentence.

The full Jewish Council unanimously agrees that Jesus is guilty and that He deserves death. Guilty? Of what? That He spoke the truth? Guilty because He is the Son of God?

The tragic thing is that the seventy men who tried Jesus were all leaders and people who knew the Scriptures thoroughly. They should have known from the Scriptures that only the Messiah could be able to do the things that

Jesus did. For the last time they could hear when He personally confirmed to them in no uncertain language that He was indeed the Messiah. What did they do with it? No, they did not fall down in worship before the Son of God, but they began to mock Him. They made a mockery of God, while at the same time out of respect for God they did not even want to mention His Name out loud! It doesn't make sense!

Jesus could have remained silent and given them absolutely no charge on which they could find Him guilty. However, He did not do this, but willingly faced His death. Why? Because it was the Divine plan according to which His own Divinity had to be made known to mankind.

However, this was not the only reason: there was a great sacrifice that Jesus had to make and this could only happen if He were innocently condemned to death. That's why Jesus gives them enough reason to pass the sentence. The sacrifice would entail that He

had to bear the punishment - the full punishment - to pay for the sins of everyone who believes in Him. That includes you and me too. Yes, He paid everything, everything!

Prayer:

Lord, it wants to scream here inside me, every time I read how terribly unjustly Your Son, Jesus was condemned. But then I realize that it was for me. Please make me truly grateful for that!

When The Rooster Crows.....

Mark 14:66-72

While the temple guards and the men with the sticks and canes take Jesus to the house of the high priest, Peter follows them at a distance. He can't afford for them to see him now. Except for the noisy crowd with of the Master, the streets are quiet and deserted - after all, it is in the early hours of the morning! At a large house in the upper city, the procession comes to a halt. "It must be the high priest's house!"

They are now not too far from that loathsome Herod's palace. Peter makes a decision: He wants to be in there close to his Master. Maybe he can even see what they are doing to Him. Possibly he can assist the Master.

The door is partly open, and Peter sneaks in. Now he finds himself in the great courtyard of Caiaphas' house. For this early in the

morning, this house is a very busy place. People are standing around everywhere. In the middle of the court, a fire burns to dispel the morning chill a little and a few men stand by the flames and warm themselves. The Man of Nazareth, Jesus, is the point of discussion at every group. Peter just keeps himself aside - he doesn't know anyone here anyway. Fortunately, no one here will recognize him either. He is disappointed that he cannot see what is going on with Jesus. Someone talks about a "court case against the Nazarene." But then what can they find Him guilty of?

The hours pass slowly. Peter notices that one of the maids is looking at him questioningly. Maybe she recognizes him? He tries to pull the cloth low over his eyes, but it only makes the girl even more curious. Peter's heart shrinks as she walks straight up to him: "You were also with Jesus, the Nazarene, weren't you? I'm sure I saw you with Him!"

Peter's mouth becomes dry as a cork: "No.... No, you must be making a mistake. I don't know Him! I don't understand what you're trying to say..."

When the girl turns around, Peter becomes ice cold. So nearly, he messed up everything. He will now have to be much more careful that they might not recognize him.

Somewhere behind the building, a rooster crows that the night is almost over. Vaguely it awakens something in Peter. Out of the corner of his eye he watches the maid. She walks back to her friends. He can see that they are discussing him, because every now and then the girls look around in his direction. He pulls the cloth even lower over his eyes. He tries very hard to hide behind his piece of cloth.

A second time the girl comes to Peter: "You are assuredly one of that Man's followers! The others say so too. They saw you with Him!" The girl looks Peter straight in the

eyes: "Don't try to lead us around the bush! A rough face like yours is not easily forgotten!"

"No, you are making a big mistake!" Peter laughs nervously, "You are confusing me with someone else. I don't know who that Man is that you are talking about."

The group of maids mercifully disappears inside and Peter begins to feel more at ease. Someone walks past him on his way to the fire. Suddenly he stops and turns around: "Hey guys! Just look what we have here! Are you one of that Galilean's buddies?"

"No, no..." Peter protested, "I don't know what you're talking about!"

