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Mark: Chapter-by-Chapter Commentary

February 15, 2022



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Transcript

Mark introduces his account with the beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. Jesus is the Messiah and the Davidic Son of God. Mark uses Gospel with reference to what he is writing.

He is writing a Gospel. What is the background of that term? If we go back to the Book of Isaiah, we can see that it refers to the good news of the establishment of the reign of the Lord. In Isaiah chapter 40 verse 9 we read, And again in chapter 52 verse 7, In chapter 61 verse 1, The Gospel is the message that God is returning to his people.

He is going to deliver them from captivity and he is going to restore his presence in their midst. He is going to bring back the captivity to Judah. Are we supposed to understand this as the Gospel concerning Jesus Christ or the Gospel belonging to Jesus Christ? Well, likely it can be read as both and it seems to me that Mark is probably playing with the ambiguity here.

Mark's prologue sets the scene for the rest of the book as it is written in Isaiah the prophet. The quotation that follows is actually an amalgamation of verses from Malachi 3 verse 1, Exodus 23 verse 20 and Isaiah 40 verse 3. But the statement about Isaiah the prophet may refer to more than simply the verses that follow. It may refer to the prophecy of Isaiah more generally and the way that the Gospel of Jesus Christ is the fulfilment of what Isaiah has foretold, this coming new Exodus.

John the Baptist is the harbinger of the coming of the Lord to reign. Mark de-emphasizes the temple part of the Malachi quotation and includes elements of Exodus 23 verse 20 which speaks of the angel who will provide for and lead them through the wilderness into the promised land. So the verse from Malachi is chapter 3 verse 1, And then in Isaiah chapter 40 verse 3, A voice cries in the wilderness, prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.

And in Exodus chapter 23 verse 20, That quote from Exodus chapter 23 verse 20 speaks of the angel that will provide for them and lead them through the wilderness into the promised land. And the wilderness setting is very important for Mark in this opening section. John the Baptist doesn't really feature much in Mark's Gospel after this, save in a retrospective look at his death in chapter 6. But it's noteworthy that in all of the Gospels there is John near their beginning and they all underline his significance in various ways.

John isn't merely a wise teacher or religious leader or even simply a prophetic teacher of divine truth. John is a key actor in redemptive history. He has a particular role to play.

He is the Elijah that was to come. And having witnessed the ministry of Christ from the baptism of John is a seeming qualification for apostleship in the book of Acts. The amalgamation of these texts changes some of their reference.

So for instance, who is the messenger sent before in Exodus chapter 23? The messenger, the angel of the covenant, is sent before Israel. And Jesus is the one that the messenger is sent before here. And Jesus may be implicitly presented as Israel in this picture.

He is the true fulfilment of Israel. But in the next verse, when compared with the original verse being quoted, Isaiah chapter 40 verse 3, a different association may be made. The way of the Lord, in context, the Lord clearly means Yahweh.

And His, in this verse, substitutes for For our God in the original verse. Jesus is being

implicitly identified as the Lord himself. At such points we may get a hint that Mark is working with a far higher Christology than many would attribute to him.

John appeared baptising in the wilderness. No background for him is given. In some ways this might remind us of the sudden appearance of the prophet Elijah on the scene in 1 Kings chapter 17 verse 1. And he proclaims a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins.

This isn't just a private rededication of one's life to God. It's the preparation of a people for an eschatological crisis near on the horizon. God is about to come to judge.

There is something that's going to be the end of the age and they must be prepared. There is a catastrophic event on the horizon. A large body of the people going to the wilderness to be baptised would be a symbolic reconstitution of them as renewed Israelites.

A new people entering the land again. Re-entering a land and returning from a sort of spiritual exile. As a baptism of repentance it would have to be confirmed in actual change of life.

It's not just the effect of the water. It's something that requires a different form of life. Merely going into the wilderness and getting washed wasn't enough.

Huge crowds however come to the wilderness to John's baptism. All of the country of Judea and all Jerusalem as Mark describes. They come out to John the Baptist to be baptised by his baptism.

It's a massive popular movement and John the Baptist is recorded in the history of Josephus. He's someone who's known to the historians of the day. He's not just a fringe religious figure.

He was well known and he was respected by the people even long after he had died. The people were confessing their sins. We don't know exactly what this looked like.

Whether it was a public confession of a particular person's sins or a more general confession of the sins of the nation. I would imagine it would be the latter. And seeing your sins as included within that.

A more general confession and then individuals including themselves within that confession. And then more particular individual sins. They were baptised by John.

Usually ritual washings were performed upon oneself. However the fact that John the Baptist performed the baptism and it was associated with him highlights his prophetic significance. He is a leader of the people and his baptism creates some association with him too.

The clothing and the location of John the Baptist reminds us of Elijah. In 2nd Kings chapter 1 verse 8 Elijah is described for us. He is described as one who wore a garment of hair with a belt of leather about his waist.

This is the way that John is described too. We're supposed to recognise that this is a man who is coming in the spirit and the power of Elijah. He's dressing like Elijah.

He's in the location of Elijah. He's doing the same sort of things as Elijah. All these resemblances we're supposed to see that there's a similar thing going on.

The wilderness is a place of new beginnings. It was through the wilderness that God led the first exodus and now there are hints of a new exodus. Through the ministry of John the Baptist God is mustering his people in the wilderness prepared for a new entry into the land.

The wilderness was a theologically significant location for something new starting. It is the unformed and the unfilled realm that precedes a new creation. It's a realm of separation from the sin and the impurity of settled society.

It's where the seeds of a new faithful order might germinate. And we can see this in groups like the Essenes that will go into the wilderness and start religious groups within that context. It reminds the reader also of Moses and Elijah, both men of the wilderness that preceded a larger re-entry into the land.

In the case of Joshua and then in the case of Elisha. Like Moses and Elijah he will be succeeded by another, someone whose ministry will greatly exceed his own. He's not worthy to even act as the servant of this coming one.

The spirit is a focus in these opening verses of Mark's Gospel. Christ is the anointed one. He's the king who has the spirit of God upon him.

And John the Baptist's baptism anticipates a greater baptism. A baptism with the Holy Spirit which will be a greater reconstitution of the people of God that would occur at Pentecost. Jesus of Nazareth comes on the scene at this point.

Coming down from a northern province to the area where John is baptising in Judea. John's is more of a Judean movement but Jesus the Galilean comes to be associated with him. Like John he comes on the scene suddenly and without introduction.

When he is baptised by John there is a theophanic appearance of the spirit as a dove to Jesus. He saw the heavens being torn open. It's an appearance to him not necessarily witnessed by others who were present.

The heavens being torn open might remind us of the vision of Ezekiel at the beginning of his book for instance. The heaven is torn open, it's not just opened. Perhaps we might

think also of the temple curtain that would be torn open later in the book.

Jesus is commissioned by the voice of the Father from heaven. You are my beloved son, with you I am well pleased. In Isaiah 42 verse 1-2 we have something that might serve as part of the background for this.

Behold my servant whom I uphold, my chosen in whom my soul delights. I have put my spirit upon him, he will bring forth justice to the nations. He will not cry aloud or lift up his voice or make it heard in the street.

Psalms 2 would seem to be another part of the background. You are my son, today I have begotten you. And the description of the beloved son might also remind us of Genesis chapter 22 verse 2 and the description of Isaac and his relationship to Abraham.

In God's voice from heaven Jesus is identified in the same way as he has been identified in the opening line of Mark's gospel. And the subtle possible allusions within this identification invite the reader to hear associations with the Davidic king, with the Isaianic servant, the servant of the book of Isaiah, and also Isaac who is nearly sacrificed by his father Abraham. And all of these backgrounds will be important within the gospel of Mark.

Mark will bring together threads from each one of those backgrounds to paint his portrait of Christ within his gospel. Each of the gospels frames the wilderness temptations of Jesus differently. In Matthew Jesus is led up into the wilderness.

In Luke Jesus being filled with the spirit is led in the spirit into the wilderness. However in Mark Jesus is driven out into the wilderness. And each of these statements invites the reader to notice different associations.

In Matthew Jesus being led up into the wilderness reminds you of the Exodus. In Luke Jesus being filled with the spirit and led in the spirit into the wilderness reminds you of something like the book of Ezekiel and the description of his prophetic journeys. However for Mark Jesus might be more like David forcefully exiled from Saul's court where he was living in places with wild creatures.

You can think about 1st Samuel chapter 24 verse 2 where he's living in the rocks of the wild goats. He's living outside safe realms of the land. He's living among the Gentiles.

And he is the king being tested in these difficult places, prepared for his later rule by facing all these obstacles and opponents. Mark understates the temptations but highlights the realm that Jesus goes to. John's presence in the wilderness was emphasised in verses 3 and 4. And now Jesus' presence in the wilderness is emphasised there too.

The fact that he was in the wilderness is twice stated. And the detail that he was with the

wild animals further underlines the importance of the location. He was being tempted by Satan.

This focuses less upon the actual content of the temptations and even upon Christ's victory in them. It focuses more upon the fact that the wilderness is a realm of testing and danger where you are exposed to the buffeting temptations of Satan, where you're exposed to starvation and the elements and thirst, and where you're exposed to the danger of wild beasts. It's an untamed realm belonging to Satan and the wild beasts.

And Jesus begins his ministry by going into that enemy territory. Much as in his death he will enter Sheol itself. The spirit stands in contrast to Satan and the angels stand in contrast to the wild beasts.

This also gives us an insight into the greater conflict beneath the surface conflict. This is a battle between great spiritual powers. And the wilderness is an initial place where we see what sort of mission Christ is engaged in.

We might also be reminded of the experience of Israel in the wilderness where they were exposed to its dangers, to temptations and to wild animals. In Deuteronomy 8, verse 15, it's described as follows. We might also be reminded of the experience of Elijah in his 40 days and nights in the wilderness in 1 Kings 19 where angels also ministered to him.

Some other parts of Old Testament background that we might consider here. Jesus might be compared to the scapegoat in Leviticus chapter 16, verses 20 to 22. The people of Israel have been confessing their sins at John's baptism.

Jesus is then baptised at the climax of this and immediately driven off into the wilderness. Being driven out is language used elsewhere for exorcism but the important thing here I think is the fact that he's going into the wilderness. It's the nature of the realm that's underlined in Mark's account.

The scapegoat in Leviticus chapter 16 is described as being for Azazel which is apocryphally associated with the demon of the wilderness. Jesus plays the part of the scapegoat, symbolically bearing the sins of those baptised by John into the wilderness. The sins of Israel that have been confessed in the baptism of John in that sort of ritual.

And then he bears them to the place where Satan, the great demon, is found. Another possible connection might be with the book of Daniel chapter 4, verses 19 to 27. Where Nebuchadnezzar is brought low as a result of his pride.

Then Daniel, whose name was Balthasar, was dismayed for a while and his thoughts alarmed him. The king answered and said, Balthasar, let not the dream or the interpretation alarm you. Balthasar answered and said, My lord, may the dream be for those who hate you and its interpretation for your enemies.

The tree you saw which grew and became strong so that its top reached to heaven and it was visible to the end of the whole earth, whose leaves were beautiful and its fruit abundant and in which was food for all, under which beasts of the field found shade and in whose branches the birds of the heavens lived. It is you, O king, who have grown and become strong. Your greatness has grown and reaches to heaven and your dominion to the ends of the earth.

And because the king saw a watcher, a holy one, coming down from heaven and saying, Chop down the tree and destroy it, but leave the stump of its roots in the earth, bound with a band of iron and bronze in the tender grass of the field, and let him be wet with the dew of heaven, and let his portion be with the beasts of the field, till seven periods of time pass over him. This is the interpretation of the king. It is a decree of the Most High which has come upon my lord the king, that you shall be driven from among men, and your dwelling shall be with the beasts of the field.

You shall be made to eat grass like an ox, and you shall be wet with the dew of heaven, and seven periods of time shall pass over you, till you know that the Most High rules the kingdom of men and gives it to whom he will. And as it was commanded to leave the stump of the roots of the tree, your kingdom shall be confirmed for you from the time that you know that heaven rules. Therefore, O king, let my counsel be acceptable to you.

Break off your sins by practicing righteousness, and your iniquities by showing mercy to the oppressed, that there may perhaps be a lengthening of your prosperity. In the other synoptics, John the Baptist talks about the axe laid to the root of the trees, drawing upon the symbolism of this particular chapter. And in Mark's account, the Holy One comes down from heaven and drives out Jesus so that he dwells among the beasts for a period of time.

Maybe Jesus should be seen as bearing the fate of the proud rulers who are about to be judged. Jesus is bearing the sins of the people, like the scapegoat. He's also bearing the fate of the rulers that are about to be humbled, like Nebuchadnezzar.

A question to consider. The Spirit immediately drives Jesus out into the wilderness. Immediately is a term that Mark uses with a remarkable frequency, especially in this chapter.

Why might this word have a particular attraction for Mark? And how does it fit in with his more general characterisation of Jesus within his Gospel? Mark 1, after setting up the ministry of Christ with the baptism of John, begins the ministry of Christ with the handing over of John the Baptist. The same language is later used for Jesus, as he is handed over to the Jews and then the Romans to be crucified. The arrest of John begins Jesus' Galilean ministry more generally, which takes up the first eight chapters of this book.

While John had largely been operative in Judea, Jesus starts off as a Galilean figure in the

north of the country. Jesus' message concerns the Gospel of God, the good news that God is coming to reign. The long-awaited time has come at last, God's promised reign is about to arrive, and people must repent and believe the joyful tidings.

Like John the Baptist before him, Jesus is described as one proclaiming. He is a herald, bearing a message of something about to happen in history. Unlike John, however, he isn't just a forerunner, but he's the one announcing and bringing the expected rule of God.

God is now fulfilling his purpose in their days and they must be ready, repenting of their sins as a people and responding faithfully to the proclamation being given to them. Jesus passes along the Sea of Galilee and he calls Simon and Andrew, followed by James and John. These are the three core disciples, Simon, James and John, with Andrew being the fourth disciple in typical ordering.

They're all fishermen from the north of the country, not the most promising material with which to start a religious movement. And they're beside the Sea of Galilee. As we go through Matthew, Mark and John, they all speak about Galilee as the Sea of Galilee.

Luke speaks about it as the Lake of Gennesaret. But the Sea of Galilee heightens some of the connotations of the Gentiles and their association with the sea, of the sea as the realm of chaos, as the sea in juxtaposition to the land. And it's a focal point for Jesus' ministry, particularly in the first half of the Gospel.

Jesus' concern with the sea and with fishermen rather than with shepherds suggests there's a movement beyond the land as the focal point for the understanding of the ministry. In the Old Testament, the leaders of the people were shepherds, but now Jesus calls fishermen. And there's a transition here that should be noted.

However, we never read of Jesus visiting Sepphoris or Tiberias, which were the main Hellenistic cities in the region. Jesus' ministry, although in a region with lots of Gentile and Hellenized populations, is overwhelmingly to Jews. Simon and Andrew, however, have both got Greek names, which suggests that like other Jews in the area, they had some Hellenistic influences.

Simon is connected to the Hebrew name Simeon, though. They're called to be fishers of men. We've spoken about the Gentiles as fish.

The Gentiles, if we go through the Old Testament, are often associated with the fish stories. Think of Jonah in particular. In the Prophets, the Gentile nations are often described as beasts of the sea, as monsters of the sea perhaps, or as beasts that arise from the sea.

In Jeremiah 16, verse 16, there is another association, though. In verse 14 following, And out of all the countries where he had driven them, for I will bring them back to their own

land that I gave to their fathers. Behold, I am sending for many fishers, declares the Lord, and they shall catch them.

And afterward I will send for many hunters, and they shall hunt them from every mountain and every hill and out of the clefts of the rocks. God is searching out his people with fishermen, with hunters. And maybe the calling of the disciples here as fishers of men is a returning of Israel after exile theme as well.

Jesus calls his disciples much as Elijah calls Elisha in 1 Kings 19, verses 19-21. Like Elijah, Jesus calls his disciples when they are engaged in a symbolically important task. We're told the number of oxen that Elisha is associated with because it's a number associated with Israel.

An oxen associated with Israel too. Likewise, Jesus calling his disciples when they're engaged in the tasks of fishing suggests that their task is of symbolic importance for their later ministry and mission. We should continue to hear the recurring word immediately in these accounts.

Things are happening quickly and it isn't just Jesus himself who does things immediately, but those who are called to be his disciples in response to his word. It's possible that Mark's liking for the term immediately, especially in this chapter, plays off the quotation in verse 3 of the chapter. And some translations capture something of the relationship between the word immediately and the statement make his path straight in the quotation by using straight way for immediately.

The way of the Lord has to be made straight and Christ is the one who does everything straight way. John's gospel suggests that these men weren't unknown to Jesus but were formerly disciples of John and had already been acquainted with him through John's witness. Also, James and John were likely Jesus' cousins.

As we compare the list of the women at the cross, this seems to follow from that. The reference to their leaving their father behind may also be more than just a bare reporting of what happened. It can underline something about the character of discipleship and it contrasts with the actions of Elisha when he's called by Elijah.

Jesus then goes to Capernaum, which would be the base for his earliest mission, but now not merely by himself but accompanied by his disciples. The next verses recount a series of great works that he performed on a Sabbath morning, afternoon, evening and then early the following morning. First of all, he teaches in the synagogue in a way that is remarkable for its authority in contrast to the teaching of the scribes.

He has earlier been proclaiming the gospel but now he teaches with authority, which seems to be a somewhat different act. Perhaps by teaching we are supposed to consider something more along the lines of the Sermon on the Mount, which provoked a very

similar response from the crowd at the end of it, who also noticed the contrast between his authoritative teaching and that of the scribes. Jesus is one who is teaching and giving instruction concerning the law and what it means to live faithfully in the age of the kingdom, but he's also one who's proclaiming the kingdom and declaring as a herald what's about to take place.

He demonstrates the authority of the word of his teaching, but then that's followed by a demonstration of his powerful word of exorcism as he casts out the demon, who testifies to his true identity as the Holy One of God. Now that expression that he's the Holy One of God possibly has priestly connotations. Jesus has both authority and power, power over evil spirits, and this is a conflict that's being highlighted.

Mark foregrounds Jesus' ministry of exorcism in this and the following verses. Israel is afflicted by demonic possession and Jesus brings relief. Perhaps Jesus is like a new David here.

After David was anointed by Samuel, he went and offered relief to the evil spirit-oppressed Saul, and Jesus is doing the same thing for Israel. Also after David was anointed, Goliath stood against Israel for 40 days before David defeated him. Jesus in Mark is a performer of great and powerful works, a champion who stands against Satan and who defeats the demons.

He goes into the realm of the wilderness, the realm where Satan and his demons had their base of operations, and he goes to their very territory and brings his power there. As a result of his work, Jesus' fame spreads throughout the region. Maybe we're supposed to remember the story of David again.

David is the one who defeats Goliath and then he wins these great victories against the Philistines and others, and his fame starts to rise at that point and eclipses that of Saul. Saul has killed his thousands and David his tens of thousands. In a similar way, Jesus' reputation is rising.

People are hearing about him, they're telling the stories of what he has done. He is getting a reputation as one who is a champion, one who's able to stand against Satan and his minions. However, even though Jesus' fame is rising, as we'll discover as we go through the Gospel, the crowds do not really understand the nature of Jesus' mission.

The synagogue exorcism is followed by the healing of Simon's mother-in-law. Jesus is someone who heals both in public and in private, and it's likely that Jesus stayed in the house with Simon and Andrew and their extended family. It's worth considering the sort of family structure of the society that Jesus was ministering within.

It may help us better to appreciate the sort of radical challenge that he presented to it at points, but also some of the ways in which our far more atomised societies are

challenged by Christ in their own ways. Jesus took Simon's mother-in-law by the hand and lifted her up, and the fever left her, in a way that some have connected with demons leaving people. She then began to serve him.

We might connect her actions to that of the angels, who previously ministered to Jesus in verse 13. We might also see a different sort of call here. Simon, Andrew, James and John followed Christ in the ministry of fishing for men, but Simon's mother-in-law may be given a different calling here, the calling of ministering to Christ.

In Luke chapter 8 verses 1-3 we see that there were a number of women who ministered to Jesus in various ways, providing for his resources, giving him hospitality and serving him in various ways. If Jesus made Peter's house in Capernaum a base of his operations, Simon's mother-in-law would probably have been his primary hostess, with all of the honour that that involved. And so I suggest that we see this as a sort of calling to her as a hostess, that she is being lifted up, she's being raised up, there's resurrection themes here perhaps, and then she is entrusted with the care of Christ.

Jesus is doing all of these things upon the Sabbath. This doesn't yet seem to be provoking controversy, but later on in the Gospel it will. Jesus is highlighting by these actions something about the true nature of the Sabbath.

The Sabbath is a time of making things whole. The Sabbath is a time of life and restoring things to life. The Sabbath is a time of liberty and setting people free.

And all who would reduce the Sabbath merely to a set of burdensome and onerous commandments are undermining the true purpose of the day that God has given to his people. The Sabbath is made for man, not man for the Sabbath. And Jesus at the very start of his ministry is acting on a Sabbath in a way that reveals the purpose of the Sabbath, that reveals something about the sort of rest, the sort of Sabbath that he is going to give to his people, that his ministry involves at its very heart.

A question to consider. How does Mark's focus upon exorcisms and the conflict with Satan in the wilderness help us better to understand the character of Christ's mission more generally? The end of Mark 1 continues the sequence of healings and exorcisms begun on the Sabbath morning in Capernaum in verse 21. After the exorcism of the demoniac in the synagogue, there is the healing of Simon's mother-in-law, followed by more general healings of the sick and deliverance of those oppressed by demons after sundown.

The healings and the exorcisms at sundown occurred after the Sabbath day had ended. And although Jesus heals many and casts out demons, this doesn't seem to be the central purpose of his ministry, and he doesn't seem to go out of his way looking for the sick and the demon-possessed. Rather, such healings and exorcisms testify to the central purpose of his ministry of proclaiming and teaching concerning the kingdom of

God.

He is the talk of Capernaum, and all who are sick and in need from demon oppression are brought to him. As an aside at this point, demonic possession is not something that is discussed a lot in the Old Testament, but it seems to be all over the place in the Gospels and later on in the Book of Acts. We should not presume that demonic oppression is a uniform phenomenon, found everywhere to the same degree and in the same way.

Rather, it seems to vary from society to society, and as the word of Christ goes throughout a society, it seems to be less prevalent, or God can hold it at bay. At other points, it's something that is far more widespread within a society. So we should not be surprised to find that at the beginning of Jesus' ministry, there is great conflict with demonic oppression, with Satan in the wilderness.

This is a society that is oppressed by demonic forces in a particular way. The description of Jesus healing many is not to be taken as a suggestion that Jesus lacked the power to heal all, although perhaps there were too many there for him to heal them all on that occasion. The main point, though, is that Jesus heals a considerable number of persons.

Also, he casts out demons and heals people with various diseases. Jesus isn't selective in the sorts of ailments that he heals, and as we proceed through the Gospel, we'll see there's a great number of different kinds of afflictions that are healed by him. And Jesus here forbids the demon to speak, because they know who he is, in verse 34.

Here we see what some have called the Messianic secret, the way in which Jesus hid his identity during his public earthly ministry and revealed it only to a few. It's an important feature of Jesus' ministry and Mark's Gospel in particular, and many have commented upon it. Jesus often discourages people from talking about healings and deliverances, and also silences demons when they're about to declare his identity.

There are occasions when Jesus displays his work more openly, but it seems for the most part he keeps it largely under wraps. The purpose of the secrecy seems to involve rather more than simply a concern to avoid excessive attention from authorities and the crowds before the proper time, although that may be part of it. The disciples and the demons have a knowledge about Jesus' identity and mission, for which the time has not yet come for more public disclosure.

There is an expiration date, however, upon the secrecy, as we see in Mark 9, verse 9, where the disciples are told not to mention the transfiguration until Christ has risen from the dead. And part of the purpose of the secrecy seems to be the great openness to misunderstanding that the revelation of Jesus' identity prior to his death and resurrection would provoke. His mission is not what people were expecting from the Messiah, and only in the light of his death and resurrection could its true character and its divergence

from typical Jewish expectation be made known.

The point, then, is not to avoid all revelation, but premature revelation. The time will come when the true character of what God is doing in Jesus of Nazareth will be made clearly known, and then what was whispered in secret could be declared from the rooftops. Verse 35 ends the 24-hour period that began in verse 21.

Jesus secretly leaves to a deserted place to pray. Rather than developing a popular movement from Capernaum outwards, he goes from town to town to proclaim the gospel of the kingdom, carrying out his mission on his own terms. Jesus' mission does not move in predictable ways.

It doesn't follow the conventional rules. It doesn't operate in terms of people's expectations or demands. Jesus doesn't give himself over to the crowd, but often retreats from them and moves on.

He recognises, I think, among other things, the fickleness of the crowd, their limited and their mistaken understanding of the nature of his mission, and the danger of them setting the terms of his mission. Jesus is led by the Spirit. He goes where the Spirit wishes.

He doesn't move according to human plans or purposes or the desires of the crowd. There's a real danger, for instance, of becoming a movement defined by a particular region or town, rather than by God's proclamation of his kingdom in the fullness of time, a kingdom that is not limited by locality. By refusing to give himself to the people of any particular town, Jesus protects his ministry from such distortion.

His mission is to proclaim and to establish the gospel of God, and this necessitates moving from place to place. And one of the things that marks Jesus' ministry is his giving himself to all, and resistance to having his ministry claimed and co-opted by any single group and its agenda. Simon and those who were with him sought Jesus out at this point, and the description of Simon and the other disciples as Simon and those who were with him highlights the prominence of Simon Peter among the disciples.

We should also consider the fact that Mark is probably resting in large measure upon Peter's own testimony, which might heighten the existing prominence of Peter among the disciples. The problem of publicity is further highlighted in the story of the healing of the leper, with which this chapter ends. Leprosy in scripture is not what we think of as leprosy, which is the condition called Hansen's disease.

Rather, it refers to a variety of different skin conditions. Lepers would generally live away from larger bodies of population, so Jesus probably met this man in a more secluded location. He's moved by pity at the man's plight, and he touches the man, a means by which someone would usually contract impurity from the leper, but by which Jesus

communicates wholeness.

Such a healing doesn't merely deliver the leper from a physical ailment, but also from social and physical isolation, so that he can become a member of the wider people again, and become part of the fellowship and the congregation. Jesus sternly instructs him not to say anything, and he drives him off. Rather, he must present himself to the priest and go through the prescribed process of cleansing.

This suggests that Jesus wants to observe the rules of the law, also that the man is maybe a testimony of the judgment upon the people. Elsewhere we see the language of proof for them being used in the sense of proof against them, as evidence of judgment. The sternness with which Jesus instructs the man has a connotation, a strong connotation of anger.

It isn't gentle, and the same thing can be said of the driving off, it's language that elsewhere we can see used of demons. It's possible that the implied anger relates to the healed leper's foreseen future actions, as contrary to Jesus' instructions, the leper spreads the news, making it very difficult for Jesus to carry out his mission openly in towns. Rather, like John the Baptist, he has to minister in the desolate places, outside of areas of human habitation.

This is one of the dangers that the messianic secret is designed to guard against, to have Jesus' mission co-opted by people who see the signs, the healings, the exorcisms, and all these great acts, and want Christ to serve them on their terms, and want to create a movement around Christ that is defined not by his mission, but by what they want from him. Something to consider. Try to imagine how people at this period in Jesus' ministry would have interpreted his actions, and the sorts of misunderstandings to which they would have been most exposed and vulnerable.

In Mark chapter 2, Jesus performs a healing, followed by a series of confrontations with, and questions from, the religious authorities. The same sequence of events is also found in Matthew chapter 9 and Luke 5. While the previous chapter was mostly about Jesus' rising fame and the messianic secret, here we start to see conflict with the religious authorities coming into the foreground. Jesus is challenged with a series of why questions.

In verse 7, why does this man speak like that? In verse 16, why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners? In verse 18, why do John's disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast? And then in verse 24, why are they doing what is not lawful on the Sabbath? And then Jesus responds to each of these challenges in turn, in a way that drives forward his teaching. In verse 10, but that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins. In verse 17, and when Jesus heard it he said to them, those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick, I came not to call the righteous, but sinners.

In verse 19 and 20, can the wedding guests fast while the bridegroom is with them? As long as they have the bridegroom with them, they cannot fast. The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast on that day. And then in verses 27 to 28, and he said to them, the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath, so the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath.

The section that we are looking at is part of a sequence beginning in verse 1 of this chapter and then ending in chapter 3 verse 6. Jesus returns to his own city of Capernaum. The last time he was there he had to leave secretly because of the size and the demands of the crowds. And as soon as people discover that Jesus is there again, once again the place is crowded.

Presumably Jesus is in the house of Simon. This is the place where he seems to have his base, and as noted in the previous chapter, the mother-in-law of Simon is probably acting as his hostess there. While Jesus is teaching, four men bring a paralytic to him on a bed.

However, since the crowd is so great and they cannot approach him, they remove the roof above him and lower the man down to him. They overcome both the obstacles of the crowd and the roof to reach Jesus. And their faith is expressed in their persistence born of confidence in Christ's power and willingness to save and to heal.

Jesus responds to their faith by declaring the sins of the paralytic forgiven. Now we should note the interesting detail that it is in seeing the faith of the men who are bringing the paralytic to Jesus that Jesus is led to declare the sins of the paralytic forgiven. This isn't just a physical deliverance or even an exorcism, as we've already seen.

This is a far more powerful act of salvation. It's also seemingly exercised in response to the faith of people other than the man who's being brought to him. It's in these verses that we can get confidence, I believe, to continually pray for Christ to save people.

Perhaps our persistent faith will be blessed with the fruit of another person's salvation. The scribes think he's blaspheming, claiming a prerogative that is God's alone. Only God can forgive sins.

Who can forgive sins but one, that is God? And that seems to be a reference to the Shema. Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God is one. Jesus recognises what is in their hearts and he challenges them.

He heals the man as a demonstration of his authority to forgive sins. It's very easy to say you have the authority to forgive sins, but in the actual healing of the man he's giving a proof of the fact that he has that authority. So there's a two-stage healing here.

There's an inward healing, as he's forgiven his sins, and an outward healing, as his body

is restored to him. Once again, Jesus speaks of himself as the Son of Man. He's acting in a particular office.

The Son of Man is a figure of eschatological significance, a sort of great prophet perhaps. The Son of Man isn't just a judge though, but one who brings forgiveness. In Daniel chapter 7, the figure of the Son of Man is a judge and one having great authority over the nations.

But Jesus presents the establishment of the kingdom and the authority of the Son of Man as being exercised through forgiveness on earth. Which is a surprising note for this eschatological figure. The response of the crowd is amazement and to glorify God.

When going out beside the sea and teaching the crowd after this, Jesus saw Levi, the son of Alpheus, standing at the tax booth as a tax collector. Now in Matthew's Gospel we're told that the tax collector was Matthew. Presumably Levi was another name by which he went.

There's another son, however, of Alpheus among the disciples called James, which raises the possibility, which a number of people have held, that Levi or Matthew was his brother. Now among the disciples there are a number of brothers, James and John, Simon and Andrew, and in this is the case, James and Matthew too. Half of the disciples at least would be brothers of each other.

As some early Christian writers claim that Mary, the mother of James and Joseph, was the same as Mary, the wife of Clopas, and that the James in question was James the son of Alpheus, which is the Latin that corresponds to Clopas for the Greek, and that Clopas was the brother of Joseph, Jesus' father, this would make Levi Jesus' cousin. Now at this point we're venturing far beyond the realm of certainty, but it's an interesting possibility, one that is based upon claims made very early on in the Church's history. If it is indeed the case, then Jesus probably had four of his first cousins among his disciples, James and John, the sons of Zebedee, and James the son of Alpheus, and Levi or Matthew, the son of Alpheus.

This should perhaps unsettle some of the preconceptions people have about Jesus' opposition to the family structure. Jesus is teaching about leaving father and mother, and the importance of his disciples being his true family, but not in a way that simply abandons the natural family structure, rather it tries to take that structure into the life and the reality of the kingdom, and for that reason we see many of Jesus' brothers involved later on in the history of the Church. The tax collectors were despised for collaborating with the Romans, and also for their injustice.

They dealt with Gentiles, and the Gentiles were an imperial oppressive power of the Romans. But what Jesus does in eating with the tax collectors is he's redefining the nation. The nation is redefined around the meal table.

It's a place where people are fellowshiping together, something that foreshadows the meal of the kingdom, as people are brought in and eat with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. There are a reclinate table in his house, and from Luke the house in question seems to be Levi's. Jesus comes as a guest, just as he goes to the house of Peter after his call, and is a guest within the house of Peter while he's in Capernaum.

The story begins with one tax collector sitting down and being called to rise up, and it ends with a larger number of tax collectors sitting and eating with Christ. The Pharisees come into the picture here. They challenge Jesus for his fraternising with tax collectors and sinners, but Jesus highlights the fact that his concern is for those who are sick, those who need forgiveness, those who are sinners.

His concern is for the lost sheep of the house of Israel, those who need to be restored. Of course, as we go through the Gospel, we'll see that the Pharisees are sick, but they do not realise it. They're in need of forgiveness, and they don't recognise it.

They're sinners, and yet they see themselves to be the righteous. And so Jesus' statement here should not be taken to suggest that the Pharisees are okay. No, it's to express his concern for the tax collectors and the sinners, and, as we see as we go through the book, to be a challenge to the Pharisees who fail to recognise their status.

The disciples of John question him after this, and this connects to the preceding story with the shared theme of eating. So the story that begins the chapter is concerned with the theme, among other things, of sin and forgiveness, and then the eating with the tax collectors and sinners is connected with sin and forgiveness too, and then that's connected with eating, which is connected with this next story. And so there's a daisy-chain pattern through the chapter, where each story connects with the one after it with some particular key theme.

When Jesus is questioned concerning the fact that his disciples do not fast, unlike the Pharisees and the disciples of John, he answers with an illustration about the Bridegroom. Christ is the Bridegroom. This is an anticipation also of the future departure of Christ, one of the earliest that we have in the Gospels.

Jesus is going to depart from them, and when he departs they will fast, but until then he will be with them, and they will celebrate as they have the Bridegroom with them. This is a window into Christ's self-understanding. Christ is the Bridegroom.

Come for the Bride. It also helps us to understand the previous story with the tax collectors and sinners. Jesus is the one who's come feasting for the Bride.

As the Bridegroom, he's celebrating the marriage, the wedding, and the people that are coming in and eating with him are having some experience of that eschatological wedding feast, the wedding feast that's awaited at the very end of history. New wine has

to go in new wineskins, and if it's put into old wineskins it will destroy them, and both will be lost. This is an illustration to help to explain Jesus' teaching about fasting.

There are the old practices of the law and the pharisaical traditions, but there's the way that the fulfilment of the law that Christ brings in goes beyond the containing and constraining structures that they are working within in their tradition and in their legal structure. John and his disciples and Jesus and his disciples are operating in some ways in different ages. Jesus and his disciples are anticipating what's to come.

They're experiencing it, they're having a foretaste of that wedding feast here and now. John and his disciples were awaiting the action that Christ would bring. The language of the wineskins, tearing, is a very strong language.

It suggests something about the way that Christ relates to the old order. The tearing of the temple curtain, for instance, or the tearing open of heaven at his baptism. Christ is bringing about a tearing apart of the old order and an eruptive new order arriving within the midst of that.

Central to this chapter is the theme that Jesus is bringing something new then, something that cannot be bound by the existing categories and structures. As he answers controversy after controversy we see that Christ does not fit expectations. He does not fit the limits and the categories that people are working within.

He is presenting something new, something that's radical, that gets back down to the root. To be a follower of Jesus then is to be a participant in this new age that is dawning in history. A question to consider.

We should not miss that at the heart of these controversies with the religious leaders is the question of who Jesus is. What are some of the ways in which light is shed upon the answer to this question within this passage? The conclusion of Mark 2 and the beginning of Mark 3 continue and conclude the sequence of events begun with the healing of the paralytic at the beginning of Mark 2. While Jesus' power, the problems of his rising fame and the secret of his messianic identity were forefront in chapter 1, chapter 2 and the beginning of chapter 3 begin a series of controversies. These controversies are about specific issues, the forgiveness of sins, eating with tax collectors and sinners, fasting and not fasting, picking the grain on the Sabbath day and healing on the Sabbath.

Sin and forgiveness is a common theme of the first two controversies, eating is a common theme of the second to the fourth and Sabbath is the common theme of the fourth and the fifth. While there are unifying themes of controversy, there is a deeper issue beneath the surface throughout, which is the identity of Jesus. He is the Son of Man who forgives sins.

He is the Bridegroom who has come to his people. He is the new David. He is the Lord of

the Sabbath.

Within the controversies then we are getting a clearer picture of who Jesus is. Jesus' actions on the Sabbath demonstrate that he is the one who gives rest. This is the true intent of the Sabbath.

The Sabbath stories are easily misunderstood as Jesus presenting some casuistic understanding of what the Sabbath law required in a way that circumvents something of the purpose of the law. That's not what's going on. Rather Jesus is revealing the purpose of the law, what it was all about and his fulfilment of it.

He's not just trumping the law with his authority, he's fulfilling it. The disciples were permitted by the law to eat of the grain as they passed through a field as a form of gleaning. The issue was that they were doing so on the Sabbath when what they were doing would count as work.

And so Jesus is questioned concerning the behaviour of his disciples for whom he is expected to bear some responsibility. He gives the example of David in response to the objection of the Pharisees. In 1 Samuel 21-7 David and his hungry men were permitted to eat of the showbread which was usually restricted for the priests.

They would offer it one week and then at the end of the week they would be able to eat it. Ahimelech, the priest, recognised that the law of the showbread existed for the good of God's people, not merely as an end in itself, and gave it to David. And in these circumstances the hunger of David and his men took precedence.

But it seems that there's something more going on here. It's not just that they were hungry, it's the fact that they were under David's leadership. Jesus is exploring the relationship between him and his disciples and David and his men.

Jesus is the greater David who has the prerogative to determine in this instance. His men are like David's men. They are committed to a mission of God and the demands of that mission take priority over the strict requirements of the Sabbath law.

In the parallel passage of Matthew 12 Jesus also points out that the work of the priests isn't counted as Sabbath-breaking work because it's in service of the temple. And Jesus is one who is greater than the temple. Mark records Jesus saying that this occurred in the time of Abiathar the priest, who was actually Ahimelech's son.

And various explanations have been advanced to account for this seeming inaccuracy. My inclination is to say that Abiathar is mentioned because he was the more prominent than his father. And Jesus wanted to evoke the larger story of David and the role that Abiathar played for David in the coup of Absalom, which would help to explain further his mission and the relationship between him and the people who were challenging him.

In Jesus' response to the challenge to the actions of his disciples in the grain fields, he makes an analogy depending upon David and his followers, aligning himself with David. The argument that Jesus is presenting then depends in large measure upon the authority of him as the leader of his men. He presents himself as the eschatological son of man again, and as the Lord of the Sabbath as such.

Jesus moves from the more general point about the Sabbath being for man to the greater point of the son of man being the Lord of the Sabbath. It might be worth considering here the way that the son of man is also a corporate figure in Daniel chapter 7. Not just an individual, but a representative of the people. Jesus is the son of man as the Messiah, and his people also participate in this.

David leads his men, and as his men share in the authority of his mission, they can enjoy a similar prerogative. A prerogative that means that their needs can take priority over the law of the tabernacle, and in this case, of the Sabbath. Jesus is the eschatological son of man, the one who establishes the original purpose of the Sabbath, in its great fulfilment in the last days.

Jesus then heals a man with a withered hand on the Sabbath. Although the man isn't in urgent need, Jesus gives rest on the Sabbath, which fulfills again the intent and the commandment of the Sabbath. Sabbath-keeping is about giving life and healing, not about laying burdens upon people.

Perhaps we're supposed to hear the story of the withering and the restoring of Jeroboam's hand in 1 Kings chapter 13, behind the story here. Jeroboam's hand was withered because of false worship, and then it's restored to him in an act of grace. Our passage ends with a section that exhibits many of the things that we've seen so far, and so serves as a fitting culminating expression of its themes.

Jesus needs to withdraw from the huge crowds that are gathering round him. They're falling upon him, pressing upon him, and the extreme response to his presence. People are just trying to touch him to be healed.

And this response is found not just from the crowds, but also from the demons who are falling down before him. Jesus displays great power in his healings and in his exorcisms. His ministry is characterised by an activity and an urgency and a speed and an immediacy.

As we study Mark, we should get a sense of Jesus as the King, the one who's moving from place to place, the one who's engaged in a sort of military campaign against the forces of the evil one, the one who's bringing salvation and healing wherever he goes, the one who's growing these great crowds and rising in his fame. Jesus is a new David. He's the eschatological son of man.

He's the Lord of the Sabbath, and he's the one who can forgive sins. A question to consider. Jesus' teaching and practice concerning the Sabbath maybe suggests the Sabbath being thought of less as a command that people are subject to and under than as a mission to complete.

Jesus is the one who gives the rest of the Sabbath to people. Jesus is the one who is the Lord of the Sabbath, whose mission is a sabbatical mission. How might our practice as Christians be reformed as we think about the Sabbath in this particular way? In the latter half of Mark chapter 3, the company of disciples around Jesus starts to assume a greater prominence in the narrative.

They've been present to this point, but now they are more directly considered. The account of the choice of the twelve has some particular details that aren't found in either Luke or in Matthew. It begins with Jesus going up on the mountain and calling to him a particular selection of the disciples.

Perhaps we should recall Exodus 24 at this point, where Israel is constituted around Mount Sinai, with Moses, the priests, and the elders going up on the side of the mountain, Moses going up to the very top, and then the rest of Israel gathered around. We might also connect the twelve with the patriarchs and Israel, the twelve tribes of Israel and the twelve sons of Jacob. They don't just happen to be twelve people.

It's important that they are twelve. They were called the twelve, and when Judas betrayed Christ and was dropped from their number, they had to choose a replacement because they had to have the full complement of the twelve present. They're appointed by Christ so that they might be with him, so that they might be sent out to preach, and also that they might have authority to cast out demons.

And the importance of proximity to a witnessing to Christ's life and hearing his teaching is paramount. They need to be around Christ and with him and see the way he lives, see the way he prays, hear what he teaches, and learn his explanation of his teaching. They're chosen also for a commission that they might be sent out as his representatives to preach and to proclaim the gospel to the cities and towns of Israel.

And they're granted authority to cast out demons, to continue Jesus' own ministry against the demons and the demonic forces at work in Israel. The twelve are listed, beginning with Simon and James and John. They're the three core disciples.

Simon is the first disciple in each list that we have of the disciples. He's the leader of the twelve. Peter is the one who will speak as the natural spokesperson of the group.

He's the one that will pioneer the mission on the day of Pentecost. He will authorise the mission to Samaria, and he will also break the new ground of mission to the Gentiles. Judas is the last in every list of the disciples.

He's occupying the position of the least honour. And we're told that he betrays Christ as well at this point, so it explains in part why he is occupying the position that he is. We should observe that Jesus gives each of the three core disciples a new name, presumably declaring the sort of people that they will become.

They're privileged in other ways. They accompany him up the Mount of Transfiguration and also in Gethsemane. Why are they given the names that they're given? Well, Peter would become the Rock.

He would be an essential part of the foundation of the Church. The Church is built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, and particularly the apostles. The apostles are the foundation stones in different ways, and Peter is the key foundation stone of the apostles.

He's the leading apostle. He's an essential part of the foundation of the Church. James and John are often said to be sons of thunder because they wanted to call down fire from heaven in Luke 9, verse 54.

Thunder, however, generally has more positive connotations in Scripture, being associated with God's powerful voice. God is generally the one who is associated with thunder, and James and John will become strong and powerful witnesses, bearing the thunder of God. Now, just as Peter the Rock could become like the stumbling block for Christ, as he sought to persuade him not to go to Jerusalem and to crucifixion, so the sons of thunder could fall into the trap of, in trying to call down fire from heaven, twisting the true significance of their name.

In the Old Testament, there are a few key people who have their names changed, like Abraham and Sarai and Jacob, and James, John and Peter should be included in this select group of persons who have their names changed by the Lord. The Twelve are a band of brothers with Jesus, and perhaps we should see in the background of this David's mighty men. Jesus is the Davidic king in Mark.

He's the man of action. He's going from place to place, straightway, immediately, and in the same way as David, he's surrounded by his mighty men. Like David, he has a larger group of mighty men, and then he has a core group within that larger group.

David has three mighty men who are particularly close to him, the core group of mighty men, in 2 Samuel 23, verses 8-12. Although Jesus has many female followers, including a number who are seemingly more prominent in the narrative than certain members of the Twelve, the Twelve are all male. They're like a military company, and they're prepared for doing battle against the demons, for scoping out the land, proclaiming the message of the kingdom, and also acting as the guardians of the church and the foundation of the church in the future.

Jesus goes back home to Capernaum, and is once again completely mobbed by a crowd, and it's making it very difficult for him to do anything. His own family go out from Nazareth to seize him. They believe that he's lost his mind.

Presumably they've been hearing strange reports from Capernaum and elsewhere, and it's troubling to hear that his very own family was so disbelieving of his ministry. But this is followed by conflict with scribes from Jerusalem. So there's people coming from Nazareth, his own family, and there are people coming from Jerusalem.

Once again, Jesus' ministry of exorcism is front and centre. It's important to see how central it is in Mark. Jesus is the exorcist in Mark.

He's going around and he's having these power confrontations with Satan and his demons. This is a conflict, it's a battle that's being waged. Jesus is not just a teacher, Jesus is not just a prophet.

Jesus is the man of action engaged in conflict and battle with Satan and his minions. They accuse Jesus of casting out demons by the prince of the demons. But then Jesus gives a parable that explains he's the one entering into the house of Satan, the strong man, and plundering it.

And he could not do that unless he had bound Satan. Christ has come to deliver them from their oppression by Satan. In the background of Jesus' teaching here, we should probably hear Isaiah 49 24-26.

And the prey of the tyrant be rescued, for I will contend with those who contend with you, and I will save your children. I will make your oppressors eat their own flesh, and they shall be drunk with their own blood as with wine. Then all flesh shall know that I am the Lord your Saviour, and your Redeemer, the Mighty One of Jacob.

While all other sorts of slander might be forgiven people, blaspheming against the Holy Spirit will not. When people attribute the work of the Holy Spirit to an evil spirit, they are maligning God himself. The point of Jesus here is to challenge those who are attributing the manifest work of the Holy Spirit of God to Satan himself.

While many people of tender conscience have struggled with this text, wondering whether they have committed the unforgivable sin, if you actually look at the context, it seems to be dealing with a very specific type of situation that involves direct and willful opposition and maligning of the work of Christ and the Spirit. Not only disbelieving, but presenting that work of the Spirit as if it were the work of Satan himself. As we look through the rest of the New Testament, we see people like Saul of Tarsus being converted, someone who persecuted the Church, who was murderously opposed to Christ and all that he stood for.

And if Christ can save such a person as an example, then what we're dealing with here is

a very extreme case of willful and persistent rejection of the Spirit of God, an attribution of that which is most holy to that which is most evil, unclean and perverse. Who are the insiders and who are the outsiders? It's a key question throughout this passage. Jesus has just chosen his disciples, the insiders, who will be the core group around him.

Then his own family prove themselves to be outsiders. They don't believe him, they believe he's mad and they try and take him away by force. Then he is challenged by the scribes as hostile outsiders.

And finally we see this contrast between the natural family and his disciples. Jesus speaks about those around him as his brothers, sister, mother. Jesus isn't just an independent teacher, an exorcist.

He's forming a family around him, a group of people who are not just followers but people who are sharing in a community of life with him. A question to consider, why do you think that Jesus discriminated among his wider group of committed disciples and followers, choosing twelve to be especially close to him and three of them to be even closer? In Mark chapter 4 we move into Jesus' use of parables. Once again he's surrounded by a large crowd as he has been in the previous chapters.

He goes out onto the sea on a boat and teaches them on the land from the boat. The fact that each of the gospels see fit to tell us where Jesus was teaching from suggests that maybe it's an interesting and important detail to note. Each one of them think it's important enough to register within their account.

Why is that the case? Perhaps because the sea more generally is associated with the symbolism of the Gentiles. As Jesus goes out on the boat onto the sea just a bit out from the land, it's like a bit of Israel going out upon the sea of the Gentiles and addressing the Jewish crowd from that position. The parable of the sower contains four different types of soil with different responses to the seed that is sown in them.

Seed along the path consumed by the birds, seed on the rocky ground without much soil and scorched by the sun, seed among thorns choked by the thorns, seed on good ground producing thirty, sixty or one hundredfold. Jesus then explains his use of parables. The kingdom of God is a secret known only by those to whom it is given.

This is to fulfil the judgement spoken of by Isaiah in a passage that is very prominent within the New Testament, Isaiah chapter 6. And this passage speaks of the catastrophic judgement of the people. They're hardening so that they will not hear, they will not perceive the message that the prophet has been given to bring to them. However there will be a remnant.

And at the very end of chapter 6, Isaiah's commission moves into a statement about how the people will be restored. Jesus' reference to Isaiah's commission, at the end of which

there is that reference to the holy seed, I think provides us with some basis and background for understanding the parable of the sower, where it is coming from. The passage speaks of the catastrophic judgement of the people, their removal from the land, but there will be a remnant.

And those will be the seed that will be sowed in the land. God sows his people in the land in the return from exile. This is language that we find on several occasions within the Old Testament.

In places like Isaiah chapter 61 verse 11. For as the earth brings forth its sprouts, and as a garden causes what is sown in it to sprout up, so the Lord God will cause righteousness and praise to sprout up before all the nations. In Jeremiah chapter 31 verse 27.

Behold the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will sow the house of Israel and the house of Judah with the seed of man and the seed of beast. Ezekiel chapter 36 verse 9. For behold I am with you, and I will turn to you, and you shall be tilled and sown. And Hosea chapter 2 verse 23.

And I will sow her for myself in the land, and I will have mercy on no mercy. And I will say to not my people, you are my people, and he shall say, you are my God. Jesus is describing what the restoration looks like.

God is sowing the seed in the land. He is restoring the people from exile. He is restoring his presence to them.

He is overcoming in part the judgment spoken of by Isaiah. But even in this situation, there is that hardening of the people. And so Jesus is explaining why even as God is restoring his people, sowing the land with that seed, there are people who are not responding in the proper way.

That seed that is being sown is producing different responses. This frames Jesus' own ministry as God's sowing of the land. His word is being sown among the people and producing fruit of persons who either respond, and in some cases, people who reject that word.

Jesus is the one who is bringing about the fulfillment of these Old Testament prophecies, and the awaited kingdom of God is happening in their midst. But it's not happening in the way that they might have expected. Jesus teaches that a lamp is not brought in to be hidden.

He has not come to the scene in order to hide his identity forever. It will be revealed, things secret are to be brought to light, and things hidden to be made known, and people must act accordingly. Actions right now, the measure that people use with others, has consequences in the future.

Those who perceive the message of the kingdom now will be blessed with more later, whereas those who reject it and are darkened and hardened will lose even what they currently have. The parable of the growing seed is the only parable in Mark not found in either Matthew or Luke, and there are many questions about what is the actual focus of the parable. Is it the secrecy of the seed's growth? Is it the man who scattered the seed? Is it the harvest? Like the parables that surround it, the parable of the growing seed seems to address the question of why things are as they are if the kingdom is present.

The growth of the kingdom occurs without human intervention, and there seems to be an allusion in the reference to the harvest to Joel 3.13 The harvest is certain, but the growth is largely hidden, and it occurs apart from human involvement. It is God's kingdom, and God establishes its process, and the person who is waiting for the kingdom must trust and be patient. In the parable of the mustard seed, Jesus is once again working with Old Testament background.