"Yes indeed!" replied someone at the fire, "I saw you there at the temple on Monday! You were with Him when He threw the merchants out like that." The other laugh vulgarly. "No, no..." Peter wants to protest.

"Man, don't try to fool us, we're not blind! Any monkey can see that you are a Galilean like him! All you silly Galileans look alike!"

Now Peter is furious: "Can't you get it into your silly heads that I don't know that Man you're talking about at all!" A few ugly words leave Peter's mouth. He curses the men who accuse him so "falsely", and he swears that he, Peter, has never known Jesus.

Then the rooster crows again deafeningly loud. "Today, tonight, before the rooster crows twice, you will deny Me three times, Peter." Jesus' words from the night before echoes through Peter. He turns and runs out the door, into the night. Raw sobs tear through his chest. "Peter, how can you how can you!" Tears stream down his face as he prays and begs God for forgiveness. That he could deliberately do such a despicable thing!

Behind him he hears the door open and then Jesus, his Rabbi and Master is led out into the street by a mocking crowd. Where to?

Peter does not know. But he is sure he can see that Jesus is looking straight at him, there where he is hiding in the dark. And he is sure he can read in Jesus' eyes: "Don't worry Peter, I understand..."

Prayer:

Lord, how many times in my life have I denied You like Peter did. Like Peter, I also pray for forgiveness. Thank you Lord, that You understand and that You have already forgiven me!

Before Pilate

Mark 15:1-15

The high priest has mixed feelings when he sends Jesus to Pilate. The despicable Romans curtailed the powers of the Jewish Council, so that they could not, for example, impose the death sentence on someone, even if the accused had transgressed very badly. Only the governor or procurator appointed by the Romans had that power. Now the high priest, who is supposed to have all the power in Israel, must humble himself by taking Jesus to that unclean gentile, Pontius Pilate.

Pilate was certainly not the Jews' favourite! He was greedy, callous and as hard as rock, and on top of that he obviously cared absolutely nothing for God! On occasion he wanted to have a water pipe built, and when Jewish aristocracy refused to fund it, Pilate simply had the funds taken from the treasury

in the temple! Naturally, there was an uproar over this blatant violation. Pilate sent his soldiers, disguised as Jews and armed with clubs, among the people and slaughtered the unsuspecting Jews. Many died!

However, Jesus became such an obsession for the high priest and the Jewish Council, that they were even willing to work with this hated man to get rid of Him. Their dilemma, however, was that Pilate would laugh at them if they went to him with the charge on which they found Jesus guilty, about Jesus' claim that He is the Christ, the Son of God. They would have had to fabricate a political charge in order to attract Pilate's attention in any way. Jesus had to be seen as a threat to the Roman Empire.

The Jews saw the expected Messiah as someone who would truly be a threat to the Roman Empire, because He would free the Jews from the Roman yoke. Now the High Priest and his henchmen are formulating the accusations that Jesus would present

Himself as that Messiah, the King of the Jews, and that He would therefore be politically extremely dangerous!

It is still very early in the morning when the important men arrive with Jesus at Pilate's breathtaking palace. Pilate is used to the fact that no decent Jew will ever set foot in that palace of his, for fear that they might pick up some impurity. After all, he's a heathen! In any case, he prefers it that way, because he certainly doesn't want to have a crowd of silly Jews gathering on his doorstep!

Pilate steps out onto his balcony. Then he is startled, because down there is not only the Sanhedrin, but half of Jerusalem. He can see that this lot is really upset! He laughs in his sleeve: "Caiaphas, the old fox! Of course he incited the crowd again to stand behind him!"

A soldier brings him a note from the Sanhedrin. "What is the charge?" Jesus stands in handcuffs before Pilate. Pilate reads and then he looks at Jesus with a question mark on his face: "Are you the King

of the Jews?" He cannot believe that this Man can justify such a charge! He's not aggressive and certainly not someone who would want to overthrow the government.

"It is as you say." Jesus does not deny the charge. Yes, of course He is King, but very definitely not in the sense that the Jews are insinuating!