I think here particularly the parable of Ezekiel in Ezekiel 17, concerning the two eagles and the vine. What Jesus says about the mustard seed does not fit with the actual reality of the mustard seed, but the expectation that it should do seems to arise from the mistaken notion that Jesus is just giving an illustration from nature. He isn't doing that.

The whole point is that the mustard tree is not a grand tree, and yet it is described as becoming very grand. We are to recognize that this isn't a natural situation. Daniel 4 is also about a tree in which the birds take refuge, Nebuchadnezzar and his kingdom and his empire, and what he represents.

However, this mustard seed, against all appearances, is going to be one that outgrows all the great trees of the nations. Although Israel may seem small, although the kingdom may seem weak and insignificant, it will become more important and extensive than all of the great empires that had led to that day, the Babylonians, the Medo-Persians, or the Greeks, or the Romans. It was going to span the whole world, and yet it would rise from the smallest seed of all, a seed altogether without natural promise, and it would be that seed from which the kingdom would grow.

Perhaps we should also think about the stone that becomes a great mountain in Daniel 2. A question to consider, reading these parables of growth, how should we think about the growth of the church relative to the sorts of growth that the world tends to put its store in? What encouragement, what challenge can we draw from these parables for our own experience and view of the world? At the end of Matthew 4, Jesus is followed by his disciples into the boat and out into the sea. There are several Jonah themes within this story. They're going to a realm associated with the Gentiles, as Jonah took a boat to Tarshish, and we should remember that boat stories are rare within the Old Testament.

There is a great storm, a sleeping main character, frightened sailors waking that person up, a miraculous stilling of the storm through some action of the main character, and

then the sailors marvelling. All of this invites us to compare and contrast Jesus with Jonah. In Matthew and Luke, Jesus gives the sign of the prophet Jonah concerning himself, and here I think we are seeing Christ portrayed as a sort of Jonah, and comparing and contrasting may help us to understand something of this story.

Other boats accompany them. Some of the crowd are following them, but it's also a picture of the church, set out on the waves of the Gentile sea in small boats with their saviour to protect them in the storm. And there's a reversal here as well.

Jesus is sleeping as the storm is rising, and then Jesus rises and the storm sleeps. He rebukes the wind and says to the sea, Peace, be still. It's the same sort of language that we have for the exorcisms, rebuking the demons and telling the demons to hold their peace.

The implicit personification of the sea is important here. The sea represents the forces of chaos, the most powerful natural forces that no man contained. The sea can be associated with death, the abyss.

It can be associated with Satan. It can be associated with the Gentiles and their power. And in the Old Testament, God's strength is often declared in his rebuking of the sea, his power over the sea.

In Isaiah chapter 50 verse 2, I make the rivers a desert, their fish stink for lack of water and die of thirst. In Isaiah 51 verses 9 to 10, Awake, awake, put on strength, O arm of the Lord. Awake, as in days of old, the generations of long ago.

Was it not you who cut Rahab in pieces, who pierced the dragon? Was it not you who dried up the sea, the waters of the great deep, who made the depths of the sea a way for the redeemed to pass over? In Psalm 18 verse 15, In Job 26 verses 11 to 12, The power of God over the sea is seen in the creation, it's also seen in the event of the Red Sea crossing and the deliverance of the people from the power of the sea there, not just the sea itself, but also the power of the Gentiles associated with it. Later in the resurrection, Jesus will rise up from his sleep and defeat and calm the sea. And here we're seeing Christ's power over the sea, anticipating his later proof of his power over the grave.

There's a great storm in verse 37, there's a great calm in verse 39, and then there's a great fear in verse 41. All these things correspond to each other. Christ is the more powerful one, the one who's stronger than the strong man, he's the one who's stronger than the power of the wind and the waves, and he's the one who can bring peace to these situations.

The don't you care question of the disciples is answered by Jesus as, why are you so afraid? Have you still no faith response? The question is, who is really in charge? Is it that

we are at the mercy of these natural forces, or is God over all of these things? After this, they arrive in the land of the Gerasenes, it's a Gentile region. And in this story, we don't just have Gentiles, we also have demonic possession, tombs, and pigs. All of these things have a great connection with impurity.

And there's an extensive description of the demon-possessed man. He's breaking shackles, he's cutting himself with stones, a sort of self-imposed stoning. These are destructive powers that he has within him, driving him towards death.

And the people futilely try to bind this strong man. This should remind us of Mark 3, verse 27. The demon or demons address Jesus by his name and title.

Jesus, the son of the most high God, the eschatological judge and king, the one who will condemn them to their ultimate fate. And there seems to be an attempt here to counter Jesus' power by naming him in some sort of magical appeal. Jesus counters by asking the demon what his name was.

And the demon refers to himself as legion, it refers to the number. It's a huge demonic force. But legion also reminds us of the Roman military forces.

The wild boar was the symbol of the Roman legion in Palestine. The demons beg not to be removed from the land, but ask to be placed into the herd of pigs that are on the hillside. In keeping with the allusion to the Roman military forces, the language has a military flavour to it.

Send, permit, rush headlong. And having entered the demons, they don't seem to be able to prevent themselves from careering towards their destruction. The herd is drowned in the waters, like Pharaoh's army was drowned at the Red Sea.

Here another great military force is defeated, a military force that maybe symbolises in part Rome and its power. All of this serves to underline Jesus' power as the son of God and the one who can bind the strong man. And there is an association between the begging demons and the begging garrisons.

When the herdsman flee and tell the people in the city of the garrisons, and the garrisons return and talk to Jesus, they beg for him to depart. They want Christ to depart from their land, just as the demons didn't want to depart from the land. There is a sort of similarity between the begging of the demons then and the begging of the garrisons.

Christ is the one that they want to cast out. He unsettles their social order. And we can see here also a reversal of the scapegoat motif.

The ones that are cast out are the multitude. They're the multitude of the demons, and if indeed they are associated with the garrisons, we're seeing a very interesting reversal here. The garrisons had cast out the demoniac.

That's usually the way that scapegoating works. The multitude cast out one or two persons or a small minority. Whereas what happens in the exorcism is that the multitude are cast out and the multitude run headlong down the hillside.

And it is the individual, the one who was formerly cast out, who is saved. However, in the end of the story we see a reversal of fortunes as the garrisons align themselves with the demons who beg Christ not to let them leave their country and the garrisons who want Christ to leave their country. The multitude that associate themselves with the demons wish to have Christ removed because Christ is a threat to them.

However, the formerly demon-possessed man wants to go with Christ, to be associated with him and to follow him where he goes. In these two stories then, we see Jesus reordering the world in different ways. He quells the storm, but he also drowns uncleanness in the sea.

He shows his power over demonic forces and the power of the unruly sea that symbolises the greatest and most powerful and uncontrollable forces in the world. Mark, to this point, has been a story in large measure about power and conflict and Jesus' supremacy over the demons. And here we see it moved on to an even greater stage as Jesus shows his power over the sea and also his power over demonic legion.

A question to consider. Why do you think that the messianic secret is not being kept in Jesus' instruction to the former demoniac at the end of our passage? What do you notice when comparing and contrasting Jesus' instruction with the man's subsequent actions? The end of Mark 5 relates two entangled events of healing. Both of the people being healed are women and both of them are connected with 12 years.

The woman with the discharge of blood had suffered from it for 12 years and the daughter of Jairus was 12 years of age. The passage begins with Jesus crossing back to the other side of the Sea of Galilee after the events in the lands of the Gerassenes. Jairus was one of the rulers of the synagogue who would have led services.

That Jairus was the ruler of a synagogue also illumines the fact that opposition to Jesus among the religious leaders of Israel was far from total. There were some among them who did look to Jesus as a great teacher and one who was speaking the truth. Jairus' name is given to us unlike the name of most people for whom Christ performed miracles or exorcisms.

Perhaps he was a figure who was known in the early church or perhaps his name itself is important. John Marcus suggests that it might have been the Greek transliteration of names meaning either he enlightens or he awakens. Either of those would be significant in the context.

We also see a number of people in the Old Testament that might be a background here.

A man called Jair the Manassite captured some of the area of Gilead in Numbers 32.41 and Deuteronomy 3.14. Another Jair was one of the judges in Judges 10.3-4. He operated in the same region and Jairus seems to be in that same sort of region too. Jesus is requested to lay his hands on Jairus' daughter and heal her and he goes with Jairus to his house.

But on the way he is thronged by the crowd and there is a woman with a discharge of blood, presumably vaginal. It seems to be a chronic hemorrhaging of blood rather than just abnormally severe menstruation. The effect of this would be to render her permanently unclean.

It's probably one of the reasons why she approaches Jesus in the way that she did. Had she been more open in her approach she would probably not have been able to approach him at all. Many doctors had tried to help her but had just increased her suffering and also consumed all her resources.

So Jesus' healing contrasts with the failure of all the experts. She had heard about Jesus and perhaps we should consider the fact that she was probably confined to the margins of society by her condition. She was in many respects someone from an utterly different station in life from Jairus.

She believes that if she were just to touch Jesus' garments she would be healed. We see similar beliefs in chapter 6 verse 56 and then also in Acts 5.15 where people wanted to be beneath the shadow of Peter as he walked by. And in Acts 19 verse 12 where people would take handkerchiefs or aprons that had touched the skin of Paul and bring them to the sick so that they might be healed by them.

The touch of the woman in this position would have been defiling but not as defiling as touching someone's flesh. A defiled person had to wash themselves and wash their clothes. So it was both themselves, their body and their clothes that were defiled by the touch.

But here there is a life that overcomes impurity and that is transmitted to the woman rather than the woman transmitting her impurity to Christ. This passage is also an illustration of the way in which clothes can function as an extension of a person. A way in which the clothes carry something of the significance and the power of the person.

Jesus inquires who touched him to his disciples' amazement because there's a crowd around. But Jesus recognises what has happened. In calling for the woman who had touched him to make herself known the stage is set for an act of recognition, blessing and inclusion that completes the healing.

She will no longer be an isolated and marginalised individual hiding herself in the crowd. But she will be one who is seen and addressed as daughter by her saviour. When the

woman reveals herself she comes in fear and trembling and falls down before him.

This is a response reminiscent of the way that people respond to appearances of God in scripture. She tells him everything and Jesus blesses her, addresses her as daughter and tells her that her faith has made her well. Faith here is not intellectual belief in some concepts or doctrines.

It's a confident and a daring trust to come near to Christ. The prominence of faith in this story, as in that of Jairus and his daughter that follows, should be seen as related to the language of salvation that occurs in both. The salvation in these stories seems to refer to physical healing and raising of the dead in the case of Jairus' daughter.

The language of faith could be interpreted narrowly too. However, Jesus routinely connects physical and spiritual senses of these things. Faith is a practical confidence to look to Jesus for deliverance, not just in spiritual matters.

And when it's exercised in physical matters it is seen to have a spiritual connotation and significance too. Our tidy divisions between physical and spiritual can obstruct our understanding at such points. Faith looks to Christ in whatever situation it finds itself in, even if it's physical difficulty.

As in the story of Jairus' daughter that follows this, early Christian readers of this story probably figured themselves into the position of the woman with the discharge of blood, recognising her experience as a model for Christian experience more generally. We should do this too. Her being addressed as daughter at the end might also make the reader think of the new family that Jesus is forming around himself.

However, all of this creates a delay, and by the time that Jesus reaches the house of Jairus his daughter is dead. The feared crisis has hit, and there might seem to be nothing more to be done. Jesus calls Jairus, however, to keep his confidence in his sufficiency for the situation.

There are many similarities to the story of Lazarus here, meeting the mourners, saying that the dead person is sleeping, delaying until the person is dead, etc. Jesus performs this miracle with only Peter, James and John of his disciples present. They are privileged witnesses to his power.

And saying that the daughter was sleeping would make people think of the final resurrection, where those sleeping in their graves would be awakened. This is the language that we find in scripture and elsewhere. The dead sleeping and being awakened at the resurrection.

However, the final resurrection was a long distant hope for the end of all things. It wasn't something that could really address the immediacy of the grief that people felt, or at least so they thought. However, Jesus can refer to death this way because in him the

resurrection and the life had entered into Jairus' house.

Jesus takes the girl by the hand and addresses her, telling her to arise. The use of Aramaic here, the fact that the original statement is preserved in its original language, gives the reader some sense of the immediacy of this powerful speech act. These were not regular words, but words with a mysterious might, and they seem to be preserved for us in their original form for this reason.

We see a similar thing in Mark 7, verse 34, where the words spoken to the man whose eyes were opened is also retained for us. The reference to a rising naturally, and I think appropriately, makes us think of the resurrection. And maybe giving her something to eat is also in part to make us think of later proofs of Jesus' own resurrection given in taking food, and not merely a reference to the girl's recovery of strength.

Jesus once again strictly instructs those present to keep the raising of the girl a secret, although his taking Peter, James and John with him makes clear that he wanted the event to be witnessed and later spoken of openly. However, to tell it at that point in time, before Jesus' own resurrection had disclosed his true power over death, would be premature. That had to wait until after his own resurrection had taken place.

A question to consider. The woman with the issue of blood suffered with that condition for 12 years, and the daughter of Jairus was 12 years old. Why does Mark record these details? What deeper significance to these healings might be suggested by them? Mark chapter 6 begins with Jesus teaching in his hometown of Nazareth, with his disciples with him.

He teaches in the synagogue and many see what he is doing, recognise the wisdom he is speaking with and the power of the works that he is performing. However, it seems as if the true recognition that this invites is immediately lost, as their presumed familiarity with his family and his origins prevents them from recognising him. Indeed, rather than responding properly, it leads them to take offence at him.

The psychological movement here is really remarkable, yet illuminating. Jesus addresses a saying to them about the failure of prophets, hometowns and households to honour them. The familiarity that people have with a prophet can lead them to domesticate them and fail to appreciate the power of their message.

We can often attempt to do this when we encounter something that challenges or unsettles us. Like the people of Nineveh, rather than moving from the remarkable character of something to reconsidering ourselves, our behaviour and our thinking in light of it, we try to domesticate it, to subdue it to that which is familiar to us, to something that poses neither challenge nor threat to us. We try to put the new wine into the old wineskins, to squeeze the unsettling idea into categories that will tame it, by naming it.

This is always a danger for people who are familiar with the things of God. At a certain point, eyes can glaze over and a word heard enough times can be heard no more. Familiarity breeds both contempt and insensitivity.

Jesus couldn't do any mighty work there because of their unbelief, not because he was without the power, but because they had no faith to receive it. We should remember that Jesus didn't usually go out of his way to heal people, rather people came to him. And it's quite likely that the problem here is simply that only a very few sick people even bothered to approach him seeking healing.

Everyone else, inoculated by their sense of familiarity, just stayed home. Jesus calls the twelve here and sends them out two by two, giving them authority over the unclean spirits. The accenting of that authority that they have over the unclean spirits is in keeping with Mark's treatment of Jesus as the anointed champion doing battle with the forces of evil.

They're sent out in twos, like spies preparing for the later conquest in Numbers chapter 13. They are sent out without provisions, dependent upon the people that they are sent to for their sustenance and their supplies. It's a test of hospitality, as we see in the story of Sodom in Genesis chapter 19, or as in the story of Rahab and Jericho in the book of Joshua.

If they're not welcomed, they will shake the dust off their feet, marking out the place for judgment in the future. As they go, they extend the message of the kingdom, calling people to repent in preparation for the coming reign of the Lord. And the message is confirmed with attendant signs.

News of this, Jesus' ministry and the ministry of his disciples, comes to King Herod. Herod was largely a puppet ruler, but being called king here may highlight the conflict between two kings, or between two royal figures, like King Saul opposed the anointed David. Herod believes that Jesus is John the Baptist resurrected.

There's clearly a resemblance between the two. As John performed no mighty signs, we must presume that the resemblance was chiefly in the boldness and the content of their teaching. Herod had a complicated relationship with John, which perhaps reminds us of King Saul's relationship with the prophet Samuel, who anointed David.

Herod heard John gladly, even though John rebuked him for his sin in having his brother's wife. And the fact that John would rebuke Herod to his face is an indication of John's prophetic boldness. The story of John the Baptist plays off the story of Elijah.

Herod is like Ahab, he's spurred on by his manipulative wife, Herodias, who's similar to the character of Jezebel. John has already been compared to the character of Elijah in the way that he dresses, in his ministry in the wilderness, and in other respects. So it's not

surprising to us that he is presented in a similar sort of relationship with the king and his manipulative wife, in this case, as Elijah had with Ahab and Jezebel.

The description of Herod's birthday feast reminds us of events in the book of Esther. In that story it begins with a feast, and there are several details within it that are repeated within the story of John the Baptist and Herod. In Esther 2, verse 9, we are told, Furthermore, the declaration of the king that he would give the woman who requests up to half his kingdom is something that we find in the book of Esther again.

In chapter 5, verse 3, verse 6, and chapter 7, verse 2, Herodias in this story plays a sort of anti-Mordecai to her daughter, just as Mordecai is the guardian of Esther who advises her on how to save her people, so Herodias is the one who advises her daughter on how to take the life of the prophet. And the daughter is like Esther, but a reversal of Esther, one who uses the favour of the king to destroy rather than to protect life. Herodias is also like Zeresh, the wife of Haman who spurred him on in his attempt to kill Mordecai, the man who wouldn't bow the knee to him.

We see this in Esther chapter 5, verse 9 and following. The whole story makes Herod look very weak too. He's manipulated by the women around him.

He's called a king, but he's not really a king, and his behaviour reveals his weakness too. The head of John the Baptist is presented as if it were a platter at a feast. The flesh of the prophet is food.

And this is immediately followed by a contrasting meal as Jesus feeds the five thousand. While the party of Herod feasts upon the flesh of the saints, Jesus miraculously feeds his followers. One final thing to reflect upon, Herod was wondering whether John had been resurrected.

The resemblance between Jesus and John the Baptist was quite noticeable. However, Jesus was not John the Baptist raised from the dead. Nevertheless, there is a foreshadowing of Jesus being put to death and of his resurrection here.

A question to consider. The people of Nazareth recognise Jesus as the carpenter, the son of Mary. While King Herod recognises Jesus as John the Baptist, whom he beheaded.

What do these forms of recognition or misrecognition say about the people who make them? How might reflecting upon such bad examples help to instruct us in adopting a more accurate recognition of who Christ is? In the second half of Mark chapter 6, the apostles return from their mission with news of their success. With Jesus they go to a deserted location to rest for a while. Like Jesus, they need time to refresh themselves and regain their strength.

And once again, Jesus and his disciples are treating the wilderness as if it were a base of operations. This might be reminiscent of the story of David when pursued by King Saul,

or of the story of Elijah the prophet. The wilderness is the natural place to reform Israel.

It's reminiscent of God's original formation of his people in the wilderness after he led them up out of Egypt. John the Baptist was the voice of one crying in the wilderness in chapter 1. And the frequency with which Jesus spends time in the wilderness recalls his message and location. The sea crossings might also draw the mind of the hearer of this text back to Exodus and the Red Sea crossing.

However, even though they tried to get away for some solitude, they are immediately recognised and the crowd follows after them. Jesus takes compassion upon the crowd as they are like sheep without a shepherd. That expression, sheep without a shepherd, is one that is also used to describe Israel after a defeat in 1 Kings 22 verse 17.

It's also used to describe the state of Israel under the wicked and neglectful leaders in Ezekiel chapter 34. And to describe the appointment of Joshua in Numbers chapter 27 verses 15 to 21. Moses spoke to the Lord saying, So the Lord said to Moses, And he shall stand before Eliezer the priest, who shall inquire for him by the judgment of the Urim before the Lord.

At his word they shall go out, and at his word they shall come in, both he and all the people of Israel with him, the whole congregation. And Ezekiel chapter 34 verses 11 to 15 provides an even more startling background. For thus says the Lord God, And I will rescue them from all the places where they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness.

And I will bring them out from the peoples and gather them from the countries, and will bring them into their own land. And I will feed them on the mountains of Israel, by the ravines, and in all the inhabited places of the country. I will feed them with good pasture, and on the mountain heights of Israel shall be their grazing land.

There they shall lie down in good grazing land, and on rich pasture they shall feed on the mountains of Israel. I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I myself will make them lie down, declares the Lord God. Hearing all of these verses in the background gives Jesus' statement added texture.

Jesus is recognising that Israel have been ravaged by their enemies, neglected and preyed upon by their leaders, and that they need a faithful, divinely appointed leader over them. Jesus is like his namesake Joshua, the one who will play the part of the shepherd for the neglected sheep, and will bring them into the promised pasture. However, he is also God himself come to shepherd the abandoned flock.

We might also hear hints of the story of the Exodus in the background here. Moses was the shepherd who led the flock of Israel through the wilderness with his shepherd's rod. Jesus also crosses the sea, leads the flock and provides them with bread in the

wilderness.

Jesus challenges the disciples to give the crowd something to eat. However, the scale of that task is suggested by their response. 200 denarii would be about half a year's wages.

Jesus instructs them to tally up what food they do have to hand, five loaves and two fish. The five loaves might recall the five loaves of 1 Samuel 21, which David received when he was fleeing from Saul, from the priests at Nob. Jesus then tells them to sit down in groups on the green grass.

Why mention the green grass? Well, maybe because they're sheep. Jesus is the shepherd and he's providing good pasture land for a formerly shepherdless flock. They sit down in groups of hundreds and fifties.

That's an interesting detail. As is the fact that only the men are numbered. This suggests that they are like a military company.

Military companies could be divided into hundreds and fifties and that sort of group. In Exodus chapter 13 verse 18, Israel left Egypt and in Joshua chapter 1 verses 14, Israel entered Canaan in fifties. They were also numbered apart from women and children in places like Exodus chapter 12 verse 37.

Here they are being given bread in the wilderness as Israel was fed by the manna in Exodus chapter 16. In Exodus chapter 18, Israel is also divided into thousands, hundreds, fifties and tens under appointed leaders. And Jesus, by telling his disciples to do all of these things, seems to be highlighting their role as his ministers, acting on his behalf towards the flock of which he is the chief shepherd.

He blesses and breaks the loaves and divides the fish and the disciples distribute them. But it seems as if the miracle is taking place in their hands, not in his hands. We shouldn't miss the Eucharistic themes here.

Jesus treats the bread in much the same way as in the Last Supper. He takes it, gives thanks or blesses it, he breaks it and he gives it. If we compare this account with Mark chapter 14 verses 17 to 23 and the description of the Last Supper there, further parallels can be seen, including the fact that it is in the evening, the eaters are reclining and that all partake.

All of this seems to offer a picture of the order of the church. You have Christ as the chief shepherd, you have the under-shepherds of the apostles and they minister to people who are divided into different groups. John the Baptist is Elijah and in the previous account he is being described in a way that recalls the story of Elijah in his conflict with Ahab and Jezebel.

Jesus is the successor, he is like Elisha. Elisha performs a multiplication of loaves in 2

Kings chapter 4 verses 42 to 44. A man came from Baal-shalisha, bringing the man of God bread of the first fruits, 20 loaves of barley and fresh ears of grain in his sack.

And Elisha said, Give to the men that they may eat. But his servant said, How can I set this before a hundred men? So he repeated, Give them to the men that they may eat. For thus says the Lord, They shall eat and have some left.

So he set it before them, and they ate and had some left, according to the word of the Lord. Jesus then performs a similar miracle. The parallels really aren't difficult to hear.

But on a much greater scale. Not just feeding 100 people, feeding 5000 people. Performing an Elisha-like miracle at this point may also cast the succession of Jesus from the Elijah-like John in sharper relief.

The story of the feeding of the 5000 is told in each of the four gospels. And each gospel includes the detail of the 12 baskets of fragments gathered up afterwards. It's obviously very important.

Why 12? Perhaps it's in association with the fullness of Israel. Perhaps it's to make the point that each of the 12 has a basket apiece. In keeping with the ecclesiological themes, they are each equal partakers in the ministry of Christ.

We should also remember that the story comes after they have returned from their mission. Mission to the last is followed by ministry to the flock. Immediately after this, Jesus dismisses the crowd and makes his disciples go before him to the other side in the boat.

While he goes up on the mountain alone to pray. Perhaps we might think of Moses ascending Mount Sinai here. But if so, I think it would only be a faint illusion.

The boat, however, is caught in a storm, as at the end of Mark chapter 4. Jesus comes to them around the time of the dawn, walking on the sea. And there's a peculiar detail mentioned at the end of verse 48. He meant to pass them by.

They, seeing him, are terrified, thinking that he is a ghost. At which point Jesus assures them, gets in the boat with them and the wind ceases. Once again, I think that there are anticipations of his later resurrection here.

Not least in the uncertainty about whether they are seeing a ghost. Although I think there's more going on here. A number of scholars have connected the walking on the water with the Exodus and the Red Sea crossing.

And have pointed to verses such as Isaiah chapter 43 verse 16 or chapter 51 verses 9 to 10 and Psalm 77 verse 19. However, Richard Hayes suggests another background. In Job chapter 9 verse 8, in the Septuagint translation, God is described as the one who walks

upon the sea as upon dry ground.

If this is the primary connection, it may also help us to understand the reference to Jesus' intention to pass them by. Because just a few verses later, in Job chapter 9 verse 11, we read, Behold, he passes by me, and I see him not. He moves on, but I do not perceive him.

In Job 9, God's walking upon the sea is associated with the mystery of God's ways. And the way that he passes by without our truly perceiving him. Mark may be telling his account in a way that helps the hearer of his passage recall these verses from Job.

The reference to passing by might also bring to mind Exodus chapter 33 verses 17 to 23 and Exodus chapter 34 verse 6, where God reveals his glory to Moses, passing before him while shielding him from the sight. Passing by is repeatedly referred to in this passage, connecting the notion with the revelation of God's glory. When Jesus speaks to his disciples, he tells them, Take heart, it is I. Do not be afraid.

It is I could also be translated, I am, a reference to the name of God, and that expression, do not be afraid, is commonly found when God appears to his people. The event of walking on the sea then is, for Mark, a sort of divine epiphany in which the identity of Jesus is being revealed. But although the disciples are astounded, they have insensitive hearts and they don't truly understand.