Pilate soon realizes that this is a made-up story by Caiaphas, and that Jesus is actually innocent. It is purely because of the chief priests' envy that Jesus is standing here before him. He can't condemn this innocent Man? His eyes wander over the crowd, which continued to grow all the time. Maybe they are not as unapproachable as this bunch of priests. Then he has of a brilliant idea: If he were to give them the choice between Jesus and that hardened murderer, Barabbas, surely they would rather see Barabbas in prison than Jesus? "Whom shall I release, Jesus or Barabbas?" he asks the crowd.

"Release Barabbas!" they shout as one man. Caiaphas smiled with satisfaction, it worked!

"And what do you want me to do with this Man, the one you call the King of the Jews?"

"Crucify Him! Crucify Him!" they shout.

Pilate still wants to ask what Jesus did so terribly wrong, but it echoes through the ravines of the Kidron Valley: "Crucify Him! Crucify Him!"

It's still ironic that the first person to be freed by Jesus' crucifixion was the murderer, Barabbas! Jesus came to give His life as a ransom for many. Even before His crucifixion, He already takes the place of a murderer. And while He is still hanging on the cross, a second murderer, His fellow crucified is also acquitted of God's punishment. You too can be acquitted!

Prayer:

Jesus, thank you for bearing the punishment in my place.

Beaten and Mocked

Mark 15:15-20

The army makes people callous and even cruel. I have heard many hair-raising stories of what the men got up to in their army years. I myself was in the army for nine months of service in 1966. Back then it was still quite tame, but during the bush war many of the men got mentally unstable and often got away with murder! There were men who had absolutely no respect for other people's property, and often some of the farmers' sheep and chickens were simply "taken"! And if his cattle were to cross their path, then these too quietly disappeared and the men had a barbecue with great cheering! Rapes and assaults were the order of the day. Fortunately, most of the men were at least "normal!"

Unfortunately, it is so that, that the army makes people hard and unapproachable, and

of course it was the same with the Roman soldiers in Jesus' time. The soldiers were rough men who took out the frustrations of their hard army life on their victims.

Pilate decides to give the Jews their way for the sake of stability in Jerusalem and Judea, which is notorious for constant political unrest. Obviously, his good name is at stake, and he certainly does not want to be reprimanded by higher authorities over a rebellion. Therefore he hands Jesus over to the soldiers.

It was standard procedure at the time that someone who was to be crucified had to be flogged first. The scourge was a whip with a lot of points that had pieces of iron on the tips. The movie: "Passion of the Christ" gives a very good representation of the devastation that this instrument of torture could do to a person's body. The idea was that the person's body would be so weakened as a result of wounds and blood loss, that it would hasten his death with the crucifixion.

The soldiers lead Jesus away to the courtyard, take off His top garment and tie Him to a pole. With a bare back He stands there, absolutely defenceless against the Roman soldier with his scourge. The first blow falls on Jesus' back, tearing pieces of flesh from His skin. With brute force, the soldier takes out his accumulated frustrations on Jesus as He writhes and screams in pain. The men laugh when they see that this so-called "King" can eventually no longer take the pain. Every time the scourge comes down on Him, the blood splashes on the bystanders.

Finally, after 39 strokes the nightmare is over and Jesus is released. He was smashed beyond recognition. But still it is not the end. Now the whole division of soldiers is called together. This is a great opportunity if a "King" can pass through their hands! Someone brings out a purple cloak, because a king must wear purple. They roar with laughter as they hang it for Jesus around His

broken shoulders. A reed must serve as His scepter.

But then they are left with a dilemma: what about the crown? A king must have a crown! One of the soldiers remembers that creeper he saw, the one with the most terrible thorns. Carefully he cuts off a tendril with his dagger and weaves it into a crown. When it is placed on Jesus' head, the men roar with laughter again. The crown is properly pressed so that the thorns penetrate deep into His scalp. He no longer has the strength to scream in pain. Blood streamed down His tortured face. "We salute you, King of the Jews!" one of the men bows in reverence before Jesus, and the other cries out with laughter. Someone hits Him over the head with a stick from behind, forcing the thorns even deeper into His head. The men bowed their knees to Him as if to a king, as if they were showing Him great honor. Others spit on Him contemptuously.

Then the commander barks that it is enough now. It is getting late, and Jesus has yet to

be crucified. They take off the purple robe and give Him his clothes to put on. The heavy wooden crossbar of the cross is placed on Jesus' shoulders and tied with a rope so that it does not fall. He staggered under the weight of the piece of rough wood. And then He is led away to a stone cup outside the city, Skull-cup, Calvary.

I want to close my ears so as not to hear how Jesus screams in pain, where He is being scourged. I want to hold my hands in front of my eyes so as not to see the blood pouring down from Him. I want to run away so as not to see how He is cruelly mocked! Do we really realize how much hellish pain Jesus went through, even before the crucifixion took place? Do we realize how unbearable, how inhuman was the suffering He had to go through? For you and me? Do we really realize? Will we ever be able to realize how dearly we have been bought? The question is: do we ever live enough of our gratitude?

Prayer:

Lord, my heart weeps when I think of the suffering You had to go through for me. Give me a truly grateful heart, please Lord.

Crucified

Mark 15:21-32

Have you ever wondered exactly what happened during a crucifixion in biblical times? It was probably the cruelest of all the execution methods of that time. It has come a long way, and it is known that it was already in use in 700 BC. The Romans used this form of execution very commonly, but it was usually reserved only for slaves or people from the lowest class of society.

It was also known to the Jews: for example, the governor of Syria had no less than 2000 Jews crucified in 4 BC.

For the Romans it was an excellent deterrent, because it filled people with fear and trembling. It was a slow and extremely painful death, which often lasted for days. First the condemned was flogged to weaken him and then he was forced to carry the

heavy crossbar of the cross to the place of execution. This of course exhausted him further and made the punishment that much greater. The upright stake was left permanently at the execution site. So the idea that Jesus carried a complete cross to Calvary is wrong. He only had to carry the crossbar. Often the crucified's death was hastened by stabbing them with a spear or breaking their legs.

However, Jesus was already so exhausted from the cruel torture that He no longer had the strength to carry the cross beam. The Roman soldiers then simply stopped someone along the road to help Him. Mark mentions very precisely who the man was, and he also mentions his sons' names, which makes us suspect that this Simon of Sirene or his sons may have later played a major role in the church.

Mark mentions that Jesus was given wine with myrrh. It was used as an anesthetic at the time. When Jesus refused to drink it, it

probably meant that He wanted to remain fully conscious, but also that He wanted to bear the full punishment. He didn't want to be helped to make it lighter.

Mark mentions that they divided Jesus' clothes. We must realize that a crucified person's clothes were all taken off, and that he therefore hung naked on the cross as part of his humiliation. The pictures that portray Jesus with a loincloth around him are not an accurate reflection of what really happened.

This is just a little background to help you understand better what Jesus really went through!

Shortly before nine on that black Friday morning, we see Jesus, climbing the slopes of Golgotha hill, followed by Simon of Sirene with the cross beam and a group of mocking, swearing soldiers. He was already exhausted to death, from the terrible physical as well as mental torture. He had been enduring these things since Thursday night, the night when Judas betrayed him and His intimate friends

who denied Him. The mockery; the inhuman scourge; the crown of thorns - all these things had already taken their toll.

However, now the worst part begins. Thick, rough iron nails are hammered through Jesus' hands to nail Him to the crossbar. The pain is unbearable, indescribable, as the thick iron nails crush His wrist bones in the process. And then He is lifted up against the stake and nails are also driven through His ankles. Jesus writhes in pain, but He is powerless. To make the pain and humiliation worse, He is mocked and slandered by passers-by, the chief priests and scribes. They revel in Jesus' (apparent) powerlessness. "Save yourself and come down from the cross!" they mock Him. Even the two who are crucified with Him make a mockery of Jesus. The church leaders stood and laughed at Him: "He saved other people, but He cannot save Himself!" Vulgarly they laugh: "Let the Christ, the King of Israel, now come down from the cross, so that we can see and believe in Him!"