We are told that this is related to their failure to understand the loaves. What is that connection? Perhaps the connection is that their fear arises from an inability to appreciate the manner of Jesus' presence with and empowering of them. He has equipped them to cast out demons.

He has enabled them to multiply the loaves. And his spirit and his presence is also with them in the boat facing the wind. A question to consider.

Reading the story of the feeding of the five thousand and of Jesus walking on the water, how can we better understand ourselves as the church in light of them? In Mark chapter 7, the Pharisees once again challenged Jesus on account of his disciples' behaviour. In chapter 2, it was on account of their supposed breaking of the Sabbath as they walked through the grain fields. Here it is due to their failure to ritually cleanse before eating.

It's an objection story. It begins with the objections of the Pharisees and some of the scribes from Jerusalem. It's followed by an address to the people.

And then it's concluded with a private discussion with the disciples. When the Pharisees and the scribes challenge Jesus concerning his disciples' failure to ritually wash their hands, Jesus responds by referencing Isaiah chapter 29 verse 13. He argues that they undermine the commandment of God through their tradition.

They seek to reject the commandment in order to establish their tradition. The two are presented as antithetically related. Jesus underlines the importance of the commandment to honour parents by adding to his reference of the fifth commandment the citation of Exodus chapter 21 verse 17.

The use of the Corban vow to defraud one's neighbour, in this case parents, from what is due to them is putting the love of God at odds with love to neighbour, which should be its necessary corollary. They're engaging in a sort of casuistry designed to circumvent the intent of the law rather than to establish it. We've already seen this with the Sabbath.

Their very particular observance in all these little details actually offers them means to avoid obedience, to avoid what the Lord wants from them. The verse that Jesus quotes in Isaiah chapter 29 verse 13 is important because of its context also. In verses 9 to 14 of that chapter we read, For the Lord has poured out upon you a spirit of deep sleep, and has closed your eyes, the prophets, and covered your heads, the seers.

And the vision of all this has become to you like the words of a book that is sealed. When men give it to one who can read, saying, Read this, he says, I cannot, for it is sealed. And when they give the book to one who cannot read, saying, Read this, he says, I cannot read.

And the Lord said, Because this people draw near with their mouth and honour me with their lips, while their hearts are far from me, and their fear of me is a commandment taught by men, therefore, behold, I will again do wonderful things with this people, with wonder upon wonder, and the wisdom of their wise men shall perish, and the discernment of their discerning men shall be hidden. The applicability of the judgement here to Jesus' ministry and the responses to it should be immediately apparent. Jesus doesn't directly answer the Pharisees' question, rather he levels a counter-accusation.

He fundamentally challenges the grounds on which they are making the accusation. They are falsely claiming authority as arbiters of proper adherence to God's law, while violating it themselves. Perhaps hand-washing was for them originally a supererogatory matter of special cleanness that could be voluntarily adopted, but which, through the development of the tradition, gradually became an absolute standard and a way in which to judge others.

Tradition is to be judged by Scripture, and hypocrisy is a constant problem. They draw near to God with their lips, but their hearts are far from him. And Jesus, throughout his teaching, focuses upon purity of the heart, that's what matters.

The point is not primarily here arguing against food laws, but against the Pharisaic misuse of the tradition. Even the law itself highlighted that it was what came out that was the problem. Jesus goes on to teach the people that what comes out of the mouth is

what really matters.

The importance of the tongue is that it manifests the heart. We should beware of seeing this simply as a light dismissal of the food laws, rather than as a disclosure of their true rationale. Jesus is fond of highlighting the radical antitheses that one encounters in the prophets, for instance, that pit the external practice over against its inner rationale and purpose.

So, for instance, mercy against sacrifice. I desire mercy, not sacrifice. The point is not that sacrifice shouldn't be made, or that it should be negated.

The tradition isn't being rejected wholesale. The point is that sacrifice needs to be understood in terms of mercy. In verse 19 here, though, there's something a bit more radical.

Thus he declared all foods clean. It's an extremely important statement. Is Jesus merely saying that all foods have always already been clean? Or is he overturning the system of food laws? I think there's a bit of both.

Jesus' argument about digestion is a timeless one. It's not dependent upon some new event in history. This has always been the case, that people take the food into themselves, and it doesn't actually pollute their heart.

It's a matter of just going through the digestive system. Yet the statement itself implies that Jesus actually made a performative utterance, something that changed the status of foods by his statement. In Acts chapter 10, verses 10 to 16, I think we see more about this.

And he became hungry and wanted something to eat. But while they were preparing it, he fell into a trance and saw the heavens opened, and something like a great sheet descending, being let down by its four corners upon the earth. In it were all kinds of animals and reptiles and birds of the air.

And there came a voice to him, Rise, Peter, kill and eat. But Peter said, By no means, Lord, for I have never eaten anything that is common or unclean. And the voice came to him again a second time, What God has made clean, do not call common.

This happened three times, and the thing was taken up at once to heaven. You can see the same thing in Romans chapter 14, verse 20. Everything is indeed clean, but it is wrong for anyone to make another stumble by what he eats.

What I believe that Jesus is doing here is laying the foundation for the later abrogation of the food laws. What he is showing is that the food laws did not depend upon the inherent cleanness or uncleanness of the foods in themselves. Rather, clean and unclean foods were to be observed as signs of the separateness of Israel from the nations, and of their

special relationship with God.

They were symbols, they weren't the reality of cleanness or uncleanness. That lay in the heart. Once the Gentiles were included, the food laws could be left behind, because their rationale was never the defiling power of foods in themselves, but rather their symbolic import.

A question to consider. Jesus emphasises the absolute importance of the handed down tradition to the Pharisees, and the way that they are attached to it over God's commandment. As tradition ostensibly functions to guard the authority of the commandment, what are some of the ways that we can guard against our traditions being valued in themselves, merely for their own sakes, in ways that set them at odds with the commandment and the word of God? At the end of Mark chapter 7, Jesus goes to the region of Tyre and Sidon.

This might recall the story of Elijah, who stayed with the widow of Zarephath, and also raised her child from the dead, much as Jesus delivers the child of this Syrophenician woman living in that region. The woman begged Jesus to deliver her daughter, and Jesus seems to deny her request, telling her that the children should be fed first, that it is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs. Jesus doesn't send her away, but he gives her a seemingly very harsh response, possibly quoting a popular proverb, rebuffing her with an unflattering statement about Gentiles that seems to place them outside of the realm of God's blessings.

Jesus' mission is not to people in general, but to Israel especially, although the claim that the children should be fed first holds the door open a crack. The woman, however, responds to Jesus' presentation of an obstacle by taking that obstacle and turning it around to her benefit. By this point we should have picked up on the fact that Jesus seldom goes out of his way to heal people, nor does he make things easy for the people who want to be healed by him.

People have to come to Jesus. Those wanting healing or deliverance often face obstacles or initial rejection and have to beg and persist in order to get anything. But we must recognise that such dogged persistence is exactly what Jesus wants from them.

In presenting these sorts of obstacles, Jesus is calling for strength of faith in the petitioner, expecting them to wrestle with him until they get their answer. The obstacles aren't proof that Jesus doesn't want to heal and deliver people. Rather, his healings and deliverance is called for faith from their recipients.

Where such persistent faith is lacking, people are not healed. This is an example of the sort of prayer that we should practice. The deliverance of the daughter of the Saraphanician woman is also an anticipation of Christ's deliverance going to the Gentiles more generally, and the surrounding context is very much focused on Gentiles.

Jesus continues to travel in Gentile regions, in the region of Decapolis, and there's a deaf man with a speech impediment brought to him, and people beg him to lay his hands on this man. Once again, the begging suggests the importance of persistence. Jesus takes the man away from the crowd, puts his fingers in his ears, and using spittle, presumably on his finger, touches the man's tongue.

He looks up to heaven, sighs and speaks a word of healing in Aramaic. Once again, the original Aramaic of a powerful healing utterance is preserved for us by Mark, just as he did in the case of Jairus' daughter. The man's ears are opened and his tongue is unshackled, suggesting the removal of bonds maybe that Satan has placed upon him. All of this recalls Isaiah 35, verses 5-6.

We should read this story alongside the parallel story a few verses later, in chapter 8, verses 22-26. The parallels between these two stories are quite pronounced when we look closely, and it should be noted that it is also a fulfilment of Isaiah 35, verses 5-6, the eyes of the blind being opened. We should remember how important Isaiah's prophecies are for Mark within his gospel.

Having instructed the healed deaf mute not to tell anyone, the released tongue of the man cannot help but declare what Jesus has done for him, and the people's response is astonishment and praise. He has done all things well. After this, Jesus is once again surrounded by a great crowd that lacks food, and we have another miraculous feeding account.

In an event highly reminiscent of the earlier feeding of the 5,000, Jesus repeats the pattern of the Lord's Supper in verse 6, once again making his disciples minister to a large flock. However, this time the flock seems to be largely Gentile. The similarities with the earlier feeding of the 5,000 suggest that we are expected to recognise a connection between the two, and that is underlined later on in this chapter.

These are two parts of a single story. Both of these events anticipate the future ministry of the disciples, as they will minister Jesus to the multitudes, both Jews and Gentiles. This seems to be in a largely Gentile region.

It continues the Gentile focus of the last two stories. Jesus feeds not only Jews, but presumably many Gentiles too. We should think back to the conversation with the Syrophenician woman.

Gentiles, who might be dismissed by dogs by some, are here feasting on the same food as the children had enjoyed. There is the feeding of the children first, and now the feeding of those who are the Gentiles. The first feeding involves the feeding of 5,000 people.

This may be connected with Israel's military ordering. And there are 12 baskets gathered

up. Here there are 4,000 people, maybe connected with the four corners of the earth, and there are seven baskets gathered up.

The 5,000 is the primary act, but the Gentiles are blessed with the Jews, and there are leftovers for others. There is a superabundance, more than enough for others besides Israel. There are five loaves in the first feeding.

There are seven loaves in the second. Altogether that makes 12 loaves. Twelve loaves represented Israel in the showbread.

We've already noted that the five loaves might be connected with the five loaves taken of the showbread by David in 1 Samuel chapter 21. So together the loaves given to these two groups make a new 12. There are 12 baskets gathered up on the first occasion, and then seven baskets gathered up on the second occasion.

Twelve for Israel, perhaps seven for the fullness of the nations. These are both significant numbers in Scripture, numbers that suggest some type of fullness. Twelve associated with Israel, seven associated with the days of creation, the scope of creation more generally.

Jesus is bringing together a new people, and all of these events connected with the Gentiles suggest that they are an important part of what Christ will perform, and his disciples will be ministering this. A question to consider. What are some of the ways in which these stories give us an image of the Gentiles' spiritual participation in the awaited kingdom of God? Our passage in Mark chapter 8 is dominated by themes of perception and lack of perception.

The Pharisees begin by asking Jesus for a sign, but he refuses to give them one. He's already given them more signs than they would know what to do with. In Isaiah chapter 29 verses 13 to 14 we see something of this prophesied.

Therefore, behold, I will again do wonderful things with this people, with wonder upon wonder, and the wisdom of their wise men shall perish, and the discernment of their discerning men shall be hidden. Jesus warns his disciples about the leaven of the Pharisees and of Herod, which his disciples don't understand. The point of Jesus' teaching is that teaching is like leaven, which when hidden in hearts produces loaves.

Jesus is forming a new set of people as loaves, cutting off the old leaven of the teaching of the Pharisees and the Sadducees and the Herodians and others, and introducing the new leaven of his word and his spirit. Leaven is like a tradition, it's passed on from loaf to loaf, and the disciples need to make a clean break with the loaves of the religious and political leaders of Israel. That theme of leaven also reminds us of the Feast of Unleavened Bread, the leaving of Egypt, leaving behind that principle of life in Egypt, in cutting off the leaven.

The disciples have to take the exact same approach to the teaching of the religious leaders of the nation. Yet the disciples start discussing the fact that they only have one loaf of bread, is that what Jesus is talking about? Jesus rebukes them for their failure to perceive. They had only just been participants in two great miracles where bread was greatly multiplied.

On both occasions they had gathered up an abundance of extra bread at the end, and yet here they are worrying that they might not have enough bread. They have eyes but aren't seeing, and ears but aren't hearing. They aren't truly recognising whom they are serving.

While they should resist the leaven of the Pharisees and Herod, they should receive their bread from Jesus, who distributes it to them. The healing of the blind man at Bethsaida that follows closely matches the healing of the deaf man in 7.31-37. And if we pay close attention to the details of this passage, it will lead us to ask certain questions. Why does Jesus take him out of the village to heal him? Why does he say don't return to the village at the end? Why does he put spittle upon his eyes? Why is there a two-stage healing? Why does the man see men like trees walking? And a number of people have questioned the efficacy of Jesus' healing power.

Jesus maybe just can't do this miracle enough, so he needs to have a second go at it. Maybe Jesus is using some traditional methods of healing. And maybe, according to some, Jesus is not actually performing a miracle.

He's just manipulating his eyes in a particular way to give him sight. Now if we think this passage is primarily about Jesus demonstrating his power, and that that's all that's going on, the question of the two-stage miracle will become a keen one. It will be quite difficult to answer because clearly the miracle does not seem to take the first time round.

It only half works. Is Jesus lacking in miraculous power? Or is there a problem with the man, for instance? Maybe he has a lack of faith that is an obstacle, or something along those lines. I think what helps us here is recognising that the miracles are frequently also signs.

In the Old Testament, human beings are compared to trees. You have empires compared to great trees spreading out their branches for the birds of the air to live in. Psalm 1 says that the righteous man is like a tree, growing by streams of waters.

Elsewhere in Scripture, you have that sort of imagery taken up, and the people of God are like a great forest. Perhaps what we're seeing in the two-stage healing is something that's related to the broader context in a parabolic manner. The disciples are people who have just been blamed for a failure to see.

They see, but they do not perceive. There is a two-stage healing that needs to take place

in them. Their eyes have been opened to some degree, and they see something about who Christ is, but they don't see him clearly yet.

They don't truly perceive his mission and what's going on with him. They don't see the kingdom mission. What they probably see is a group of trees walking around, a new group of men and women who will be like the forest of God.

But they don't truly appreciate what's happening. Maybe Mark is drawing upon the imagery of Isaiah, where you have the images of trees growing up and being cut down, all this forestry imagery. Jesus is the root that grows up out of dry ground.

He's the branch growing out of Jesse. So maybe that imagery is playing in the background. The man is taken out of the village.

He's told, as it were, to follow Christ outside of the village. And then Christ gives him his sight. But he does not yet have true perception.

His eyes are opened, but he does not yet truly perceive. He sees some things, but he sees men walking around as if trees. So at this initial stage, he's perceiving to a degree, but there's a second stage of healing that must occur.

In the section that immediately follows this, there's another case of people failing to perceive in a two-stage sort of testing. Jesus goes with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi, and he asks his disciples, Who do people say that I am? They give him different answers, and he presses them for a further revelation. And Jesus is told by Peter that he thinks that he is the Christ.

Yet even then, Peter does not clearly perceive. As we see from what he says afterwards, he tries to resist Christ going to his death in Jerusalem. Peter is another blind man who needs a two-stage healing.

I think then there might also be a clue as to why it's trees and why they're walking. This is the beginning of the walking segment, or the way segment of Mark's Gospel. They're on the way to Jerusalem, and this comes at the very outset of the turn in the narrative towards Jerusalem.

This two-stage healing of a blind man introduces the section, and at the very end of the section, at Jericho, just before he arrives at Jerusalem, he sees Bartimaeus and heals him by the roadside. Yet, another blind man. So that movement towards Jerusalem is framed by the healing of two blind people.

And as you read through the Gospel more generally, we can see that the image of blindness is used to reflect spiritual blindness. So the healing of the blind man is not just a demonstration of God's power over the elements, the physical body. It's a picture of the spiritual state of the disciples and others, and what needs to still take place in them.

Those verses from Isaiah that Jesus alludes to are quite key within Mark, and elsewhere in Luke and the other Gospels. He talks about seeing you shall see and not perceive. It's the judgement upon Israel.

And even Jesus' disciples suffer from it to some extent. All these things he's doing in front of them, and yet they still cannot truly perceive who he is and what he's doing. Now, why are they trees walking around? Maybe a clue is to be found in what Jesus says to his disciples in the crowd after he has rebuked Peter.

If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. Now, the cross is such a familiar symbol to us that it's lost much of its weight. We probably don't think about it enough in terms of its associations and its particularity, because it represents everything for us.

It stands for all these things that are associated with Christianity. And the weight of associations has led us to forget the particularity of its associations. Sometimes even its association as an instrument of torture, an imperial power.

One of the things that we can forget is its association with wood. It's a tree. And here, this might be part of what's going on.

These are men expected to take up their cross and follow Jesus. So Jesus is walking around, as it were, with this big log on his back, walking around like a tree, and followed by other people who are walking with symbolic trees on their back, ready to be crucified. And the disciples' vision and yet failure to perceive is associated with a broader failure to perceive that the cross is not just representing the crucifixion, but what Christ will achieve there.

The cross is not just a tree. It's also the victory of Christ. As they leave the village, as they leave their background and follow Christ, their eyes are initially opened, and they see themselves as men carrying trees towards Jerusalem, ready to be crucified.

But then there comes a later stage, with the resurrection of Christ and the gift of the Spirit at Pentecost, as Jesus lays his hands on the man's eyes, so he will give his Holy Spirit to them, and their eyes will be opened to perceive in a new way. And they will see it's not just men walking around as trees, it's not just a wooden cross as an instrument of torture, it's a means of victory, and it's Christ leading his disciples to Jerusalem, to suffering and death, but finally towards victory. After the incident with the healing of the blind man, Jesus asks his disciples who people say that he is.

The masses seem to identify him with John the Baptist, Elijah, or one of the prophets. Jesus' ministry very naturally follows from that of John the Baptist, and has many resemblances to him and Elijah. Like Elijah and John, Jesus spends much of his time in the wilderness.

The way he teaches, the way he acts, the miracles he performs, are like the actions of the prophets. Peter, however, confesses that Jesus is the Christ, the Anointed One, the Awaited Messiah. The disciples are strictly charged to tell no one.

Once again, the time will come to do so, but it is not yet. And at this point, there is a transition in the narrative. Jesus begins to teach his disciples about his coming death, teaching them in considerable detail.

He will not only be raised, but he will be raised on the third day. There doesn't seem to be a mention about the manner of his death, though, although you will see later on he talks about taking up the cross. Peter, then, showing his lack of perception, rebukes Christ.

He's playing the role of Satan. He's not actually possessed. And Jesus' response to him, in many ways, could be seen as, get back in line.

In 2 Samuel 19, verses 21-22, we have a similar statement. And we see another way in which this is expressed in the incident in the Garden of Gethsemane, as Christ rebukes Peter for taking the ear of Malchus, the high priest's servant. Those verses read, He is the preeminent apostle, and he still doesn't get it.

Suffering is absolutely essential to Christ's identity and his vocation as Messiah. To follow Christ requires denying yourself. It requires the crucifixion of the ego, the I that insists upon its own, the I that insists upon what's due to it, the I that insists upon its possessions, its privilege, its status, all these things.

Those must be sacrificed. We must be crucified with Christ, so that it is no longer we who live, but Christ who lives in us. And the act of taking up our cross is marking ourselves out for death and by death.

We're also bearing a mark that associates us with outsiders from the community, from the political order. We're being expelled from it. We're being treated as rebels and revolutionaries.

And this cross is not just something that we submit to passively. It's something that we take up in a committed act, and we walk with it. We walk with it behind Christ.

We're following one who has taken up his own cross, and his example is the one that we must follow. The one who would save his life will lose it. The one who wants to gain the whole world, but loses his soul, loses that thing that is most precious.

In taking up our cross, we are disgorging ourselves from the order that holds us in thrall with possessions, with status, with honour, with all these things that so occupy our thoughts and desires. And we are becoming the living dead, those who no longer have the stake that we once had within this existing order. Those who have given up

everything in order that we might gain what is most precious.

A question to consider. What are some of the things that you notice as you reflect upon the principles of honour and shame that are explored in verse 38? Mark chapter 9 is a turning point in the narrative. If the baptism of Christ initiated the first phase of Jesus' ministry, the transfiguration initiates the second.

In the first phase, Jesus announced the kingdom, and in the second phase he announces his coming death. And a great shadow will come over the story at this point. Our passage begins with a strange statement about people not tasting death until they've seen the Son of Man coming in his glory.

In each of the synoptic gospels, the transfiguration comes after such a statement. The transfiguration seems to be an anticipation of the later coming of Christ. Daniel 7 and the glory of the Son of Man, for instance.

It anticipates that. It previews the glory of the resurrected Christ and also the glory of his later coming. In 2 Peter chapter 1 verses 16 to 18, Peter describes this.

We ourselves heard this very voice, born from heaven, for we were with him on the holy mountain. In this passage, Peter is arguing that even though people are saying that Christ may not be coming after all, that the disciples and the apostles are dying out and Christ still hasn't shown up, that they saw his glory on the holy mountain and they know that Christ will reveal his glory in his coming, which I believe refers in that context to the judgment upon Jerusalem in AD 70 and the end of the old covenant leading to the establishment of the new covenant on a new level. It happens after six days.

This chronological detail is strange here. I mean, what is it being dated from? Is it really something that tells us anything of any significance? Maybe it's connected to the Sabbath. After six days is the seventh day, the Sabbath.

It could also, I think, more likely be associated with Exodus chapter 24 verses 16 to 18. The glory of the Lord dwelt on Mount Sinai and the cloud covered it six days. And on the seventh day he called to Moses out of the midst of the cloud.

Now the appearance of the glory of the Lord was like a devouring fire on the top of the mountain in the sight of the people of Israel. Moses entered the cloud and went up on the mountain. Jesus brings with him Peter, James and John.

These are the three key disciples, the ones that he chooses in particular to be with him on specific occasions. They're the ones that see Jairus' daughter being healed, raised from the dead. They're the ones that go with him to the Garden of Gethsemane.

And so they have a particular close access to him. Peter will be the lead disciple in the ministry of the early church. And James and John also have pivotal roles to perform.

On the Mount of Transfiguration, Jesus is transfigured. His glory is seen. This is not just a reflected glory.

This is the glory of Christ himself, a glory from within. And he's accompanied by Moses and Elijah. Some have seen this as a reference to the law and the prophets.

They also have similarities. They're great witnesses. They're wilderness forerunners.

They go before Joshua, who enters into the land, and Elisha, who performs great miracles within the land. And both of them seem to be connected to the character of John the Baptist, who is a forerunner of Christ. John the Baptist is the one who's in the wilderness.

He's associated with Moses in some ways there. He's also one who dresses like Elijah, who has conflicts with Herod and Herodias that are similar to the conflicts that Elijah had with Ahab and Jezebel. Beyond this, both are associated with Theophanies at Horeb of Sinai.

Moses goes up on the mountain and he sees God's glory at the top of Mount Sinai. And Elijah meets with God at Mount Horeb as well and sees the glory of God. So they're both witnesses to the glory of God and they join Christ, who is the glory of God.

Both, furthermore, are associated with the last days in various ways. A prophet like Moses, who will arise according to Deuteronomy chapter 18. And then Elijah, who was to come, as spoken of by Malachi.

In Christ we see the glory of the last Adam and of the second man. He's the glorified, radiant son of man. The one who comes into God's presence, into the presence of the ancient days and inherits all kingdoms.

Sinai was associated with a number of key things. It was associated with the Theophany, as Moses saw the glory of God on the mountain, the cloud, the fire and all these other things. It was associated with the Tabernacle and the formation of that realm where God would dwell with his people.

It was associated also with the gift of the law. And we see these different elements here played out in different ways. Peter wants to build tabernacles.

If the purpose of the tabernacle was to be a sort of moveable mountain, a portable Sinai, Peter wants to move around the reality of this transfiguration, the reality of this appearance of God's glory and take it with them as they move throughout the land. And so the purpose of the tabernacles is to transport this Theophany. Peter longs to retain the reality of that place.

But yet God's own cloud overshadows. God's Theophanic cloud is far more glorious and powerful than any tent would be, any tabernacle would be. And that is what will lead the

way.

We also see in Christ, he is the high priest with glorious garments. He's dressed like the high priest in his glorious clothes, dazzling white. And he's the one who will perform atonement for his people, just as the high priest was called to do.

Sinai was also the site where God gave the law, his word to his people. And here we see something similar. It's the one occasion in scripture where God declares directly concerning Christ in his own words from heaven.

His beloved son, listen to him. This is the word of God to humanity. His son, who has been given to us, we must listen to him.

So we see themes of tabernacles, see themes of the law, see themes of Theophany and all these things that connect us with Sinai. Going up after the sixth day, all of these things should remind us of what happened there. Jesus is accompanied by Moses and Elijah, but he is greater than Moses and Elijah.

He alone is the one who will remain with them. They're the forerunners. He is the one who is God's son.

He is the one who will lead them into the future. Jesus tells his disciples to keep the vision under wraps until after the resurrection. There are things that can only properly be known in their own time.

The significance of the Transfiguration will only become apparent from the vantage point of the cross and resurrection. However, the cross becomes clearer from the vantage point of the Transfiguration. When you see that Christ is the glorious High Priest, the one who is all-powerful, the one who is the beloved son.

When he goes to the cross, it becomes clear that he's doing that willingly and intentionally. He's not someone who's overtaken by events. He's not someone who fails and is outwitted by his enemies.

He is one who's doing this purposefully to redeem and atone for his people. The disciples puzzle about the resurrection at this point. They don't truly understand what Jesus is talking about.

They also wonder about the meaning of Elijah that was to come. There seems to be conflict between the statement that Elijah will restore all things and that the Son of Man will suffer many things. I mean, if Elijah has restored all things, how can the Son of Man suffer many things? But yet Jesus makes clear that Elijah has come and Elijah clearly in this case is John the Baptist.

But what has happened is he was rejected. He suffered himself. The forerunner suffers

the same fate as the one who comes after.