Powerless. Betrayed by His own confidant. Forsaken of His friends. Denied by His stalwart, Peter. Dismayed. A total failure of His triumph! This is how it would appear, especially to the Jewish leaders. And that's what it seems to look like for Peter and the others. But it is not at all what it seems, because Jesus knew every little detail in advance. He could so easily have fled instead, but He went straight to Jerusalem, where He knew they would arrest Him. With His brilliant reasoning ability that we see throughout the gospel, He could have acquitted himself during both hearings, but He didn't! He was able to command an army of angels and destroy the Jewish Council. But He didn't. He chose to go the full way and bear the full punishment! Fully aware of what would happen to Him, He willingly walked the way of the cross; Had himself flogged; Let himself be mocked; Let himself be humbled; Let himself be nailed to the cross!

Why? He paid dearly for the sins, the transgressions of everyone who believes in Him, so that you and I can be fully acquitted!

Prayer:

Lord, I can never be grateful enough for what You have done for me!

Jesus dies

Mark 15:33-41

The hours pass by, painfully and slowly. Three anxious hours have already passed while Jesus is hanging there in unbearable pain, exposed to all the elements and exposed to the mockery of the Romans and the mockery of His people, the people of God. He is dying of thirst from all the blood loss. The wounds on His back constantly chafes against the rough, infected wooden cross. Inflammation in the wounds that burns like fire. The merciless sun burns my Lord's naked body where He is displayed for the world to see. He struggles to breathe. None of His friends are there to support Him or encourage Him. Alone He hangs there between two murderers - they, guilty unto death – Him, innocent.

There is an atmosphere of death in the air. Then someone shouts: "The sun... look, the

sun is disappearing!" Afraid, the people cling to each other as they see the daylight slowly disappearing.

"What's going on?" the soldiers ask each other in bewilderment.

"The gods are punishing us for this Man!"

At twelve o'clock complete darkness descends over the earth. In Jerusalem there is chaos - disorder.

A little way from the cross, a group of women stands and cries. They have been standing there for hours now, powerless to do anything about the situation. When the darkness closes in around them, they wonder if this is not a sign of God's judgment on the people who crucified Jesus. The greatest of all sins is to reject God. Isn't that what these people did? They rejected God in the most despicable way you can imagine. Would salvation ever be possible for any of them?

The darkness drags by slowly, while Jesus still struggles on the cross with the most terrible, indescribable pain and discomfort. He is now becoming very weak, and there is no way He can support His tortured body. Through all these events Jesus says nothing. He hangs there in total solitude as He bears His reproach, anguish and pain in silence.....

Finally, at three o'clock in the afternoon, the sun makes it's appearance again. The night is over! Suddenly everyone around the cross is brought to a halt when Jesus exerts His last strength and cries out loudly: "Eloï, Eloï, lemá sabagtani?"

An eerie, shocking silence descends and hangs in the air. Then one of the men mockingly breaks the silence: "He's calling for Elijah!" Then again a wave of mockery and mimicking breaks out among the people, and they laugh. The women nearby want to cower in pain for their Master.

"Go get some wine!" ordered one of the chief priests, "I want to hear if He might say something else."

"Yes, maybe Elijah will come and collect Him here in person!" The men roared with laughter at the joke.

What they do not realize is the true meaning of these words, a quote from Psalm 22, which means: "My God, My God, why have You forsaken me?" In His moment of greatest anguish, Jesus turns to God - something that is totally incomprehensible to us because He is then God himself! How then could He be forsaken of God? Were His humanity and Divinity so terribly separated at that moment? It screams out Jesus' situation of absolute desolation and deepest powerlessness. This is a situation that no one can ever experience! Today we just stand dumbfounded at the deep mystery of this terrible event!

Soon after, Jesus cried out loudly, and then He breathed out his last breath.

At the foot of the cross stands a hardened Roman officer. Chills go through his body when he sees these things. Then he comes to the conclusion: "Truly, this Man was the Son of God!"

At that moment, something inexplicable happens elsewhere in the city that gives the Jews cold shivers: in the temple, the priests watch as the giant curtain that separates the Holy of Holies, is torn in half in a supernatural way before their eyes, from top to bottom, as if two giant hands were tearing it apart. Behind this curtain - so it was believed - God is present in a special way. God's sign of judgment with this is that the Jews unjustly condemned Jesus to death. Now He rejects their temple service and Religion because they rejected His Son. He will no longer be present in the Holy of Holies from now on.