He has prepared a people for the Lord but he has been rejected by the great majority of the people. So he has prepared things, set things right, yet he is ultimately rejected by the people to whom he came. Coming down the mountain, Jesus and his disciples come to a commotion.

I think we would be justified in seeing a parallel between this and Moses and Joshua coming down the mountain to seeing the crowd and the tumult around the golden calf and Aaron. The people are awestruck when they see Jesus come down the mountain. Again, that's an interesting detail.

The fact that they're awestruck reminds us of the awestruck character of the people in chapter 34 when Moses comes down the mountain with his face shining after seeing God's glory there. Perhaps we're supposed to connect these two things together. Jesus, like Moses, left his disciples and other people under him in control in his absence and he comes back to find that they have failed.

The disciples haven't been able to cast out this demon and in the same way Aaron made the golden calf for the people. Whether we're supposed to stretch the analogies further and see the similarities between the way that the demon casts the child into the fire and into the water and the way that the golden calf was cast into the fire, came out of the fire as the form of the golden calf and was then cast into the water to be drunk, I'm not sure. My suspicion is that this would be too speculative.

Nevertheless, there do seem to be clear connections and the Mosaic themes are strong throughout. Jesus refers back to the words of Moses in places like Deuteronomy 32, verses 5 and 20 when he refers to the people as a faithless generation. They have dealt corruptly with him.

They are no longer his children because they are blemished. They are a crooked and twisted generation. And he said, I will hide my face from them.

I will see what their end will be for they are a perverse generation, children in whom is no faithfulness. A question to consider, within the exorcism account and its aftermath with which our passage ends, there is considerable discussion of faith and prayer. We see the example of the boy's father.

We see the example of the disciples and we see their conversation with Christ later in the house. What can we learn about the relationship between faith, prayer and deliverance from reflecting upon these details? In the concluding half of Mark chapter 9, Jesus once again predicts his death and resurrection. And once again his disciples fail to understand.

They presumably think he's speaking some strange sort of parable here. When on this

particular matter he's speaking entirely plainly. He's giving them the details down to the specifics of the specific people who will be responsible for his death and the day on which he will rise again.

The question of who is the greatest obviously occupied the disciples' thoughts on this and many other occasions. The typical human desire for exaltation over others is being expressed here. And Jesus' response to it is to show them a child.

The kingdom of God does not work in the same way as the kingdoms of this world, the societies of this world. The child challenges people to humble themselves. Not to be people who vaunt themselves over others, who seek to have an expression of their superiority, of their honour, of their status.

We are not to be invested in the competitive games of honour that consume so many other people and their attention, their concern, it becomes their preoccupation. And it's not to be like that for the people of God. Rather the disciples are to recognise their dependence, their unworthiness, their lack of honour and status and to resist the pursuit of exalting themselves over others.

Greatness comes through loving service of others. If you want to be first you must be last. If you want to be the greatest you must be the servant of all.

Greatness also comes through welcoming and receiving of the weak. The section of the passage that we're looking at now has a lot to say about how we recognise each other and the way in which our receiving of each other, our recognition of each other and our honouring of each other is a way of honouring and receiving Christ. Here it's found in receiving the weak person, in receiving the child, in receiving the person who's dependent, who's without honour and status, who doesn't have anything to offer us in return.

As we receive them we are receiving Christ and as we receive Christ we are receiving the one who sent Christ. And we will be rewarded. But instead of trying to exalt ourselves over others, the alternative is not just recognising the goodness of the child, it's recognising that the kingdom works in a very different way.

As you show honour to those who do not naturally receive honour, you will be honoured by the one who has sent Christ, by the Father himself. Children are highlighted as the example. They should be seen as representative of the wider group of weak and dependent persons.

But they are important in their own right. A number of people have seen Jesus paying attention to children and putting forward children as examples of the kingdom and have said that he must be referring to something else. That the children must illustrate some other group of persons.

Now they do illustrate a wider group of persons. But they illustrate those wider group of persons precisely as children, precisely as the sort of group that you would not pay attention to in themselves. The sort of group that you would think they obviously are referring to some other group.

It can't be children. Children lack the mental capacity or maybe they lack the age to be recognised as part of society. Whatever it is that might cause us to discount them, it seems to me that Christ is challenging that.

That the people of the kingdom are defined by the least, by the weakest among them. Those are the ones we are to honour. And as we honour them, we will be honoured by Christ.

This is not then the pursuit of honour and status for ourselves, of self-aggrandisement that the disciples had exemplified. Rather it's about giving ourselves to others. It's about honouring others ahead of ourselves and that is how we will be honoured.

Receiving children means paying attention to and honouring the people who cannot give you anything in return. Who might threaten your status rather than raising it. The way that we treat children, the poor, the mentally disabled, the dependent and other such persons is how we follow or fail to follow Christ's example.

Jesus surrendered his rights for the sake of people who have nothing to offer. Nothing to commend themselves to his attention. And we are to do the same.

This incident is followed by the disciples seeing a man casting out demons and rebuking him. It's reminiscent of Numbers chapter 11 verses 26-29. Now two men remained in the camp, one named Eldad and the other named Medad, and the spirit rested on them.

They were among those registered, but they had not gone out to the tent, and so they prophesied in the camp. And a young man ran and told Moses, Eldad and Medad are prophesying in the camp. And Joshua the son of Nun, the assistant of Moses from his youth, said, My Lord Moses, stop them.

But Moses said to him, Are you jealous for my sake? Would that all the Lord's people were prophets, that the Lord would put his spirit on them. Jesus in his response to the disciples challenges their sectarianism. Indeed, even the smallest act of hospitality given to an apostle, because they belonged to Christ, would not go unrewarded.

Just a cup of water would be enough. This is fleshed out in much more detail in Matthew chapter 25. You should note also here that Jesus refers to himself as the Christ.

Jesus had challenged the way in which they failed to recognize the weak and sought to put themselves over others. Now Jesus is challenging their sectarianism, their failure to recognize people outside of their camp. This is all about how we recognize and honor

people.

And this theme continues through into the next body of teaching. Jesus talks about the importance of dealing radically with obstacles to the weak. The connection to Jesus' teaching on adultery, for instance, in the Sermon on the Mount.

We must deal radically with sin in order to protect not just ourselves but others from stumbling. If we do not deal with sin, if we do not deal with those things that might wound others in the body of Christ decisively, then we are in danger of hell itself. The challenge here is to deal with anything that would lead to abuse, that would lead to destruction of the weak.

We must recognize the weak. It's so often within churches the case that people will treat the weak, the dependent, the people who have no honor, as if they could be collateral damage of those with honor and status and platforms. That's not how it's supposed to be in the body of Christ.

The weak and the dependent and the children are seen by God himself. God sees the orphan and the widow. He sees the one who is poor.

He sees the child. And a Christianity that is unmindful of the weak and allows them to be abused is no Christianity at all. This is, once again, all about how we recognize people, how we honor people.

The description of the great millstone hung around the neck and the person being cast into the sea maybe reminds us of the description of Babel on the great. In Revelation 18, verse 21, Then a mighty angel took up a stone like a great millstone and threw it into the sea, saying, So will Babylon, the great city, be thrown down with violence and will be found no more. The destruction of such cities can be connected with their inhospitality to the poor, the weak, those in need.

And we must not be such people. A question to consider. How might Leviticus chapter 2, verse 13 help us to read the final verses of this chapter? In Mark 10, Jesus leaves Galilee and enters Judea.

There he is asked by the Pharisees to weigh in on the debate between schools of legal opinion of the day, between Hillel and Shammai. The school of Hillel had a very extensive understanding of for any cause in Deuteronomy chapter 24 in the regulation on divorce. But the school of Shammai had a far more restrictive understanding.

They're trying to test him. Part of this test may have a political undercurrent to it. We should bear in mind that John the Baptist had ultimately lost his life because of speaking out against divorce in the case of Herod Antipas and Herodias, his brother's wife.

It was a dangerous issue to speak out on. And so if they could get him to speak out on

this, they could get him in trouble in Galilee and Perea. Apart from the political issues involved in teaching against divorce, there were also debates among the Jews themselves concerning the subject.

As I've just noted, in Matthew's account of this exchange, debates concerning the conditions under which divorce is permissible are much more foregrounded. Whereas in Mark's account here, it's the legitimacy of divorce itself that is focused upon. Jewish scholars of those days debated the meaning of the expression, something wrong, indecent or objectionable in Deuteronomy chapter 24 verse 1. So some of the school of Shammai believed that this only legitimated divorce in cases of sexual immorality.

Whereas others of the school of Hillel interpreted it very broadly, believing that it could apply to something as minor as a wife accidentally spoiling her husband's meal. So there are two things going on here. There's an attempt to entrap Jesus in a dangerous political statement.

And second, there's an attempt to get Jesus to take a side in a divisive Jewish debate on the Torah. And his response is to give them a question. In his teaching, Jesus frequently answers questions with questions or with parables.

We can think of the parable of the Good Samaritan or of paying taxes to Caesar and his response to that. In this way, he challenges the questions that people ask him. It is very easy to fail to perceive loaded questions or to see the assumptions that are built into supposedly innocent questions.

Jesus' approach to teaching often gets people to reconsider their questions and also shrewdly outwits questions that are designed to trap him or trip him up. Questions, especially questions designed to trip someone up, can often be used to defend ourselves from the force of the truth or to undermine people who trouble our conscience. Questions of the type that the Pharisees bring here are also often an assertion of authority relative to someone else.

We might recall the way that the Pharisees enquire about the disciples' behaviour and their failure to wash their hands before meals. In that case, they are asserting their authority as judges and Jesus does not actually answer their question to them. Rather, he challenges their right to ask the question, pointing out that they are people who nullify the law of God through their tradition.

So answering a question with a question is in part designed to turn the tables, to deny people the right to judge Christ while putting them in a position where they have to give an account of themselves. The wording of Jesus' question to them is important. What did Moses command you? Not what did Moses write concerning divorce, but what is the commandment of the law on the matter? Note that the law is not just the ten words or the various commandments that surround it.

It's the entirety of the Pentateuch. Jesus' answer to the Pharisees will expose their improper posture towards the law. Their answer to Jesus' question differs from what he requested.

They say, Moses allowed. Deuteronomy 24, though, isn't a command concerning divorce. It's a concession.

What is the difference between these things? Well, a concession is an accommodation to human weakness, a recognition that human beings are imperfectible in their fallen state, and that good laws will make allowances for the sinfulness and immaturity of people and their societies. Good laws are accommodated to the societies and the persons for which they're designed. So, for instance, if you're raising young kids, you will accommodate your requirements to their abilities and their age of understanding.

And then, as they grow up, those requirements will increase and you'll expect greater maturity from them. In the same way, while we are informed by a deeper and more absolute moral law, we need to have accommodation to particular circumstances and persons. If you allowed your teenagers the same liberties as you give to your toddlers, it would not be good.

Jesus highlights the problem with the Pharisees' response. They haven't answered his question about what Moses commanded. And Moses' concessions concerning divorce allowed for divorce, but they did not approve of it.

It was an accommodation to the sinfulness of human society, not practice that was viewed positively. We might think of the practices of slavery or polygamy in a similar light. These were permitted and regulated, but never celebrated or encouraged.

These practices were never God's good intention for humanity, but they were tolerated for a time as an accommodation to sin, weakness, immaturity and imperfectibility. To find out what is really commanded, we have to look back further, to God's creational intent for humanity. And Jesus joins Genesis 1 and 2 together to highlight the permanent unity that was always God's intention in marriage.

This is distinguished from laws that are accommodated to the hardness of human hearts. And this distinction significantly reframes the question of divorce. The Hillelites and the Shammaites are both approaching the question of divorce primarily within the horizon of the Mosaic body of laws, and they fail adequately to consider the horizon of God's creational intent.

And the result of this is a loss of a sense of the way that divorce undermines God's intent for humanity. Divorce is a tragic accommodation, a legitimate accommodation, but a tragic one nonetheless, to human sinfulness. It's not something that is positively allowed.

Jesus may here contrast Moses and God. Moses is the divinely inspired prophet,

administering the moral law in a particular historical situation. But God is the author of the timeless moral law.

And there's a sort of legalism which snatches at all such allowances of a law accommodated to human sinfulness and imperfection, rather than pursuing the righteousness that it should direct us towards. Such allowances excuse us, in these people's minds, from the higher standard of divine righteousness. But that's never what they were supposed to do.

Note that Jesus doesn't teach that Moses was wrong to allow divorce under some circumstances. The allowances were made on account of people's sinfulness and hardness of heart, but they were not themselves sinful allowances. The Old Testament law provides us with a number of conditions in which divorce is treated as permissible, and I believe that the New Testament does not simply abrogate these.

Accommodation to the reality of human sinfulness and weakness really is necessary for good law. Where there is serious abuse, for instance, or desertion, or adultery, or some other such sin or failure, divorce may be appropriately permitted. We should also note, in such circumstances, that we should not abstract the specific action of divorce from the broader failures of permanent exclusive union that might have precipitated it.

While the act of divorce is an act of very grave moral weight, it's a purposeful act that ends a marriage, the one who initiates it should not be treated as if they bore the entire weight of blame for a failed marriage. It may be that the blame lies almost entirely on the other side. What Jesus' teaching does is not simply to delegitimize the teaching of Moses, or to suggest an alternative legal code to replace it, but rather to relativise it.

The law of Moses and all other legal codes that are necessarily and appropriately accommodated to human sinfulness are not the North Star of righteousness. In Mark, Jesus' teaching on divorce seems to be more absolute than it is in Matthew, where there are allowances made for the legitimacy of divorce in the case of adultery. The lack of such qualifications in Mark can help us to understand the radicality of Jesus' teaching in ways that might be unclear to many readers of Matthew.

In Jesus' teaching, in Mark especially, divorce is framed not primarily by the conditions of this present sinful age, but by God's creational intent at the beginning. Where necessary accommodations to this sinful age exist, including those given for adultery, these accommodations are exposed for what they are. They're signs of how estranged we have become from God's good purpose for humanity.

Because we are a hard-hearted and sinful people, God permits us to divorce in the case of adultery, but lifelong permanent, indissoluble and exclusive unity was always his intent. And this teaching can be troubling for us. We live in a society in which both divorce and serial, extramarital relations are rampant.

It's a hard teaching today, as it was in Jesus' own day. We would like God to tell us that it is okay to divorce, perhaps, under conditions X, Y and Z. But this is not what we're told. Rather, we are given the original intent of creation as the standard of our measure.

With the concessions appearing more clearly for what they are against that background, they're tolerated, but not positively validated ways of negotiating human rebellion against God's purpose in marriage. The fact of God's creational establishment of marriage is a measure by which we must consider divorce. We may break faith with and reject our prior vow in the self-contradiction of divorce, but not in such a way as places us beyond the bounds of God's grace.

So the Church is bound both to uphold the institution of marriage and present God's grace to those in tragic situations of failed marriages. And there may be the possibility of people being called back to the abandoned task of marriage to a specific person. But sometimes the conditions for this simply no longer exist.

The end of chapter 9 of Mark had a couple of instances that drew attention to children as models for the Kingdom. And here again, children are brought to Christ, and the disciples seek to prevent them being brought to Christ, but Jesus rebukes them. These children, again, are models of what it is like to receive the Kingdom of God.

We have to receive the Kingdom of God with the humble dependence of children. Here it should be clear that the children aren't just being brought forward as examples of something that refers to adults. The children are being valued in their own right.

Christ blesses the children, and the children are given attention. Here we also see Jesus doing something beyond his exorcisms or his healings. He's blessing people, and people are bringing children to him in order to receive this blessing.

Many people have talked about Jesus' radical teaching and practice concerning women, or the poor, or people outside of Israel. And all of these things are appropriate and important to talk about. But along with all of these things, we should talk about how radical Jesus' approach to children was.

Jesus is then approached by a man who asks what thing he must do to inherit eternal life. And it's easy to misread Jesus' discussion with this man. Many have seen Jesus as highlighting the futility of seeking righteousness according to the law, driving the man to despair of his righteousness.

But when we read the story, this isn't actually what he says. And to arrive at such a reading requires some considerable contortions of interpretation. Jesus actually teaches that keeping the commandments is necessary for entering into life.

The twist in some ways is in how this is understood. He highlights the second table of the law, and we should note that there's no reference to covetousness. Rather, that

commandment is fulfilled in selling and giving to the poor.

And there's a fulfillment of the commandments on a deeper level by following Jesus himself. That is how you fulfill the first table, how you fulfill the duty of love to God, by following Christ. If the final commandment, the commandment concerning covetousness, highlights the greed of the man and his attachment to his possessions, the call of Christ to follow him highlights also the tragic way in which those possessions have prevented him from actually serving God, from loving God as he ought.

The man is a prisoner of his love for money. And even when Christ, who is described as loving him and calling him to follow him, offers him this great honour, an invitation, he cannot accept it because he is so bound up with his money, and he cannot leave that behind. Mark doesn't have the same degree of teaching concerning riches as Matthew does.

But here, and in other places like it, he does show us the way that riches can weigh us down, preventing us from serving and following our true master. This naturally makes many of us feel uncomfortable. We want our wealth and possessions to be off limits for Christ.

We'll serve him in all sorts of different ways, but not if this is what is required of us. Wealth is a power that can prevent us from entering the kingdom of God. It's something that can master us, and we should be very fearful of it.

We should be fearful of falling under the sway of things that we think we own, but really own us. However, those who give up things for the kingdom are promised a return, not just in the age to come, but also in the present age. And while it may be humanly impossible for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God, with God all these things are possible.

A question to consider. What do you believe that Jesus is referring to in verses 29 and 30? Truly I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands for my sake and for the gospel, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this time, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions. As we move through Mark chapter 10, Jesus is moving towards Jerusalem.

They're on the road, as they have been for the last few chapters, steadily travelling the whole length of the land down to Jerusalem. They're travelling down for the Passover, so there are presumably many others on the way with them. And here Jesus makes the third prediction of his death.

He's going to Jerusalem, he's ascending to the place where he will be condemned and crucified. And his disciples are amazed, and the followers have a sense of trepidation.

They know that this isn't a regular journey to Jerusalem, but that the ministry of Jesus is arriving at a critical point.

It's important that Jesus declares his death beforehand. It's important to make clear that it's not an accident or fate overtaking him unawares. And Jesus predicts in incredible detail what will happen, the participants, what exactly they will do, and what the result will be, that he will rise again on the third day.

Having just described, however, the manner of his death, Jesus is approached by James and John, asking for prominent positions in his kingdom. And Mark maybe spares a few of the brothers' blushes by telling the story in a way that hides the fact that they made the request through their mother, Jesus' aunt. They want to be on his right and left hand in his kingdom.

They want the thrones of honour, or the highest places at the feast. Yet Jesus makes clear that if they want those places, they will need to drink the cup placed before them. In chapter 14, verse 24, we read about Jesus' cup, the cup that he must drink, the cup of his suffering.

They will also need to be baptised with Jesus' baptism. Jesus states that one day indeed they will share in his suffering in this sort of way. When they do, they won't just be like the people on the right hand and the left hand in the feast, they will also have to be like the people that we see on Christ's right and left in chapter 15, verse 27, the thieves on either side of him on the crosses.

They will have to share in his suffering, and it will only be through that that places of honour are enjoyed at the feast. Jesus' reference to his baptism here is interesting. It seems strange to refer to Jesus' forthcoming death and resurrection as his baptism.

What could be meant? Well, a number of things. First of all, it's a transitional event. It's a passage from one form of life to another.

Jesus' discussion of his baptism presents it as a sort of trial by ordeal, an entering into the waters of the grave, or like Israel passing through the waters of the Red Sea. And the Apostle Paul would later speak of Christian baptism in connection with Christ's death in Romans 6, verses 1-8. We too might walk in newness of life.

For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. We know that our old self was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin. For one who has died has been set free from sin.

Now if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. It is through dying with Christ that we end up living with him. It's through entering into his death and his suffering that we end up with honour in the kingdom of God.

There will be people in these positions of honour, these places of honour at the feast, but these places aren't granted according to ambition. The other disciples at this point are indignant, but it seems that the irritation at James and John arises more from their desire for such honours rather than any principled opposition to what James and John were doing. In response, Jesus speaks to the whole group, pointing out that the pursuit of greatness and superiority is characteristic of the Gentiles.

They lord it over others. But this is not how the kingdom of Christ is to be. It is not the case that there is no honour in the kingdom of Christ, but it is not obtained through jockeying for power.

Rather it's found in the way of humility and service. The Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many. He came.

He's the one who has come from heaven. He's come on a mission, as angels would come on a mission. What is meant by the service here? Are we thinking about Christ assuming the position of a servant relative to a master, a sort of lowly manward service? It seems to me that the importance here is that of carrying out a charge.

He's one with a commissioned agency or ministry, not as one to be surrounded by attendants as a typical king. Jesus came to perform the task of the commissioned servant of Isaiah, not to get status for himself. The focus is not here upon Christ as the humble servant of men, but upon Christ as the one on a mission from his Father, a mission whereby he will give his life as a ransom for many.

In a similar way, ministers in Christ's Church are not supposed to gather attendants around them, as kings of the Gentiles would, and assume status for themselves, the highest places and feasts, things like that. No, they are sent on a mission. They're acting in Christ's name, and that mission or ministry is to be for the good of all, not to set them over others.

Leaving Jericho, he's followed by a multitude of people. They're excited by this prophet, teacher and potential messiah. The blind man calls out to him as the son of David.

This is the first time that Jesus has been addressed in this way in the Gospel. The messianic secret, as it were, has slipped, and the time is nearing for open revelation of Jesus' identity. Bartimaeus is the first person outside of the disciples to speak of Jesus in this sort of way.

We should also notice, once again, that Jesus is being addressed by someone socially marginal, without status, who wishes to get close to him, but is rebuked by others, and prevented by others. And once again, Jesus insists that the person be allowed access to him, and explicitly calls for him. A question to consider, how might Bartimaeus be seen as a model of the disciple of Christ more generally? In Mark chapter 11, Jesus finally

arrives in Jerusalem.

We've been moving to this point for a number of chapters now, and now the events of the final week of his life are about to take place. In Genesis chapter 49, verses 10 to 11, Jacob prophesies concerning the tribe of Judah. Later on, as we read in the story of 1 Samuel, Saul's rise to the throne of Israel is set in motion by the wandering donkeys of his father Kish.

And his quest to locate the lost donkeys leads him to the prophet Samuel, who anoints him with oil, and lists a series of signs that will confirm his message to Saul as he travels back. One of these signs is that he will be met by two men declaring that the donkeys have been found. The association of donkeys and mules with rule and kingship in Israel, which we first see in Genesis chapter 49, is seen throughout its history, from Judges in chapter 5 verses 10, and 10 verse 4, 12 verse 14, and then later on in passages such as 2 Samuel chapter 16 verses 1 and 2, where, as David escapes from Jerusalem after his son Absalom's coup, Zeba brings two donkeys for the king's household to ride on.

In an ironic twist, Absalom the pretender ends up hung from a terebinth tree by his long hair when his mule goes beneath it. Later on we see again, in 1 Kings chapter 1 verses 28 to 40, the fraught situation surrounding royal succession as David's death draws near, is resolved as Solomon is decisively distinguished as the true heir as he goes in a triumphal entry into Jerusalem on King David's own mule. The donkey or the mule is the king's steed.

It is associated with peaceful rule, while the horse with an animal of war. A different sort of triumphal entry occurs in the story of Jehu, who is secretly anointed by Elisha and rides on a carpet of people's garments. He's not a meek ruler riding on a donkey, but he's a furious charioteer and someone who causes a lot of bloodshed.

He kills Joram of Israel, Ahaziah of Judah, he tramples Jezebel under his horse's feet, and he cleanses the Temple of Baal in a very bloody manner. When the prophet Zechariah foretells the coming of a new king to restore the people's fortunes, he's identified as riding on a colt, the foal of a donkey, and his mode of rule is distinguished from that of the rulers on their great horses and their royal chargers. Zechariah 9, verses 9-10 reads, Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem! Behold, your king is coming to you, righteous and having salvation as he, humble and mounted on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.

I will cut off the chariot from Ephraim and the warhorse from Jerusalem, and the battle bow shall be cut off, and he shall speak peace to the nations. His rule shall be from sea to sea, and from the river to the ends of the earth. Now this passage is not explicitly cited in Mark as it is in Matthew or John, but it is clearly in the background.

The coming king is the true bearer of Judah's scepter. He's the one who will establish the

kingdom. He's the greater than Saul, the greater son of David.

He will realize the unfulfilled promise of Solomon, who fell short of his name, and calling to be the prince of peace. He will not be like the warlike Jehu. The chariot and the horse and the conflicts to which they belong will be cut off, and the nations will have peace declared to them.

Jesus then is engaging in a symbolic action that displays kingship. Throughout Mark's gospel, themes of kingship have been prominent, and they really come to the foreground here. Mark's account differs from Matthew's in the timing of events here, it seems, as the cleansing of the temple appears to happen on the following day.

There are three visits to the temple, punctuated by two passages concerning the fig tree. The interspersing of these accounts strongly suggests a connection between the fig tree and the temple. The fig tree is Jesus' one destructive miracle.

The fig tree is seen in leaf. It seems to promise some life, but it's not the season for figs. Jesus might be expecting undeveloped figs, though.

Jeremiah 8, verse 13. Micah 7, verses 1-6. Micah 7, verses 1-6.

Micah 7, verses 1-6. The desire to find figs on this tree seems to be strange as it's out of season, and Mark underlines that fact. The point, however, is not the fig tree itself.

It's what the fig tree represents. The fig tree represents Israel and its temple and its leaders, and it's that that Christ has come to inspect. This is followed by Jesus' cleansing of the temple.

In Zechariah 14, verse 21, we're told, Jesus' action is the action of the Messianic king. He's the one who's going to set right and restore and reform the worship of God. He's going to re-establish the temple in its proper manner.

And his action with the fig tree interprets the action of the temple. Jesus is inspecting the temple as he inspected the fig tree, and the temple will suffer the same judgment. It will wither and be destroyed in the same way as the fig tree.