The wonderful thing about this event, however, is that heaven has now been torn open, as it were, and that every believer suddenly has free access to God!

Prayer:

Lord, I cry every time I relive these events.
Will we ever understand what terrible
sorrows You went through for us?

Jesus' Burial

Mark 15:42-47

Jesus' death is certainly one of the greatest highlights in the history of the universe. That's why we may have to look at it again - there are so many questions surrounding this event. Yesterday we saw how the hardened Roman soldier, a complete pagan who worships Greek gods, stood at the foot of the cross in dismay and shook his head in wonder. "Truly, this Man was the Son of God!" With his own eyes he saw the things happen. He personally experienced Jesus' dying and everything that accompanied it. Then he decides that this Man, whom he has never met before, must be God! And so a complete pagan becomes the very first person to realize that, based on Jesus' suffering, He is the suffering Son of God.

If we read the other gospels, we see that a few other things also happened that Mark

does not mention. According to Matthew, there was also a violent earthquake after the solar eclipse. Rocks burst apart when Jesus breathed his last. Tombs opened and people who had been dead for a long time rose from the dead. Many people saw them!

The breathtaking vision of Ezekiel 37 suddenly becomes a reality before your eyes - the plain full of dead bones that get flesh and revive!

And then there was the curtain that was so supernaturally torn - torn in half by the hand of God. God wanted to show everyone that the old dispensation was finally over. The temple is no longer the central place of worship. Everything is now open towards God. There is an unobstructed view right into the Holy of Holies. Everyone now has free access to God through Jesus' death, even that hardened pagan Roman soldier.

Indeed Jesus' death brings life!

However, the miracles do not stop when Jesus dies. He died at 3 o'clock on Friday afternoon. This meant that there were only three hours left in the day before the Sabbath would begin. After that nothing could be done! So there were three hours to arrange Jesus' burial. The question is: who would do it? The eleven men were conspicuous in their absence, perhaps too afraid that they could expect the same fate as Jesus. So they could not claim Jesus' body. The women standing nearby crying? Well, they were just women, totally without any rights. Who would bother them now? Everything seems lost and Jesus' body would just have to hang there until Sunday! By then probably already eaten by the vultures!

But then came a solution from a totally unexpected source that no one would ever expect. The outcome was from none other than the Jewish Council itself! None other than one of the respected members of the Jewish Council, Joseph of Arimathea. This man risked his life to go to Pilate and ask for

Jesus' body. If his colleagues were to find out what he was up to, they would have crucified him!

When Joseph came to Pilate, one of the officers confirmed that Jesus had already been dead for a long time. So it must have been late afternoon by then.

The wonder is that only a respected Council member like Joseph would be able to bypass all the red tape to get Jesus' body. Simple men like Peter and John could never gain access to Pilate. God provided in a miraculous way even here, and made the miracle so much greater for us.

But there was more: This man was also in the very privileged position of owning a stone tomb, and he was willing to sacrifice his tomb, which probably cost him a lot of money, for this Man who just died a cursed death. The Jews considered anyone who died on a cross to be cursed, and an honourable burial was never arranged for such a person. Joseph even went to the

trouble of buying linen especially for Jesus' burial. After they took Him down from the cross, Joseph wrapped Jesus' body in the expensive linen and laid Him in the stone tomb. Then the stone was rolled in front of the opening.

By the way, this stone was a giant "wheel" that weighed about two tons. It moved downwards in a furrough to seal the opening. Before that it was held in position by a wedge. But when the wedge was removed, the stone rolled down. After that it was almost immovable. It would have taken a whole team of very strong men to roll the stone away!

Mary Magdalene and Mary, the mother of Joses stood nearby and watched as Joseph buried Jesus. It was a heartbreakingly sad day, but at the same time a day filled with miracles and signs from heaven. But the greatest of all miracles was yet to come, very early that Sunday morning.

Prayer:

Lord, I can only lift my hands in wonder this morning. Every little detail was meticulously planned down to the finest details to carry out the great act of salvation. Thank you, Lord, for strengthening my faith once again when reliving these events!

The Empty Tomb

Mark 16:1-8

It was the darkest week ever in Peter' life. Everything began so wonderful that indescribable Sunday morning when Jesus entered Jerusalem triumphantly. The crowd's joyful chanting, the swaying palm branches. But everything very soon changed. They were hardly in Jerusalem when Jesus had to chase the crooked merchants out of the temple! Then Jesus' prediction that the beautiful temple would be destroyed. And then that terrible Thursday night. Everyone could already feel the tension when they sat down together around the table for the Easter meal. The shocking news that one of the twelve would betray Jesus still stuck like a dagger in his back. That night in Gethsemane - Jesus' anguish while they lay sleeping. Judas' disgusting betrayal, and then Peter's cowardly denial! He bursts into tears just thinking about it. He weeps bitterly when he

thinks of the mockery, the scourging, the crown of thorns, the nails, the cross.....

Sunday morning finally dawns. It is still dark when Mary Magdalene hurried to the tomb. A dark cloud hangs over her mind when she arrives at the stone cup where Jesus is buried. But then she is startled, because as if it is not enough that Jesus is dead, she also sees that the heavy stone in front of the tomb has been rolled away! Someone stole her Master's body!

Mary didn't even look any further, she turned around in shock and hurriedly ran back home. Out of breath, she told Peter and John the terrible news: "They have taken our Master away, and I don't know where! Someone stole His body! What are we going to do?"

The two men jump up in terror and run as fast as they can to see what is going on at the grave. John is still young, he cannot wait for Peter any longer and he runs ahead. When he gets to the tomb, it is exactly as

Mary said: the stone was rolled away before the opening! He bends down and peers into the grave. It's empty! Well, not completely empty, because on the stone bench on which Jesus' body has lain he sees the burial shrouds in which his Master had been wrapped.

Out of breath, Peter catches up with him. Carefully he climbs through the opening into the burial chamber. Jesus is not there.

He sees the cloths lying, but there is something that makes no sense to him: on one side, separate from the other cloths, the cloth that was wrapped around Jesus' head lie, neatly rolled up.

Johannes gathers all his courage and climbs in too. The two men look in disbelief at the scene before them. What could that mean?

It's two very confused men walking home slowly on Sunday morning. They don't understand what happened there at all. Just pretty much nothing makes sense! The cloths

lying there? If someone had stolen Jesus' body, they most definitely would not have even rolled the cloths off His body in the first place. Thieves would certainly not leave the cloths lying there, they are precious, and they can sell them.

John does not understand this at all, therefore he can only make one single conclusion: Jesus rose from the dead!

Mary Magdalene is confused, her heart is broken for her beloved Master! Aimlessly she starts walking, shuffling her feet along the footpath to the grave. Before the opening of the empty tomb, she stops and begins to cry bitterly. When she looks up for a moment, she sees through her tears two men sitting in the burial chamber. They are wearing pure white clothes.

The men have great sympathy for Maria. "Why are you crying like that?"

"They took my Lord away, and I don't know where they buried Him."

Now the tears are pouring. She turns, wanting to run away. Then someone stands in front of her: "Madam, why are you crying? Who are you looking for?"

Through her tears, she does not recognize Jesus at all, and she thinks he is the gardener. "Sir, if you took him away, please tell me where you buried him. I will go get Him there." Raw sobs tear through Maria.

Then the Man speaks to her: "Maria."

Immediately Mary recognizes Jesus' voice. After all, he was the One who cast seven demons out of her! Why then will she not immediately recognize His voice?

John writes that after this happy meeting, Mary went straight back to the other disciples. She must have run all the way as fast as she could, and she told them that she had seen Jesus, that He was alive and that she had spoken to Him. She further also told them that Jesus said that she had to tell them

that He would ascend to His Father, and that His Father is also their God and Father.

Mary Magdalene was therefore the very first witness for Jesus! It was certainly remarkable, because it was a time when women had absolutely no say in life, they were only the man's property! This happened at a time when the man had all the say, and they were the only ones who could speak publicly about religious matters! Despite this, a woman becomes the very first one to testify to Jesus' resurrection!