Jesus' statement concerning the temple is also working with the Old Testament. Isaiah 56, verses 6-7. And then in Jeremiah 7, verse 11.

So there are a number of overlapping judgments here. There's the judgment implied by the fig tree being inspected and no good fruit being found upon it. In the same way, the people of Israel, their leaders have been inspected and they have not produced the fruit that is being sought.

Then there is also the background of Zechariah 14, the final verse of that book, which speaks of the removal of the traitors from the house of the Lord. Beyond that, there's

also Jeremiah. Jeremiah, which speaks about the rebellion of the people and the way that they treated the temple as a sort of talisman to protect them from Gosroth.

It was a shelter and a refuge so they could sin and the temple would secure their impunity. Like robbers retreat to their den after they've committed their crimes, so the people of Israel would retreat to the temple, to the house of God itself, and treat that as a place that protected them from judgment, from being sought out by justice. This is an utter perversion of the true purpose of the temple.

It's not to be a place of merchandise, it's not to be a place to avoid the just judgment of God, and it's not to be a place that is fruitless. Rather, it's supposed to be the place where the spiritual life of Israel is most evident, where the leaves, as it were, of this house display the fruit within it. And then it's also to be a place that brings in people from outside, that for all nations it should be seen as a house of prayer.

The judgment on the fig tree, then, is a symbolic judgment upon the temple and Jerusalem. In Mark's account, then, it frames Jesus' action in the temple. The fig tree represents Israel and its leaders and their failure to produce fruit.

Jeremiah 8, verse 13, chapter 24, verses 1-10, Hosea 9, 10, and 16-17 all use that sort of symbolism to refer to Israel. The temple and the fig tree are related, then. And then Jesus, after this, goes into a discussion of prayer, about efficacy in prayer, the importance of faith, but also forgiveness.

If we want effective prayers, we have to come to God with faith and confidence, but also in a way that heals the relationships that we have with others, the breached relationships, the bitterness that might exist between us and others. And unless we come to God with the faith to grasp hold of Him and the forgiveness to release our neighbour from their debts, we cannot enjoy effectiveness in prayer. A question to consider.

Why do you think Mark focuses Jesus' teaching on prayer here, rather than elsewhere in his Gospel, as the other Gospels do? The end of Mark, chapter 11, sees Jesus back in the temple again. And there is a movement back and forth between the Mount of Olives and the Temple Mount in this chapter that is worth paying attention to, and we see it continuing throughout the Gospel. Jesus has entered the city like a king.

He declared judgment upon the temple. He had healed within it. And there are people gathering around and behind Him.

He is the head of a movement. And now the leaders, the chief priests, the scribes, and other elders try to trap Him. If His authority is from man, it can be dismissed.

If His claim is that it is from God, they have grounds to move against Him. So Jesus answers their question with a question. Once again, He is challenging the authority on

which they are asking the question, and putting them in a position where they are trapped.

The answer to the question that Jesus asks is the answer to the question that the chief priests and the elders ask. Because John the Baptist was sent by God, and his prophetic ministry was one through which God authorised and bore witness to His Son. So Jesus traps those seeking to trap Him, as He does on many other occasions.

The parable of the tenants that follows is important to read in the light of Israel's identity as the vineyard. Jesus introduces the parable in a way that highlights the background of Isaiah 5 and Psalm 80. Isaiah 5, verses 1-7 reads, Let me sing for my beloved my love song concerning his vineyard.

My beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill. He dug it and cleared it of stones, and planted it with choice vines. He built a watchtower in the midst of it, and hewed out a wine vat in it.

And he looked for it to yield grapes, but it yielded wild grapes. And now, O inhabitants of Jerusalem and men of Judah, judge between me and my vineyard. What more was there to do for my vineyard that I have not done in it? When I looked for it to yield grapes, why did it yield wild grapes? And now I will tell you what I will do to my vineyard.

I will remove its hedge, and it shall be devoured. I will break down its wall, and it shall be trampled down. I will make it a waste, it shall not be pruned or hoed, and briars and thorns shall grow up.

I will also command the clouds that they rain no rain upon it. For the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel, and the men of Judah are his pleasant planting. And he looked for justice, but behold bloodshed, for righteousness, but behold an outcry.

The prophecies of Isaiah have often been in the background of the book of Mark, and here is no exception. We also see references in Psalm 80 verses 8 to 16. You brought a vine out of Egypt, you drove out the nations and planted it, you cleared the ground for it, it took deep root and filled the land, the mountains were covered with its shade, the mighty cedars with its branches, it sent out its branches to the sea, and its shoots to the river.

Why then have you broken down its walls, so that all who pass along the way pluck its fruit? The boar from the forest ravages it, and all that move in the field feed on it. Turn again, O God of hosts, look down from heaven and sea, have regard for this vine, the stock that your right hand planted, and for the son whom you made strong for yourself. They have burned it with fire, they have cut it down, may they perish at the rebuke of your face.

Isaiah's parable focused upon the failure of the vineyard to produce good fruit. Jesus,

however, focuses upon the wickedness of those working within it. The fruit seems to be there, but the workers are rebellious.

The Master is sending his servants, the prophets, and finally his own son, and all are being rejected. In speaking of the killing of the son within the parable, Jesus is presenting to the people who will orchestrate his death, their part in the fulfillment of this parable. Listening to the parable to this point, you can imagine that the chief priests, and the scribes, and the elders would have thought in terms of the background of Psalm 80, the vineyard of God has been exposed to the enemies of the Lord, to the enemies of the people who are ravaging it, and they're going to pray for God to deliver them.

The real problem are the Romans or some other force that's oppressing the land from outside. But even though a passage like Psalm 80 is playing in the background, the enemies of the land are not actually the Romans in this parable. It's the elders and the chief priests and the scribes themselves.

And a further biblical allusion can help us to see what's taking place here. In Genesis chapter 37, 18-20, we read of Joseph approaching his brothers. They saw him from afar, and before he came near to them, they conspired against him to kill him.

They said to one another, Here comes this dreamer. Come now, let us kill him and throw him into one of the pits. The wicked tenants in this parable speak in a manner similar to the brothers of Joseph.

They are members of the people, they are the tribes of the land, and they are rejecting the one that has been set apart by the father to receive the firstborn portion. By using this particular parallel, maybe we can see Jesus inviting us to read his story in the light of the story of Joseph. He's the one who's going to be placed into the pit.

He's the one who's going to go down into the far country. He's the one who's going to deliver his people. And he's going to be raised up, seated at the right hand of power.

He's going to have criminals on either side of him. He's going to provide bread and wine. And the raising up of his body from the far country is going to be at the heart of God's great act of deliverance of his people.

The wicked tenants will be deprived of their position. This isn't a claim about Israel itself being dispossessed, but about the wicked tenants of the chief priests and the scribes. Their places will be taken by the Twelve and others, who are the true tenants of the vineyard of Israel.

It also looks forward to fruit from Israel. The vineyard isn't abandoned, it's given into different hands. And Jesus quotes Psalm 118 verses 22 to 23 here, a verse that is used in reference to resurrection in Acts 4 verse 11 and 1 Peter 2 verses 4 and 7. The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone.

The quotation interprets the parable. The chief priests and the leaders of the people might have identified the wicked tenants with the Romans or some other party. Although it's not found in Mark's Greek, there seems to be a wordplay behind the use of this verse with son, Ben, and stone, Eben, being played off against each other.

The rejected son is the rejected stone. And this brings temple themes to the foreground. Jesus is the rejected stone and he becomes the cornerstone of a new temple.

In Isaiah chapter 8 verses 14 to 15, And he will become a sanctuary and a stone of offense and a rock of stumbling to both houses of Israel, a trap and a snare to the inhabitants of Jerusalem. And many shall stumble on it. They shall fall and be broken.

They shall be snared and taken. And Daniel chapter 2 verses 44 to 45, And it shall stand forever, just as you saw that a stone was cut from a mountain by no human hand, and that it broke in pieces the iron, the bronze, the clay, the silver, and the gold. Later in the story, Jesus will be buried in a tomb cut out of the rock.

He is the stone quarried from the rock, prepared as the cornerstone of a new temple of the Lord. The wicked tenants get their comeuppance, but the focus of the parable ultimately rests upon the vindication of the rejected son. Once again, the response of the chief priests, the scribes, and the elders is determined by their fear of the people.

They could not respond to Jesus' question about authority concerning John the Baptist because they feared the people, and once again they cannot respond properly because they fear the people. A question to consider, how might Jesus' quotation from the Psalms that opens up his parable remind us of the setting and also connect with Jesus' actions in the previous chapter? In chapter 12 of Mark, Jesus is engaging with his opponents in the context of the temple, and here the Pharisees collude with the Herodians to trap him. The Herodians no longer enjoyed power in Jerusalem, but Jesus came from Herod Antipas' territory, and Herod Antipas was in Jerusalem at the time for the feast.

Tax to Caesar was a deeply fraught political and religious question. To pay the tax was a seeming acknowledgement of its legitimacy, and, by extension, of the legitimacy of the Romans' authority in the Holy Land. And the Denarius itself probably had blasphemous statements of Caesar's being the son of God.

One way or another, Jesus seems to be caught. Either he aligns himself with the tax rebels and the revolutions against Rome, or he will seem to be like a compromiser or an accommodationist with Rome. The Pharisees and the Herodians begin with flattery.

They're trying to put Jesus off his guard, and perhaps to tempt him into the radical answer by praising his virtue of fearless candour. The statement that Jesus is not swayed by appearances also means, quite literally, that he does not look at people's faces, and it was precisely the face of a person, Caesar, that was part of what was at issue here.

Jesus' answer is a profoundly shrewd one.

Before he even addresses the issue, he asks them why they are testing him, connecting what they are doing with Satan's testing of him. Then, as he answers their question more directly, he deals with it in some very clever ways. First of all, he asks them to produce a coin.

They must reveal one of the coins to be in their possession, compromising them. The Jews could enjoy their own coinage to some degree, but they clearly had one of these coins in their possession, so they were in a difficult position if they were going to ask a question that was designed to trap him, because they were caught too. The statement, Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's, is ambiguous but brilliant.

To some, it might seem to be saying, give Caesar what's coming to him. To others, pay your taxes. However, there is a logic to it.

If you have this blasphemous object in your possession, why not give it back to Rome? There is a willingness to be dispossessed of such an item. There are Jews also to be paid both to Caesar and to God. You need to recognise what Caesar is owed and what God is owed.

There may be opposition between those two, but Caesar is owed something. Some have seen in the identification of Caesar's image an implication that we are supposed to render the image of God to God, as in of persons and other persons. The reasoning of Jesus, however, is that the coin is Caesar's, and so the tax isn't just an arbitrary imposition, but something given for services given.

Those Jews could be paid while still having a certain ambivalence in relationship to Caesar. Jesus' answer is neither that of the accommodationist or the compromiser, nor that of the revolutionary. He treads a line between compliance and resistance.

Rendering to God limits what you render to Caesar. Caesar can't be given worship, for instance. Following this, Jesus is challenged by the Sadducees, who denied the resurrection.

They present an elaborate account of the performance of the Levirate marriage in this case of a woman who has gone through a number of different husbands who have not born her a child. And the question is, in the resurrection, whose wife is she? Jesus' answer challenges their presuppositions. They see the resurrection almost as a perpetuation of the existing form of life, whereas for Jesus it's a transformation.

Marriage and giving in marriage function to fulfil the calling to be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth, and also serves to sustain the human race in response to the reality of death. This is one of the significances of the Levirate law. The Levirate law was to raise up

seed for the dead brother.

Of course, the resurrection is a different way of raising up seed from the dead. The resurrection involves a new principle of generation or regeneration. It's no longer marriage through which people are born, but through the rebirth from the dead.

The angels don't marry, but are a non-procreating living host. Here it might be interesting to see Jesus' teaching against the background of something like 1 Enoch 15:3-10, apocryphal literature that would provide an understanding of how angels were viewed by many at the time. Why have you forsaken the high heaven, the eternal sanctuary, and lain with women, and defiled yourselves with the daughters of men, and taken for yourselves wives, and done as the sons of earth? You were holy ones and spirits, living forever.

With the blood of women you have defiled yourselves, and with the blood of flesh you have begotten, and with the blood of men you have lusted, and you have done as they do, flesh and blood, who die and perish. Therefore I gave them women, that they might cast seed into them, and thus beget children by them, that nothing fail them upon the earth. But you originally existed as spirits, living forever and not dying for all the generations of eternity.

Therefore I did not make women among you, the spirits of heaven. In heaven is their dwelling, but the spirits begotten on earth, on earth is their dwelling. Humanity is a race, but the angels are a living host.

They do not reproduce, they are created as a complete host. The angels are also presented as if a band of brothers. There are no women among them, there are no fathers and sons.

The resurrection then isn't just revivification and return to our existing form of life. It is a transformation of life, where we will no longer be faced by the reality of death, or the need to procreate and fill the earth, and in that context there is no longer the need for marriage. This doesn't mean that we cease to be male and female, but it does mean that procreation ends.

Jesus' reference to Exodus chapter 3 seems very odd here. The statement that God is the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob would not seem to imply that resurrection will occur. However, it presents the action of the Exodus as being done for their sake in part.

It suggests that they haven't just simply ceased to be. They have a destiny still to be worked out, a destiny in their descendants, but also a destiny in their own persons. The event of the Exodus is a new birth.

It's a birth event occurring through the events of the Passover and the crossing of the Red Sea. God is raising up Israel from slavery and raising up in them the seed of

Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. There's more going on here, there are themes of resurrection within it.

The bones of Joseph are being taken up with them, raised up out of Egypt, brought into the Promised Land and buried in Shechem. The great attention given in the story of Genesis to burial of the patriarchs and their wives from Genesis chapter 23 onwards is already an indication that the body is not just to be discarded, that the body has some destiny remaining to it. And what happens to that body after its death is a matter of extreme importance.

Jesus' response to the testing of the Sadducees here might also recall his response to the testing that he received earlier concerning Moses' teaching concerning divorce. In both cases Jesus highlights a problem of perception in his opponents and also the way in which the proof text that they brought forward needs to be relativised. Finally, a scribe presents a third question to him, although Mark doesn't present it as a testing question in the same way.

It seems to be more genuine. The scribe has seen that Jesus answered the other question as well and he wants to see how he will answer this question. Is Jesus going to choose some particular law that reveals an imbalance in his teaching? Perhaps the greatest commandment is you shall not murder or maybe the greatest commandment is remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy.

Whatever Jesus answers, maybe he's going to tread on some toes, open himself up to some criticism, suggest some imbalance at the heart of his belief. But Jesus' answer once more is shrewd. The greatest commandment, and there is a greatest commandment, is the summary commandment of the Shema.

In this commandment the entire law is encapsulated and the second great commandment arises from it. To love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength and your neighbour as yourself. These two commandments sum up the entire ten commandments and all the other commandments.

The law is not just a collection of miscellaneous laws that are assembled together. There is a logic and a unity and a system of truth summed up in the call to love God and neighbour. The whole purpose of the law is encapsulated in these things and then it's refracted into these specific commandments which explain what that actually looks like.

The statements that Jesus identifies are also taken from the law itself. They're taken from summary sections of the law. Leviticus chapter 19 is a summary of key elements of the second table of the law, the way that we relate to our neighbour.

And Deuteronomy chapter 6 verses 4 to 5 is at the very outset of chapter 6 to 26 which unpacks the ten commandments which are given in chapter 5. The law and the prophets

all arise out of this. By contrast, the scribes and the Pharisees approach to the law is so often one that takes bits and pieces and abstracts them from a larger system of truth that is ordered around a central principle, the loving God and loving neighbour. The commandments that Jesus identifies express the positive truth at the heart of all the thou shalt not's.

While the scribes and the Pharisees nullify the law on account of their tradition, Jesus fulfils it. He highlights that reality that lies at the very heart, the centre, the weighty matters of the law. The scribe responds to Jesus' answer with great approval and actually expands upon his answer by showing that obedience is greater than sacrifice.

And hearing this response, Jesus declares that the scribe is not far from the kingdom of God. Once he has appreciated the true nature of what it means to keep the law of God, the centrality of loving God and neighbour, and the importance of this over sacrifice, he has grasped one of the very core principles of the kingdom of God. A question to consider.

In Jesus' teaching concerning divorce, he draws the attention of his hearers back to the period before the fall, to God's original institution of marriage and his creation of man and woman. In his response to the Sadducees, he draws attention to something that lies beyond the patterns of this age, to a new heavens and a new earth where there will no longer be marriage and giving in marriage, but we will be like a heavenly host. How can marriage in the valley of this present age be informed by the reality of these two horizons? At the conclusion of his various conflicts with the leaders of the people, the scribes, the Pharisees, the Herodians and the Sadducees, in Mark chapter 12, Jesus asks a question to them.

Psalms 110 is a Davidic Psalm in which David refers to the Christ as his Lord, which makes no sense if the Christ is merely his son. The Christ seems to be more than merely the son of David according to the flesh. This is a conundrum for those who lack the fuller understanding of Christ that would emerge through his resurrection.

The full character of the messianic secret, when it was revealed, would answer this question. Jesus warns about the scribes. They are concerned with the praise of men and with social status.

They love the markers and the honorific titles that come with religious authority. There is clearly some exaggeration and satire in Jesus' description of them. But Jesus is very concerned that his disciples learn from their example and do not follow it.

The ministers of Christ must be meek. They must not be those who exalt themselves over others. They must not be those who see leadership as a matter of personal honour rather than about the service of their master, the Lord.

True ministry in the kingdom is such that the one who is most humble will be most exalted. The scribes, by contrast, are predatory leaders. They consume the sheep, especially the most vulnerable.

They are hypocrites. They are fixated on getting honour from men. But cover up their inside, the fact that they are not pious people at all.

They are whitewashed tombs, as we see in Matthew 23. The story of the widow's two small coins that is read here needs to be read alongside what immediately precedes it. All too often it is taken out of context and the point is missed.

The widow is investing all of her livelihood in the temple, which is about to be destroyed on account of the sin of the people and their rulers. This isn't a parable about healthy sacrificial giving, but about the way that corrupt religious leadership preys upon the weakest of all and heaps up judgement for itself. The prophecy of the destruction of the temple that follows should be directly related to the oppression of such people as the widow.

The leaders of the people devour the houses of widows, so their great house will be devoured. Read carefully in context, the story of the widow's two small coins is a horrifying story of the way that wicked religious leaders abuse the flock. As Jesus leaves the temple at the beginning of chapter 13, one of his disciples admires the temple buildings.

Jesus makes clear, however, that the buildings are condemned to destruction. Not one stone will remain upon another. All will be torn down.

Jesus teaches concerning the judgement upon Jerusalem and its temple on the Mount of Olives later to Peter, James, John and Andrew, his three core disciples and Andrew, Peter's brother. Remember that these four disciples were the four disciples that were called at the very beginning of the Gospel in chapter 1, just after Jesus had declared that the time had come for the Kingdom of God and just after his baptism and his temptation in the wilderness. The Gospel is returning to its beginning point.

We're hearing about the fulfilment of the Kingdom of God, there will be a new set of temptations, and then there will be the baptism of Jesus' death and then the announcement of his coming. We are coming full circle. Jesus teaches concerning the judgement upon Jerusalem and its temple on the Mount of Olives, which Mark makes clear to the reader is opposite the temple.

The disciples are looking at the city and its temple as Jesus is declaring its coming fate. Jesus begins by listing a number of things that would happen in advance of his coming, not direct signs of his coming itself, but things that would anticipate and go before his coming. They needed to recognise that these things anticipated but did not herald the

coming of Christ, so that they would not be led astray.

A number of unsettling events would occur before his coming. There would be false teachers and false Christs both within and without the Church. There would be wars, famines, earthquakes and other disasters.

These are just the beginning of birth pains. The birth of a new world order still hasn't taken place. This is the world going into labour, but the new birth has not yet occurred.

Not every dramatic world event is of cosmic significance, and the events that are of cosmic significance often don't seem to have sufficient drama. Who would think that the great famines and disasters and other things in the world's history can be largely forgotten, whereas the crucifixion of a first century Galilean carpenter is the event on which all history turns? The disciples will face persecution, but this will serve as an opportunity and occasion for witness before rulers. The witness of the disciples to governors and kings is extremely important.

Jesus is a king and a ruler, and the disciples are his emissaries to the rulers of this world, declaring his kingdom to their kingdoms. The gospel will be spread throughout all the nations, throughout the known world. The nations will hear of this new king, yet they will face treachery and betrayal, even from their own families.

They will be hated, but if they persevere, they will be saved. A question to consider. Why do you think that Jesus underlines his point in the way that he does, drawing his disciples' attention to the widow, singling her out from the crowd? What more might we learn from this? In Mark 13, Jesus is addressing his disciples' question about when the destruction of the temple that he foretold would occur.

A critical sign of this is the abomination of desolation that Daniel foretold in Daniel 9, verses 24-27. The abomination of desolation is the abomination that provokes the desolation of the temple, not the desolation of the temple itself. Abominations are typically performed by Israel itself.

It's the perversion of the bride. It's not the sin of the nations. In the Old Testament, it could be seen in the sins of the sons of Eli, for instance, or the idolatry of the nation in Ezekiel's day.

The abomination of the temple, then, is caused by flagrant sin and or apostasy. And the more specific reference to the abomination of desolation is found in Daniel 11, verses 30-35. For ships of Kittim shall come against him, and he shall be afraid and withdraw, and shall turn back and be enraged and take action against the holy covenant.

He shall turn back and pay attention to those who forsake the holy covenant. Forces from him shall appear and profane the temple and fortress, and shall take away the regular burnt offering, and they shall set up the abomination that makes desolate. He

shall seduce with flattery those who violate the covenant.

But the people who know their God shall stand firm and take action. And the wise among the people shall make many understand, though for some days they shall stumble by sword and flame, by captivity and plunder. When they stumble, they shall receive a little help, and many shall join themselves to them with flattery.

And some of the wise shall stumble, so that they may be refined, purified, and made white, until the end of the time, for it still awaits the appointed time. In Daniel chapter 11, the king is Antiochus Epiphanes, an early 2nd century BC Hellenistic ruler of the Seleucid Empire. Yet the abomination of desolation is not directly set up by him, but by forces aligned with him, which may be those who are described as forsaking the holy covenant.

I believe it's the apostate Jews, particularly the high priests, Jason and Menelaus, who are the ones who set up the abomination that makes desolate in around 168 BC. This also is connected with Daniel chapter 9 verses 24-27. 70 weeks are decreed about your people and your holy city, to finish the transgression, to put an end to sin, and to atone for iniquity, to bring in everlasting righteousness, to seal both vision and prophet, and to anoint a most holy place.

Know therefore and understand that from the going out of the word to restore and build Jerusalem, to the coming of an anointed one, a prince, there shall be seven weeks. Then for sixty-two weeks it shall be built again with squares and moat, but in a troubled time, and after the sixty-two weeks an anointed one shall be cut off, and shall have nothing. And the people of the prince who is to come shall destroy the city and the sanctuary, his end shall come with a flood, and to the end there shall be war.

Desolations are decreed, and he shall make a strong covenant with many for one week, and for half of the week he shall put an end to sacrifice and offering, and on the wing of abominations shall come one who makes desolate, until the decreed end is poured out on the desolator. So we have an earlier desolation, or an earlier abomination of desolation in the time of Antiochus Epiphanes and the Maccabees, and now we have a later one that's being foretold, and I believe this is the one that Jesus is referring to, the events in AD 70. And I think there's a candidate described in Josephus, in the Jewish War, Book 4, Chapter 3, he writes of the Zealots, that they undertook to dispose of the high priesthood by casting lots for it, whereas, as we have said already, it was to descend by succession in a family.

The pretense they made for this strange attempt was an ancient practice, while they said that of old it was determined by lot, but in truth it was no better than a dissolution of an undeniable law, and a cunning contrivance to seize upon the government, derived from those that presumed to appoint governors as they themselves pleased. Hereupon they sent for one of the pontifical tribes, which is called Eneakin, and cast lots, which of

it should be the high priest? By fortune the lot so fell as to demonstrate their iniquity after the plainest manner, for it fell upon one whose name was Phaneus, the son of Samuel, of the village Apatha. He was a man not only unworthy of the high priesthood, but that did not well know what the high priesthood was, such a mere rustic was he.

Yet did they hail this man, without his own consent, out of the country, as if they were acting a play upon the stage, and adorned him with a countenance. They also put upon him the sacred garments, and upon every occasion instructed him what he was to do. This horrid piece of wickedness was sport and pastime with them, but occasioned the other priests, who at a distance saw their law made a jest of, to shed tears, and sorely lament the dissolution of such a sacred dignity.

I believe this could be connected to the man of lawlessness mentioned in 2 Thessalonians 2 1-12. And at this point, when the disciples saw the abomination of desolation set up, the utter perversion of the high priesthood, they were supposed to flee. And it was a good time to flee, because it was just before the zealots summoned the Idumeans to attack the city.

At this point the Jerusalem Christians fled to the mountains, to Pella in the Transjordan. Eusebius, in his Ecclesiastical History, Book 3, Chapter 5, writing in the early 4th century, writes, But the people of the church in Jerusalem had been commanded by a revelation, about safe to approve men there before the war, to leave the city and to dwell in a certain town of Perea, called Pella. And when those that believed in Christ had come there from Jerusalem, then, as if the royal city of the Jews and the whole land of Judea were entirely destitute of holy men, the judgment of God at length overtook those who had committed such outrages against Christ and his apostles, and totally destroyed that generation of impious men.

But the number of calamities which everywhere fell upon the nation at that time, the extreme misfortunes to which the inhabitants of Judea were especially subjected, the thousands of men, as well as women and children, that perished by the sword, by famine, and by other forms of death innumerable, all these things, as well as the great many sieges that were carried on against the cities of Judea, and the excessive sufferings endured by those that fled to Jerusalem itself, as to a city of perfect safety, and finally the general course of the whole war, as well as its particular occurrences in detail, and how at last the abomination of desolation proclaimed by the prophets stood in the very temple of God, so celebrated of old, the temple which was now awaiting its total and final destruction by fire, all these things, anyone that wishes, may find accurately described in the history written by Josephus. But it is necessary to state that this writer records that the multitude of those who were assembled from all Judea at the time of the Passover, to the number of three million souls, were shut up in Jerusalem, as in a prison, to use his own words, for it was right that in the very days in which they had inflicted suffering upon the Saviour and the benefactor of all, the Christ of God, that in

those days, shut up as in a prison, they should meet with destruction at the hands of divine justice. Just as the perversion of the priesthood in the days of Antiochus Epiphanes led to judgment upon Jerusalem and its temple, so in AD 70 the perversion of the high priesthood again would lead to a similar fate.

The language of this passage seems so extreme and so cosmic that many people can't imagine it relating to anything other than the destruction of the universe on the last day. But it needn't be read this way. Those familiar with the Old Testament prophets will know that there are many similar passages that use the same sort of imagery to refer to judgments in history, judgments upon places like Egypt or Babylon.

Isaiah 13, verse 10 speaks of the destruction of Babylon. And again in Isaiah 34, verse 4. Ezekiel 32, verse 7-8 speaks of Egypt. We need to be alert to the fact that the fall of Jerusalem is being described like the fall of Babylon and Egypt.

Later in Revelation, Jerusalem will be spoken of as Babylon the Great. We focus upon the coming of the Son of Man often as a downward movement from heaven towards earth. But it is the coming of the Son of Man into heaven itself that is in view here.

The background is that of Daniel again. Daniel 7, verses 9-14. As I looked, thrones were placed, and the Ancient of Days took his seat.

His clothing was white as snow, and the hair of his head like pure wool. His throne was fiery flames, his wheels were burning fire. A stream of fire issued and came out from before him.

A thousand thousands served him, and ten thousand times ten thousand stood before him. The court sat in judgment, and the books were opened. I looked then because of the sound of the great words that the horn was speaking.

And as I looked, the beast was killed, and its body destroyed and given over to be burned with fire. As for the rest of the beasts, their dominion was taken away, but their lives were prolonged for a season and a time. I saw in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven, there came one like a Son of Man, and he came to the Ancient of Days, and was presented before him.

And to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed. The sign of the coming, then, is the vindication of the exalted Son of Man by the dispossession of the wicked tenants.

They shall see this coming in the sense of the proof of it. It will be demonstrated in the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple. All of this is about establishing the new age of the kingdom.

The angels, or literally the messengers, will then be sent out to gather from the four winds. It's a new beginning, it's a new covenant order being established. And this is referring, I think, to places like Deuteronomy chapter 30 verse 4. If your outcasts are in the uttermost parts of heaven, from there the Lord your God will gather you, and from there he will take you.

God is going to gather all of his children. See the same thing in Isaiah chapter 27 verse 13. And in that day a great trumpet will be blown, and those who were lost in the land of Assyria, and those who were driven out to the land of Egypt, will come and worship the Lord on the holy mountain at Jerusalem.

After this Jesus speaks of the fig tree. He's connected the fig tree with Israel earlier. They will see these signs, and they should recognize that the time has come.

That generation will not pass away until everything has occurred. There's a time limit on this. Within about 40 years of the time Jesus is speaking, everything will have taken place.

Heaven and earth will pass away, but his words will not. This maybe refers to Isaiah chapter 51 verse 6. Recognizing the fulfillment of Jesus' words in AD 70, and the specific detail that he gave to his disciples to flee at a crucial moment, we should see that Jesus is not a false prophet. Jesus is not someone who foretold an eschaton that never occurred.

This all took place, and he prepared his disciples for it. And as Eusebius recounts, they took that preparation and escaped the great and terrible fate that was suffered by Jerusalem and the people within it. Jesus concludes the teaching of this passage of the Olivet Discourse by focusing upon the absolute necessity of watchfulness and wakefulness.

Everything will seem to be going on as it always has, and then suddenly everything changes in a single day. Your entire world order, everything you thought to be so rock solid and certain, collapses. When the master of the house comes, the servants have to be ready for him.

They cannot predict the time of the Son of Man's coming, but the signs will be there for the watchful and the faithful and the wakeful servants. They're called to be such servants, and they're reminded again and again because this is of paramount importance. A question to consider.

The theme of wakefulness is very prominent at the end of this passage. Where else can we see such a theme within the New Testament? And how can it give us an insight into the way that the early disciples saw themselves and how we should see ourselves? Mark 14 begins by telling us that the Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread was coming

after two days. The timing was important.

Passover was the 14th of the month of Nisan, followed by the seven-day Feast of Unleavened Bread, recalling the deliverance from Egypt. The Passover lamb, the death of the firstborn, all of these things were associated with that time. Passover was an event charged with significance in the memory of Israel, and so the events of the Passion and the Resurrection occurring at this time was of great significance.

It's important to consider that, as this was one of the pilgrim feasts, Jerusalem would have been packed with people coming up for it, maybe over a couple of hundred thousand people. All of Israel's attention would be drawn towards Jerusalem over this week, so Jesus' death and resurrection were occurring at a crucial time, when people from all Israel gathered together in its capital. The chief priests and the scribes were then seeking to arrest Jesus by stealth and kill him.

Jesus is a genuine threat to their power and influence, as has been seen in the previous chapter, where his support from the crowd and his ability to outwit them really puts them in a difficult position. They don't want to capture and kill Jesus during the feast, and certainly not to do so openly, precisely because that would draw so much attention, and the unmanageable crowd might cause all sorts of problems. While Jesus is staying in Bethany, in the house of Simon the leper, he is reclining at a meal, and a woman comes with an alabaster flask of nard and pours it over his head.

There are similar yet different anointing stories in each of the four Gospels, although Luke's story in Luke 7, verses 36-50 is set much earlier in the narrative and focuses upon themes of love and forgiveness. It suggests that this might be a different event that's being recorded. Each of Matthew, Mark and John, however, connect their anointing story with the death and the burial of Christ.

It anticipates the fate of his body, and directly leads into the Passion narrative in some way or other. In John, it's connected with Jesus' own wiping of his disciples' feet. In Matthew, as in Mark, it introduces the Passion narrative itself.

Something very important is happening here. It's an extravagant and a costly action, and Jesus sees it as preparing him for his burial. It's an act that values Jesus himself.

Jesus is being treated like a king, but also in other ways, he's being treated like a lover. In Song of Songs, chapter 1, verse 12, I think we see part of the background for this. While the king was on his couch, my nod gave forth its fragrance.

Song of Songs, this song of the love between the king and a woman. And here I think we have that alluded to. Jesus, throughout the Gospel of Mark, is the kingly figure.

And here we have a woman treating him as the kingly figure, but also as the kingly bridegroom. The disciples are indignant over the cost of the ointment, but they fail to

appreciate the value of the one to whom it is given. Jesus declares that it is a beautiful thing that she has done, and that the poor they will always have with them.

The timing of this action is critical. This isn't just an action performed upon Christ at any point in his ministry. The importance of this action is seen in the fact that it occurs in the few days running up to his death.

This is preparing Christ for his burial. This is an action that anticipates that Christ won't be with them for much longer. They will have the poor with them after that week, but they will not have Christ with them to anoint in the same way.

And indeed, after Christ has departed, it will be in the service of the poor that the anointing of Christ occurs. We minister to the body of Christ and show our devotion and love for him by taking care of his people who are in need. Jesus declares that the woman who performed this action would be remembered with honour wherever the gospel is proclaimed.

As R.T. France observes, the gospel is not just told by Christ, as we see at the very beginning of the book of Mark, but it is also about Christ. And the fact that Jesus speaks in this way of the gospel, and the woman's part within this critical event that leads into the story of the Passion, is an indication that the gospel has a more developed sense, that it's not just the story of the establishment of the Kingdom. As such, it's the story of the establishment of the Kingdom through the action of Jesus Christ in his life, his death and his resurrection.

And that the woman is playing an important role within that story, that she has a noteworthy part to play. At this point, Judas goes to the chief priests and betrays Jesus. This would have been a stroke of good fortune from the chief priest's perspective, because they would struggle to arrest Jesus secretly and do so before the start of the feast otherwise.

But Judas's willing involvement and his knowledge of where Christ would be and his involvement in different locations would enable them to do so in a far more efficient manner. The presence of money in both of these stories, the question of why the ointment wasn't sold for money rather than being expended upon Christ's body, and then the sale of Christ's body, as it were, for money by Judas, maybe helps us to see something of a common theme connecting these two stories. The failure to perceive Christ's value, and the value of Christ's body is beneath both of these accounts.

Money is valued more than the person. At this point it's the first day of Unleavened Bread. Now presumably this is not strictly speaking the first day of Unleavened Bread, it's the first day of the feast, it's the Passover, it's the 14th of the month.

And the next day would be the first of the seven days of Unleavened Bread, but the

larger festival could be spoken of as the Feast of Unleavened Bread, connected with the Passover. It would be on that day, the 14th of the month, that they would kill the Passover lamb in preparation for the feast. The dating and the timing of these events, and particularly the way that we are to reconcile the events as they're told in John's Gospel with the events as they're narrated in the Synoptics, is a matter of considerable debate.

It might be possible, for instance, if we reckon the day from sunset to sunset, that this is all taking place on the night before the afternoon in which the Passover lamb would be sacrificed. And so it's the same day, but not as we would recognise it. As we would recognise it in our reckoning of the day, it's the day beforehand.

So this is happening on the evening, and then Jesus ends up being taken that evening, he's brought to Pilate in the morning, and then he's crucified around the time that the Passover lamb would be sacrificed. This would explain, for instance, why certain actions that are performed by Joseph of Arimathea and others could be performed without breaking of the laws of the Feast and the Sabbath. Various other suggestions have been made, however.

They prepare for Jesus to eat the Passover meal. It's interesting that Jesus is spoken of as the one who's eating the Passover meal, as if it's Jesus' meal, not the meal of all of them together. He sends his disciples into the city to prepare to celebrate the Passover together.

They're sent and they're told that they will see a man carrying a jar of water. Jesus knows in advance who they will meet, and it's important in the context that it gives them assurance that he knows what's ahead, that he's not stepping into these events blind. He knows exactly what's taking place, and from the triumphal entry, when they were given the instructions to go into the town and to get the donkey, they have been assured that Jesus knows what's taking place, that things are under his control, even though he's facing a terrible fate.

Again, the request is made to the man, where is my guest room where I may eat? The suggestion, once again, being that the meal is particularly associated with Christ. It's Jesus' meal. He will eat with his disciples, but he is the one who's the host.

He's the one that the meal is about. Jesus eats the meal with the twelve, presumably the only ones present with him, and the shadow of the original Passover is starting to be felt. This is a Passover meal, or at least a Passover-associated meal, and they have a sense that something is off.

Jesus' tone may be sombre in a way that they do not yet fully understand, and then Jesus tells them that one of them will betray him, and they become sorrowful. They're wondering, who is it? They each question, is it I? They doubt their own hearts more

readily than they doubt Judas, who's one of their number. Jesus goes on to make clear that the Son of Man goes as it has been written of him.

This is his destiny. This is not something that's happened accidentally, that's blown things off course. This is what was always intended.

It was what was written, and though there will be judgment upon the person who brought this betrayal about, the betrayal is what God intended and purposed. Jesus and his disciples are eating a Passover meal, or at least a meal associated with the Passover. It's crucial to see that Jesus isn't just taking up any old food and drink.

He's taking up elements that are charged with great historical and symbolic and ceremonial meaning. These are elements that are part of a larger meal, and when those elements are taken, they take with them the fabric of the symbolism of the meal itself. So what Jesus is doing is taking something already freighted with meaning and symbolism, and taking that pre-existing symbolism and relating it to himself.

In this case, the symbolism is that of the unleavened bread associated with the Messiah. It's broken and distributed and participated as his body. It's a self-communication in symbol, a real communication of himself in the symbol of something that was already associated with the Messiah.

Jesus speaks of the blood of the new covenant, poured out for many, taking words I think from Isaiah 53, verse 12. Therefore I will divide him a portion with the many, and he shall divide the spoil with the strong, because he poured out his soul to death, and was numbered with the transgressors. Yet he bore the sin of many, and makes intercession for the transgressors.

The pouring out of blood is also a sacrificial action. Poured out as part of the blood rite around the base of the altar. For instance, Moses took half of the blood and put it in basins, and half of the blood he threw against the altar.

Exodus 24, verse 6, as the covenant of Sinai is being established. The story of Exodus 24 is an important one for the background. This is where the covenant is established through sacrifice, and the blood of the covenant is spoken of in that particular context.

Blood sprinkled on the people, and cast against the altar. This blood rite was for purification, for disinfecting as it were, the people and the temple of the pollution of their sins. It is also a means of establishing a new covenant.

In Exodus 24, verse 8, And Moses took the blood, and threw it on the people, and said, Behold the blood of the covenant the Lord has made with you in accordance with all these words. And then in Zechariah 9, verse 11, As for you also, because of the blood of my covenant with you, I will set your prisoners free from the waterless pit. God is going to deliver his people through this blood of a new covenant.

The wine also anticipates drinking in the kingdom. The wine is associated both with the blood that Christ is about to shed, but also with the wine of the wedding feast of the kingdom that is anticipated. These two things meet together in Christ's gift of the wine.

There's also a statement of abstinence, that he will not drink of it again until this point. It might make us think of the Nazarite vow, the Nazarite vow to abstain from wine and fruit of the grape. A vow of temporary dedication to a sort of priestly status for a period of time, often for a specific mission, maybe warfare.

It seems appropriate in this context here that Christ would take such a vow, that Christ would be in preparation for his great act of deliverance, his great battle with the enemy, that he would take this vow of abstinence. That he would dedicate himself fully and then go out on the battlefield. A question to consider.

Many of the details that we've encountered within our passage might remind us of details that we meet in 1 Samuel 9-10. Can you identify some of these details and what might we learn from the associations between these stories? We have now arrived at the middle section of Mark 16. Jesus makes three predictions in this chapter and there are three fulfillments.

Judas' betrayal, the disciples' desertion and Peter's denial. And each of these three predictions is fulfilled in order by the end of the chapter. After singing a hymn, they go out to the Mount of Olives.

The hymn was presumably one of the Psalms that ended the Passover meal. Psalms 113 and 114 were traditionally sung beforehand and afterwards, Psalms 115-118 would have been sung. So presumably these are the things that Jesus would have sung at this point.

They go out to the Mount of Olives. This continues the movements back and forth between the Temple Mount and the city and the Mount of Olives. Jesus quotes Zechariah 13-7 to speak about the way that his disciples will forsake him.

They will strike the shepherd and the sheep of the flock will be scattered. As usual, it's important to hear the stories behind the stories. This is another allusion from the one that we've seen in the triumphal entry to Zechariah.

The rejected Messiah will be wounded and killed, but the end of Zechariah is one of great deliverance and blessing to the nation and the wider peoples. Perhaps notably, the last chapter of Zechariah begins with key references to the Mount of Olives. Jesus foretells what's going to happen in his disciples forsaking of him, but he also foretells the resurrection and the fact that he will meet them again in Galilee, returning to where he first called them.

The scattered sheep and the struck shepherd will be reunited again. Peter, however, told that they will forsake Christ, has an excessive confidence in his own abilities. He

insistently denies that he will deny Christ.

Puffed up, he presents himself as the most faithful disciple. Perhaps we should see a connection between the proud crowing cock and Peter himself. In Mark, we're told that the cock will crow twice, and many have seen a contradiction between this and other Gospel accounts.

I think it's quite natural to think that the other Gospel accounts removed one of the references to the crowing of the cock, because one is enough to get the point across. The reference to the cock crowing twice here probably occurs because Mark's source is Peter himself, and Peter has the most vivid memory of the event. However, most cocks that crowed would crow multiple times and would likely be joined by others.

It's a rather strange detail to camp out on as a contradiction. Peter is the lead disciple. He recognises that Jesus will die, but he thinks he is faithful enough to die with him.

Perhaps he doesn't realise just how much pressure he will be put under, or perhaps he doesn't realise the type of pressure he will be put under. Either way, his pride at this point will soon be deflated by events. Jesus goes to pray in the Garden of Gethsemane.

He prays three times for the cup to be removed, and is joined by Peter, James and John. These are the same three disciples as were present at the transfiguration, the raising of Jairus' daughter. They are probably near enough to hear what Jesus is saying.

They have an intimate view into Jesus' prayer life at its most remarkable and powerful moment, and yet they fall asleep. Jesus challenges Peter in particular for his failure to watch one hour. Peter, the one who had been so proud and boastful about his ability to stand with Christ, his ability to stand when all others would forsake, and now Peter has failed just to keep awake.

Jesus charges them, watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation, into the trial or the testing or the tribulation that would test them beyond their capacity. Jesus, at the very beginning of the Gospel, had been brought into temptation by the Spirit, cast out into the wilderness, facing the temptation of Satan, in a position where he lacked the resources that he needed to eat and was tested to the limits of his strength. A similar time of trial and testing and tribulation is opening up now, and he will once again face off with Satan himself, and the disciples are on the brink of that moment, and they are falling asleep, they are not prepared.

Three times they are tested, and three times they fail, in contrast to Jesus in the wilderness. The Spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak. They are zealous, particularly Peter, but they lack the ability to carry it through in practice.

And I think Jesus' words here reflect his own struggle. He himself knows what it is to feel temptation, the struggle to persevere with his vocation, when his flesh is crying out

against what the cross means, against the pain and the agony, and all the other things that the cross represents. If anyone's spirit is willing, Christ's is, but if anyone is facing a battle with the flesh, and its instinctive desire to avoid suffering and pain and hardship, Christ is facing that struggle.

In this we're seeing a contrast between Christ and his disciples. Christ, who watches and prays as he prepares for the temptation, this testing, that he will go through, and the disciples, as the weakness of their flesh overcomes them, and they cannot stand in the hour that they need to stand. Christ is tempted in every way as we are, tempted to fall back, tempted to divert from the path that the Father has set before him, tempted to give up the cup that had been handed to him.

But he perseveres, he faces temptation and does not sin. And in this he provides not only a contrast with us, but also an example to us. After returning the third time, Jesus says, it is enough.

The matter for which he wanted their presence is now settled, and his betrayer is at hand. Judas comes with the mob. We're told he's one of the twelve.

We know that Judas is one of the twelve already, but it tells us that to underline the point. This is one of his closest friends. He's been betrayed by someone he's invested the last three years of his life in.

He's been close to this person. He's trusted this person. He's given power to this person to do miracles in his name.

This person has witnessed all that Christ has done, and now he's turning against him. And he betrays Christ with a kiss, an act of greeting to single him out from the others. But the cruelty and the wickedness of the betrayal is heightened by the manner in which it occurs.

This act of greeting and love and tenderness and friendship is exploited as a means to destroy someone. And so betrayal with a kiss might remind us of the story of Joab and Amasa in 2 Samuel 20 verses 9-10. One of those who's with Jesus, a bystander, identified as Peter elsewhere, strikes the high priest's servant.

And Jesus points out that they could have taken him in the temple. He was teaching there openly by day. And yet here they are, arresting him like some criminal, like some brigand.

This of course is all part of the plan of the chief priests and the scribes. They wanted to arrest Jesus by stealth because they didn't want the crowd to have notice of it. They wanted this all to go down as quietly and behind the scenes as possible, so that there would not be unrest at the time of the feast.

This however happens in order that the scriptures might be fulfilled. Christ is numbered with the transgressors, it says in Isaiah chapter 53. And the disciples now all flee.

There's a reference here to a young man in a linen garment who was seized but ran away naked. It's rather surprising in the context and a bit comical. None of the other gospels record this detail and many different suggestions about the identity of this figure have been put forward.

Perhaps it was a disciple of Jesus who witnessed the event, later became a witness to the event, and was known among many in the early church. Others have suggested it was Mark himself. Mark had a house in Jerusalem which some have identified with the site of the Last Supper.

And so maybe he was a witness to this event himself and he writes himself into his gospel without putting himself in by name. Others have seen some symbolic import here. In Amos chapter 2 verse 16, He who is stout of heart among the mighty shall flee away naked in that day, declares the Lord.

When God judges and this event of crisis comes, people will flee away naked. Perhaps there is some reference here to the previous chapter. Mark chapter 13 verses 15 to 16 reads, Let the one who is on the housetop not go down nor enter his house to take anything out, and let the one who is in the field not turn back to take his cloak.

Maybe we're supposed to hear the events of the previous chapter being played out in some way here. A question to consider. In the disciples falling asleep in the Garden of Gethsemane, and in the cock crowing bringing Peter to his senses, we should be reminded of the centrality of the charge to be wakeful in the previous chapter.

In Mark chapter 13 verses 33 to 37 we read, Or when the rooster crows, or in the morning, lest he come suddenly and find you asleep. And what I say to you, I say to all, stay awake. Reading Mark 14 against the backdrop of Mark 13, what parallels do you notice? What do these parallels suggest and what can they teach us? Earlier in Mark chapter 14, Jesus was seized by the mob with Judas at night and taken now to Caiaphas the high priest.

The setting of night highlights the urgency and the underhandedness of what's taking place. The authorities are concerned to deal with Christ as urgently as possible before the feast proper starts. And so rather than following a more deliberate and slower procedure of justice, they're trying to deal with things as rapidly as possible.

The Sanhedrin, the Jewish council, brings together false witnesses against Christ. They're seeking to get the conviction that they so desperately desire. And they repeatedly try and fail until some come forward accusing him of statements challenging the temple.

Jesus had challenged the temple on a few occasions, particularly during the final week in

Jerusalem. He claimed it had been made into a den of robbers, a place of traders, a den for brigands to take refuge from God's justice. Acts chapter 6 verses 11 to 14 is one testimony to the way that the early Christians were seen to speak against the temple and what it stood for.

Then they secretly instigated men who said, We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God. And they stirred up the people and the elders and the scribes, and they came upon him and seized him and brought him before the council. And they set up false witnesses and said, This man never ceases to speak words against this holy place and the law, for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and will change the customs that Moses delivered to us.

In the story of Stephen's trial, we see many of the beats of the story of Christ's trial being played out again. And once again, there's that threat to the temple that's at the centre of the charges being made. Jesus is a prophet like Jeremiah or Ezekiel, one of the prophets who speaks against the temple and the way that it's being used in the people's life.

It's being perverted. It's being made into something they're putting their hope in while they're disobeying the will of the Lord. In Jeremiah chapter 7 verses 1 to 14, we have an example of such a charge.

The word that came to Jeremiah from the Lord, Stand in the gate of the Lord's house and proclaim there this word and say, Hear the word of the Lord, all you men of Judah who enter these gates to worship the Lord. Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, Amend your ways and your deeds and I will let you dwell in this place. Do not trust in these deceptive words.

This is the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord. For if you truly amend your ways and your deeds, if you truly execute justice one with another, if you do not oppress the sojourner, the fatherless or the widow, or shed innocent blood in this place, and if you do not go after other gods to your own harm, then I will let you dwell in this place, in the land that I gave of old to your father's brother. Behold, you trust in deceptive words to no avail.

Will you steal, murder, commit adultery, swear falsely, make offerings to Baal, and go after other gods that you have not known, and then come and stand before me in this house, which is called by my name, and say, We are delivered, only to go on doing all these abominations? Has this house, which is called by my name, become a den of robbers in your eyes? Behold, I myself have seen it, declares the Lord. Go now to my place that was in Shiloh, where I made my name dwell at first, and see what I did to it because of the evil of my people Israel. And now, because you have done all these things, declares the Lord, and when I spoke to you persistently you did not listen, and when I called you you did not answer.

Therefore I will do to the house that is called by my name, and of which you trust, and to the place that I gave to you and to your fathers, as I did to Shiloh. Jesus makes a statement about the temple in John chapter 2 verses 18 to 22, which seems to be alluded here in the statements that are made by the false witnesses against him. So the Jews said to him, What sign do you show us for doing these things? Jesus answered them, Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.

The Jews then said, It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and will you raise it up in three days? Jesus was speaking about the temple of his body. When therefore he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this, and they believed the scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken. So the false witnesses make a true statement, but with the attempt to destroy him.

False witness can have a broader sense than simply a false message. Jesus is convicted by true testimony, but true testimony that is perverted. Jesus is silent before his accusers, and once again this seems to be in fulfilment of the scriptures.

In Isaiah chapter 53 verse 7, He was oppressed and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth, like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep before its shearers is silent, so he opened not his mouth. The high priest asks him if he is the Christ, the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed. What does this have to do with the earlier claims about his statements concerning the temple? Well, the Messiah was the one to cleanse and restore and reform the temple.

Jesus, we should remember, has been performing messianic-style actions for the last few days, his triumphal entry, his action in the temple. Calling the Messiah the Son of the Blessed would not have the same strong metaphysical meaning that later Christian theology would give it. The Son of God, in that sense, is the one who is the Davidic Son, the one who is going to inherit the throne of his father David.

Now, as we play that out and work out all the things that are associated with that, we'll see that it's not just a human figure, but the initial and immediate sense of Son of God or Son of the Blessed is not the Divine Son, in the way that we would think about that in terms of the Son as the second person of the Trinity. Jesus affirms the statement that the High Priest gives to him in the loaded words, I am, and he identifies himself once more with the Son of Man in Daniel's vision, in Daniel chapter 7, verses 13 to 14. I saw in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven, there came one like a Son of Man, and he came to the ancient of days and was presented before him, and to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him.

His dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed. There also seems to be an allusion here to Psalm 110, verse 1, The Lord says to my Lord, sit at my right hand, until I make your enemy to your

footstool. The hearers of Jesus' statement, he declares, will see Jesus at the right hand of power, and coming with the clouds of heaven.

What on earth could this mean? Jesus seems to be saying that he is coming to the throne of God in the middle of history to receive power. The point is not that he is coming to earth, but the leaders of the Jews will see proof of his ascension to power when he is vindicated in the destruction of their temple and city. The coming of Christ then, the coming of the Son of Man, is not primarily a downward movement to earth, rather it is the movement to the throne of God, the movement to the right hand of the power of God.