Prayer:

Lord, this morning we rejoice once again over the empty tomb - You have truly risen! Jesus lives!

Epilogue

Mark 16:9-20

We have come to the end of Mark's Gospel - the very first Gospel that was written. Matthew, Luke and John came later. The last part of Mark 16 (verses 9 to 20) is probably not part of this book, and may have been added later by someone who did the copying work. In the best manuscripts, Mark ends at verse 8.

However, verses 9 to 20 are not necessarily wrong, because they are in complete agreement with the other three gospels. In this section it is told about Mary's meeting with Jesus and how Jesus also appeared to other people. It also tells that Jesus rebuked the eleven because they initially did not want to believe about His resurrection. We read here of Jesus' mission assignment to the disciples, that they were to go into the whole world and preach the gospel to all mankind. It

also describes His ascension. The "epilogue" closes with the news that the disciples did carry out Jesus' instructions, that with the power that the Lord gave them, they were powerful witnesses and that many miraculous signs took place through them.

However, I want to end this series with the question: What is the message of Jesus' suffering for us as believers in 2022? Does the story of Jesus' imprisonment, crucifixion and death 2000 years ago really still have a message for me today? Over the past few weeks we have cried together and hurt together with Peter and the others. But wasn't it just a nice story?

If you truly understand Mark's perspective on all these events, it means a tremendous spiritual deepening for you.

If I were to ask you the question this morning: "Why did Jesus have to die?" you will surely, without thinking twice, say that it is to bring about atonement for our sins. Of course it's true! But we must also realize that this is not

the only perspective on Jesus' death and suffering. Indeed, Mark wants to emphasize that Jesus died as atonement for our sins, but if you think carefully, you will remember that he mentions this only twice in the Gospel (Mark 10:45 and 14:24).

However, there is another matter that is very close to Mark's heart: to emphasize Jesus' Divinity. What is in the very first verse of the book? That Jesus Christ is the Son of God. This line is drawn throughout the book.

But now you may ask: How does this rhyme with His suffering and death? It is precisely here that Mark makes a great effort to link Jesus' suffering and crucifixion to the fact that He is the Son of God. Actually, it is a paradox that Mark uses to emphasize Jesus' Divinity precisely with the events of the cross. What greater contrast could there be, than the King of all kings dying on a cross as cursed?

But then we see how Mark repeatedly reaches back to the Old Testament, and

especially the Psalms to show that Jesus is the Great Suffering Righteous One. There are numerous examples from the Old Testament of righteous people who had to suffer because of wicked enemies who persecuted them. Mark wants to show that Jesus had to suffer despite the fact that He was totally innocent, but at the same time that He suffered willingly. So we see, for example, that Jesus went to Jerusalem at the right time, while He was well aware that He would die there. He went to pray that night in Gethsemane while He knew that Judas would betray Him there. During the trial He did not even try to defend Himself. Everything had to go according to a Divine plan. When Mark then tells about the Roman officer who admitted in amazement at the cross that Jesus was truly the son of God, based on the way in which Jesus died, this is the final confirmation.

Mark wants this whole thought to take hold of every believer, not only to recognize Jesus as God in wonder, but also that we will

realize the practical implications of this very thoroughly. In Mark 8:34, Jesus says that you must also be prepared to take up your cross if you want to follow Him, and be prepared to suffer for the gospel.

This thought naturally runs directly against our human nature. Of course, suffering today no longer necessarily means dying as a martyr, unless you live somewhere where Christians are still brutally persecuted today. It means to carry and live the gospel unfettered, despite the fact that I may be ridiculed for it, or that I may even be rejected by my circle of friends! Suffering means that I may have to be willing to perform the humblest of tasks.

I want to invite you, dear reader, to joyfully walk the path that Mark has laid out for us for the sake of our Lord, Jesus Christ, the Son of the living God!

Prayer:

Lord, thank you for the wonderful testimony of Mark, and the wonderful message it has for our lives. Thank you that we can know today: You are the Living, Ruling and Loving God!

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