And the high priest's response to this is to tear his clothes. We should recall from Leviticus chapter 21, verse 10, that the high priest was specifically commanded not to tear his clothes. The priest, who is chief among his brothers, on whose head the anointing oil is poured, and who has been consecrated to wear the garments, shall not let the hair of his head hang loose, nor tear his clothes.

The high priest and the court charge Jesus with blasphemy and declare him to be worthy of death. They do not, however, have the jurisdiction to carry out that sentence, so they must deliver him to Pilate later on. This trial was probably not a trial in the fullest sense of the term, more a hearing that is an attempt to establish charges to be presented to Pilate later on, the one with the actual authority to cast the death sentence.

So why was Jesus declared to be guilty of blasphemy? First of all, he committed a sort of cultural blasphemy. He opposed the temple and the religious leaders, and he claimed messianic status. But also he seemed to go beyond that.

In claiming to be the son of man, who would sit at the right hand of the power of God, he was claiming something for himself that went beyond the status of any man. This was a blasphemy in a stronger sense of the term. Their response is to spit in his face, to cover his face, to strike him and to mock him.

The way that he is being treated here is probably intended to remind the reader of the Isaianic servant in Isaiah 50, verse 6. I gave my back to those who strike, and my cheeks to those who pull out the beard. I hid not my face from disgrace and spitting. Peter's denial is paralleled with and contrasts with Jesus' trial.

Mark brings that contrast to the attention of the heroes of his gospel by moving the narrative to and fro between them. Both are questioned. One is faithful, but the other is unfaithful.

And there's a gradual escalation. First he is approached directly by the servant girl, and he denies it. He then tries to move location, and then he is accused to the bystanders by the servant girl, and he denies it strongly again.

Then the bystanders accuse him together of association with the followers of Jesus. His accent gives him away. He seems to be a man of Galilee, associated with this teacher that's come down from Nazareth.

In responding to this charge, Peter seems to call a curse upon himself, an anathema upon himself, which is something of the utmost seriousness. In denying Christ, he's calling a curse upon himself. Hearing the cock crow that second time brings sudden and horrified self-recognition.

He recognises his earlier pride. He recognises his lack of wakefulness. He's not been alert.

He's not recognised what he's been doing, and he's sleepwalked into this great sin. He comes to his senses. He completely removes himself from the situation, and he weeps bitterly.

A question to consider. What can we learn from the way that the testing of Peter is contrasted with the testing of Jesus, both in Gethsemane and in the house of Caiaphas the high priest? Mark chapter 15 begins with a consultation between the chief priests, the elders, the scribes, and the entire Sanhedrin. They then deliver Jesus over to Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor.

Pilate questions Jesus concerning the charges against him. The charge that he claims that he is the king of the Jews is the messianic claim as seen from a Gentile perspective. Some have suggested that Pilate's question should be read in a sarcastic tone.

You are the king of the Jews? Joel Marcus then suggests that Jesus' response to this question is the edgy one. You are saying it. Such an answer might antagonise him.

It presents Pilate himself as bearing witness to Jesus being the king of the Jews. But beyond this, Jesus doesn't give any more responses to Pilate. Pilate presses him to answer the charges made against him, but Jesus makes no further response.

Once again, this is reminiscent of Isaiah chapter 53 verse 7, the lamb who is led to the slaughter who is silent before its shearers. This is the silence of one who is facing the threat of death, and for that reason it is remarkable, and Pilate is amazed. One would expect a person in Jesus' position to be doing anything and everything to defend himself, but Jesus is silent.

Pilate gives the people the choice between Barabbas and Jesus as the one to be released to them. Pilate seems to be searching for a means of escape here. He recognises that the chief priests have delivered Jesus up through envy.

However, he needs to keep the chief priests, the elders and the Sanhedrin on his side, so he needs to condemn Jesus. He also wants to satisfy the crowd. Like the Jewish leaders,

he fears the crowd and doesn't want to go against it.

A customary release of a prisoner seems to offer him an opportunity to get Jesus off, without taking responsibility that would render him unpopular. The practice of releasing a prisoner seems to be a strange one, and presumably it's not a commitment on the part of the Roman governor, so much as an occasional Passover-time crowd-pleasing gesture that's snatched at now as a way out of a difficult position. What it does do is it sets up Barabbas and Jesus as two ways that the people can choose.

The choice between Barabbas and Jesus seems to be a choice that shouldn't be a choice at all. Why would they prefer an insurrectionist and a murderer over Jesus who healed the sick and raised the dead? Yet, as the chief priests stir up the crowd, this is exactly the way that they choose. Mark makes certain that we have an idea about what sort of man Barabbas is.

Barabbas means son of the father, which again invites comparison and contrast with Christ himself as the true son of the father. In choosing Barabbas, the people choose the violent revolutionary over the true messiah, and this is a choice that over time would eventually seal their fate in AD 70. The crowd cry out for Jesus' crucifixion, not just for his condemnation, but that he should be put to death in the most grisly way possible.

The actions and the description of the crowd here is similar to the way that we find demon-possessed persons described elsewhere in Mark. The crowd are whipped up in a sort of demonic frenzy, with the chief priests being involved, but behind them I think we can see Satan himself. Pilate releases Barabbas to the crowd, scourges Jesus and then delivers Jesus up to be crucified.

There's a parodic coronation and enthronement that follows. Gentile soldiers, the whole battalion, ridiculing the king of the Jews, gathering as an audience before him, dressing him up with a crown and a scarlet robe. Now this is appropriate because soldiers recognise kings.

Soldiers are the ones that surround kings and express the glory of the rulers of this world. And now in a parody of a coronation we're seeing something of the truth of what's taking place. Jesus is the true king and this is his exaltation that's going to happen.

He's going to be lifted up on the cross and then raised to God's right hand. We might also reflect upon the fact that all the other people in this situation, none of them seem to be in control. The chief priests and the scribes are envious of Christ and his influence driven by their passions.

They're also fearful of the crowd, as is Pilate, who is concerned to pacify them. Pilate also needs to keep the chief priests and the scribes on his side. The crowd is caught up in a satanic frenzy.

And paradoxically, Jesus, the one who is condemned to crucifixion, seems to be the only one who isn't operating out of his fear and passions. A passerby called Simon of Cyrene is compelled to carry the cross for Christ. Simon is a Gentile who carries Christ's cross, the very mark of true discipleship.

Yet Simon Peter, the chief of the disciples Jesus called, and the one who had been given the charge to carry the cross and follow Christ, is nowhere to be found. Once again we're having a juxtaposition here. We've seen juxtapositions between Christ and Peter, between Jesus and Barabbas, and now we're seeing one between Simon of Cyrene and also Peter, Simon Peter.

The division of Christ's garments and the casting lots for them again looks back to Psalm 22 verse 18. They divide my garments among them, and from my clothing they cast lots. The voice of scripture is behind the text at many points here, and we can hear its voice as the voice of fulfilled prophecy.

This is the voice of the Davidic suffering king. It gives the reader or the hearer a sense of what is taking place in the death of Christ. They crucify him in the third hour, around 9am.

He's offered myrrh and wine, drugged wine, to dull his awareness of the pain, which he refuses. His refusal of the drugged wine draws our mind back to his statement that he would not drink the fruit of the vine until he drank it new in the kingdom, a sort of Nazarite vow that Christ takes as he goes out to do battle with the evil one. It is also a commitment consciously to bear the pain of the cross, not to shrink away from it in insensibility, but to face up to it fully.

Finally, perhaps we're supposed to see a relationship between Christ not drinking wine and the fact that the priests were not supposed to drink wine while they were on duty in the temple. Jesus is performing a sacrificial work here, and it's important that he does so in his full and right mind. The charge for which he's being crucified is placed above him, that he is the king of the Jews, and there are robbers placed on either side of him, like people would be on either side of an enthroned king.

There's a fulfilment of Isaiah 53, verse 12 here, that he was numbered with the transgressors. There's also a continuation of the theme of a parodic enthronement. As people pass by, they mock and they wag their heads.

Again, this looks back to the words of scripture in the past. Psalm 22, verse 7. Once again, Psalm 22. All who see me mock me, they make mouths at me, they wag their heads.

Lamentations, chapter 2, verse 15. All who pass along the way clap their hands at you, they hiss and wag their heads at the daughter of Jerusalem. Is this the city that was

called the perfection of beauty, the joy of all the earth? Jesus is ridiculed as the one who would destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days by passers-by.

He's ridiculed by the chief priests, by the scribes and the elders, as the one who, though he saved others, cannot save himself. He is the supposed king of Israel and claims to trust in God, but God is not coming to his aid. There's darkness over the land from noon to three o'clock, and this progression through hours, the third hour, the sixth hour and the ninth hour, perhaps invites us to see some deeper order in what's taking place, and the divine superintention of the crucifixion.

Perhaps we could even see it as something akin to trimesters leading to the birth of a new world. Darkness over the land from noon to three o'clock recalls the final of the cycle of plagues before the death of the firstborn, which itself occurred at the darkness of midnight. Once again, there's darkness over the land, darkness that reminds us of the exodus and associates Israel with Egypt as it was judged in the plagues.

And now we have another death of the firstborn, the true firstborn that dies for the people, and they were substituted by lambs, but this is the true Lamb of God. And we should be alert to the Passover connotations here, because the Passover lamb would be killed around this sort of time. Christ is the true Passover lamb, he's the true firstborn son, he's the one that dies so that the people can be released from slavery, that a new exodus can take place.

Mark has been working with themes of Isaiah and of Isaiah's new exodus throughout, and now we maybe see these coming to their full head, that this is the time when the exodus is taking place. Christ prepared for the Passover, and now he is the Passover lamb being sacrificed. The darkness here could not have been a solar eclipse, but it may have been an extreme sandstorm as it was in the case of the exodus, or perhaps also it could have been a covering up of the skies with heavy cloud cover.

The darkness at his death contrasts with the light of the dawn that will be associated with his resurrection. And the darkness of the day of the Lord is described in the Old Testament, Zephaniah 1, verse 15. A day of wrath is that day, a day of distress and anguish, a day of ruin and devastation, a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and thick darkness.

Emmaus chapter 8, verses 9 to 10. And on that day, declares the Lord God, I will make the sun go down at noon, and darken the earth in broad daylight. I will turn your feasts into mourning, and all your songs into lamentation.

I will bring sackcloth on every waist, and baldness on every head. I will make it like the mourning for an only son, and the end of it like a bitter day. We have a number of the elements here that appear in the crucifixion of Christ.

As in the prophecy of Emmaus, it's noon when the sun goes down and the earth is darkened. There's also the death of an only son, the firstborn son of the Father. We might also consider the similarities between the description of Jesus' trial, mockery, crucifixion and death, and the events described in relation to the events leading up to and in the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70.

Jesus is suffering the fate of Jerusalem. He's presenting an alternative for all those who trust in him. At the ninth hour, Jesus cries out with a loud voice, My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? These are the first words of Psalm 22, a psalm that's been alluded to or cited on a number of occasions already within this account.

It's a psalm of the suffering Davidic king. The bystanders don't recognise that Jesus is quoting scripture. Like Eli in the temple, who couldn't recognise the prayer of Hannah, they can't recognise the voice of scripture and the voice of the psalms.

They hear, but they do not understand. And perhaps there's another irony here, as the coming of Elijah was associated with the arrival of the great and terrible day of the Lord in Malachi chapter 4. Jesus is offered sour wine at this point, recalling Psalm 69 verse 21. They gave me poison for food and for my thirst they gave me sour wine to drink.

He again cries out with a loud voice and he dies. And the curtain of the temple, the realm of God's dwelling, the very heart of the religious order, is torn from top to bottom. It's a sign of God's action.

It's not torn from the bottom to the top, but from the realm of God's dwelling, from the top. Also, it's an anticipation of the fulfilment of Christ's words concerning the temple. This is a tearing in judgement.

It could also be seen as a tearing in mourning. The high priest tore his garments, as he was not supposed to do earlier on, in outrage at Jesus' blasphemy. But God is tearing the clothes of his tabernacle in mourning for his son.

It's also an opening up of a realm that has been closed off so that people can come into God's special presence. There's debate about which part of the temple this curtain is in. Is it the curtain at the entrance to the temple itself or is it the curtain that is at the entrance of the Holy of Holies? One way or another, God is opening up a way for people to come in.

The response of the centurion seeing all of this is to confess that Jesus is the Son of God. This is a response of a Gentile in faith. Again, we might think of Psalm 22.

Along with the centurion, Mark draws our attention to the many women of Jesus' disciples who were present at a distance. While the male disciples had almost all forsaken him at the end, the women remained present. They had ministered to him, providing for his needs from Galilee.

In Luke 8, verses 1-3, this ministry of the women is described. Joseph of Arimathea comes at evening, asking for the body of Jesus. He is a member of the council, which is surprising considering the part that the council had played in the condemnation of Christ to his death.

But there's time pressure here. It's the day before the Sabbath, and so they need to bury Christ before the Sabbath begins. As in the other Gospels, the presence of two Josephs and two Marys in the account of the burial of Jesus might make us think about Christ's birth, and the way in which the tomb can function as a new womb, from which Christ will come forth as the firstborn from the dead.

The prominence of the women at this point might also add weight to such birth themes. The body is wrapped in a clean linen shroud, like the clothes of the high priest would be made of linen on the Day of Atonement. It's also a fulfillment of Isaiah 53, verse 9. His grave is made with a rich man at his death.

The tomb is cut into the rock, like stones taken from the quarry. In Isaiah 51, verse 1, Listen to me, you who pursue righteousness, you who seek the Lord. Look to the rock from which you were hewn, and to the quarry from which you were dug.

Christ is the great stone that will become the chief cornerstone of the new temple, so it seems appropriate that in his resurrection he will come from a tomb that has been cut into the rock. The women witness where the burial takes place, and so they know where to go on the first day of the week. As in the other gospels, the prominence of the women at this point invites us to reflect upon their model of faith, the way that they remain faithful to Christ and follow him even when the male disciples fall away and are scattered.

A question to consider, what can we learn from the characters of Simon, the centurion, and Joseph of Arimathea? Mark chapter 16 is the final chapter of the Gospel of Mark. It is the climax of the story, but it also raises a number of difficulties, as verses 9-20 aren't in the oldest extant versions of the text. The chapter begins with the two Marys and Salome, the same three women as were at the foot of the cross, first buying spices and then going to the tomb to anoint the corpse of Jesus.

The fact that they are bringing spices suggests that they were not anticipating the resurrection despite Jesus' words. Possibly they considered Jesus' statements about his resurrection as more of a cryptic statement, not to be taken literally. They come very shortly after dawn, and they are wondering about how to remove the large stone, but it has already mysteriously been moved.

This is strange due to the size of the stone and how difficult it would be to move it. Going inside the tomb they see a young man dressed in a white robe, striking enough to be seen in the darkness of a tomb. White clothes as we see elsewhere in scripture are

associated with heaven, they are heavenly clothes.

He is sitting there, which is strange, he is clearly not an ordinary bystander, but has the hallmarks of an angel, and their response is to be very afraid. He gives them the message that Jesus has risen, his body hasn't been taken, he is raised from the dead and has moved on, and he invites them to see the place where his body was, to see that it has gone, to be witnesses of what has taken place. Jesus has moved on ahead of them, they need to catch up.

This isn't just someone who almost died and then revived and came to, and then is limping away. Christ is moving with the speed, the alacrity that we see elsewhere in the Gospel. He is the one who does things straight away, suddenly, immediately, and here we see Christ again going before them.

He is leading the way, he is calling his servants to a staging ground of a new mission, and he is calling them back to the site where it all began, in Galilee. In Mark 14, verse 28, Jesus had already declared that he would see them in Galilee after his resurrection. But after I am raised up, I will go before you to Galilee.

The man instructs the women to tell the disciples and Peter. The fact that Peter is spoken of in distinction from the disciples suggests some breach has been created after his denial. Although he is still associated with the disciples, he does not see himself truly as one of them in the same way.

There is need for restoration, and the fact that the women are sent with a message for him as well as the other disciples already hints at such a restoration occurring. What we see here is a sort of lesser commission. There is a greater commission coming up, but here the women are sent with a message to the disciples.

They flee from the tomb in trembling and astonishment and don't tell anyone because they were afraid. In Matthew's account we see that the commission had to be given by Christ himself to the women before they passed it on to the disciples. Matthew 28, verses 9-10 Should verses 9-20 be included in the Gospel of Mark? Historically these have been taken as scripture by the Church, but in two of the oldest extant texts they are absent.

There seems to be none Markan terminology and style according to certain authors and commentators. Some have argued that what we see here is a pastiche of elements from the Gospels, Acts and other sources, and it's not really Mark at all. Some argue that Mark intended to end his Gospel at verse 8, perhaps to put the ball in the reader's court.

This strange ending invites the reader to come into the story and to think about what happens next, how do they respond. Others claim he meant to go on, but he didn't. Perhaps he wanted to complete it but didn't have the opportunity.

Some say that an original ending might have been lost. Others say that there were alternative yet genuine versions of Mark in circulation. So the shorter ending and the longer ending were both genuine versions of Mark, from Mark's hand, but both circulated in different quarters.

Nicholas Lunn makes a persuasive case, for me at least, that verses 9-20 come from Mark's hand and that they were his intended ending. He dismantles first of all the claim that the language and style is not Mark's. He shows that if we applied the same criteria to undisputed texts throughout the Gospel, we would be led to dismiss them too.

So it seems strange that we would apply here what we would not apply to other parts of the Gospel. If Mark 16 has much the same sort of degree of variety as we find in other Markan passages, then why shouldn't we accept it as genuine? Furthermore, the absence of the longer ending in the two oldest extant texts isn't the slam-dunk that some think. First, we have references to the longer ending in texts that long predate these manuscripts, so within certain of the Church Fathers and elsewhere.

Second, the actual texts in question give suggestive evidence that their copiers were aware of longer versions of the ending, and that they were either purposefully excluding them in one case, or perhaps leaving space for them to be added at a later point in the other case. His most persuasive arguments, for me at least, however, are literary and thematic. Some of these are stronger than others, but together I think that they make a strong case.

First, the conclusion involves a thematic return to the beginning of the Gospel. The Gospel begins with the forerunner at the beginning, and it ends with the successors. Jesus comes from Galilee at the beginning, and he goes to Galilee at the end.

Second, John the Baptist begins with preaching, and then the disciples end with preaching. There's third, the descent of the Spirit from heaven, and then at the end, the ascent of Christ into heaven. Then there's the calling of disciples to become fishers of men, and then the sending of the disciples out into the world to be fishers of men.

And then fifth, John foretells the baptism of the Holy Spirit, and then Jesus speaks of the Pentecostal signs that will follow his disciples. There are verbal connections too. Only in the prologue, in verse 3, and in the epilogue do we find the term Lord being used of Christ by the narrator.

Second, the term baptism is very important at the beginning and the end, but yet is absent throughout much of the rest of the Gospel, except used in reference to things that aren't related to Christian baptism. The expression preach the Gospel is found in verse 14 of chapter 1 and in verse 15 of chapter 16. These are the only occasions with the active form of this verb and noun combination.

And then fourth, the relationship between preaching and faith is prominent in both places, in verse 15 of chapter 1 and in verse 16 of chapter 16. These features for Lund suggest that Mark intended an *inclusio*, a bookending of the material of his Gospel. We see the same thing in Luke, and we see it in Matthew as well.

Beyond this, there are themes of prediction and fulfilment throughout Mark's Gospel. We have a lot of different predictions and then these are fulfilled step by step. In Mark 10 for instance, verses 32 to 34, And taking the twelve again, he began to tell them what was to happen to him, saying, See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be delivered over to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death and deliver him over to the Gentiles, and they will mock him and spit on him and flog him and kill him, and after three days he will rise.

It would be strange indeed if Mark, after highlighting the fulfilment of each aspect of Jesus' prophecy concerning his death, didn't end with a very strong witness to the resurrection. Lund notes that Mark uses foreshadowing on occasions in his Gospel, and observes the way that various elements of the story of the raising of Jairus' daughter, a story that anticipates Jesus' own resurrection, reappear in the ending of chapter 16. He identifies nine such related phrases.

Beyond this, he argues, verses 1 to 8 and verses 9 to 20 of chapter 16 are two paralleled frames of narrative. He argues that both of these two blocks of verses can be broken down into four sections each, and these four sections parallel each other. Both, for instance, begin with Mary Magdalene on the first day of the week.

Both contain a climactic speech with key expressions. Go tell, and he has risen in the first, and then go into all the world and proclaim the Gospel, and that he had risen in the second. It's concluded by a response to speech, and they went out and they said nothing to anyone in the first, and they went out and preached everywhere in the second.

It seems that these things are being held alongside each other. We're supposed to see a parallel, and we're also supposed to see a movement up. There's this initial fearful appearance, then there's the appearance to Mary Magdalene, the one, and then there's the appearance to the eleven, where they are sent out into the world and commissioned to preach the Gospel.

The themes of faith versus fear and unbelief that are throughout Mark's Gospel also come to the foreground at the end, with this emphasis upon the one who has faith, and the way that they should not be fearful, they should not be people of unbelief. Beyond this, we can also see Exodus themes, Lunn argues. Many have identified Exodus themes as structuring the story of Mark, Ricky Watts being a good example of this.

There is an appearance that reminds us perhaps of the appearance of God to Moses at the burning bush. There's a commission to go, as Moses was commissioned for the

Exodus. There's belief and disbelief as a theme.

There's picking up serpents. Where else have we seen that before? Moses picks up a serpent. He takes up a serpent, and it's a sign of the Exodus.

Hard-heartedness, that's something that the disciples are challenged for. It's a constant theme within the story of the Exodus, both in reference to Pharaoh and in reference to the people of Israel. And then there's the speaking and performing signs, as Moses did.

And then finally, an interesting reference, the casting out of seven demons from Mary Magdalene. Lunn suggests that there is a parallel perhaps here between the seven nations that are cast out of the land. In Deuteronomy 7, verse 1, These are a selection of the arguments that Lunn makes in his book, and I highly recommend it.

A recurring theme at the beginning here is that of unbelief. They're told this message of Christ's resurrection, and they don't believe it. They're told it first of all by Mary Magdalene, then they're told it by the two who see him in another form on the way, and then finally Jesus has to appear to them himself and rebuke them for their hard-heartedness.

He had told them that he would rise from the dead, and they just had not believed. This might remind us of other incidents within the Gospel, perhaps particularly those events on the boat, where they had failed to believe in Christ's power over the storm. As we read through those, I noted the parallels between those and the themes of resurrection.

And once again, I think these give supportive evidence to the legitimacy of reading chapter 16 in its full form as part of Mark's text. They are commissioned to go into the world and to preach the Gospel to all the creation. This is a cosmic message that they're bringing out.

And as they do so, they're supposed to declare that he who believes and is baptised will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned. Many have found these verses troubling, the suggestion of baptismal regeneration, for instance. But baptism has always been an essential part of the process of becoming a Christian.

It doesn't mean that if you're not baptised you can't be saved, but it does mean if you're not baptised that there is something seriously wrong. It's unusual. It's like being a king without having a coronation, or being married without having a ring.

Baptism really is integral to the process of becoming a Christian. And it isn't just something that confirms something that is already the case, although that's part of what it means. It's also an entrance into the reality of what salvation means.

It's an entrance into the life of the body of Christ, the life of the Church, the life of the supper. While people are rightly cautious about the idea that baptism is automatically a

ticket of salvation, it isn't automatically so. It requires belief.

It is not from Scripture that we get any warrant to downplay baptism. Throughout Scripture it's spoken of as the washing of regeneration. Peter says that baptism now saves us.

Paul in Romans chapter 6 speaks of us being baptised into Christ and dying and rising again with him. None of this language suggests a magical power of baptism. Baptism acting irrespective of the faith or unbelief of the person and just magically zapping them into salvation.

That's not what's happening here. In many ways, baptism's relationship to salvation is more like the relationship between a wedding and a marriage. A wedding is the means by which a faithful couple enter into the union of the marriage.

It is a sign of their union and it's a seal of their union together. It's a symbolic manifestation of it. And baptism is all of these things too.

But just as a wedding entered into by unfaithful people would lead to a hollow marriage, so baptism is not a guarantee of salvation apart from faith. Yet, on the other hand, while people can be saved without baptism, to lack baptism is to lack something very important. Like a common law marriage where there was nothing resembling a wedding.

Jesus promises that signs will follow those who believe. Presumably we should take this as referring to the disciples in particular. They are the messengers, they are the apostles being sent out with the message of the gospel.

And as they do so, they will have these signs that confirm that message. Hebrews 2, verses 3-4 says, This speaks as if this stage of the ministry had already been completed. That what Jesus is referring to is specifically the ministry of the apostles, not the ministry of the church more generally.

Although there are ways in which what is true of the ministry of the apostles extends to the rest of the church. In John 14, verses 12, Jesus also declares to his disciples, And greater works than these will he do, because I am going to the Father. And then in Mark chapter 3, verses 14-15, And he appointed twelve, whom he also named apostles, so that they might be with him, and he might send them out to preach, and have authority to cast out demons.

Jesus is commissioning his disciples here again, giving them authority and power to have signs that confirm the message of the gospel that he has given them. The strange signs that particularly invite discussion are the ones of handling snakes and of drinking poison. The handling of snakes, as I've already noted, reminds us of the story of Moses and the sign given to him as he preaches in Egypt.

But it also anticipates an event with Paul at the end of the book of Acts. In Acts chapter 28, verses 3-6, When Paul had gathered a bundle of sticks and put them on the fire, a viper came out because of the heat and fastened on his hand. When the native people saw the creature hanging from his hand, they said to one another, No doubt this man is a murderer.

Though he has escaped from the sea, justice has not allowed him to live. He, however, shook off the creature into the fire and suffered no harm. They were waiting for him to swell up or suddenly fall down dead.

But when they had waited a long time and saw no misfortune come to him, they changed their minds and said that he was a god. As regards the drinking of poison, Eusebius records the story from Papias, which he received from Philip's daughters, that justice named Barsibas drank a deadly poison without consequences. Justice, of course, along with Matthias, was one of the two that was considered to take the place of Judas in Acts chapter 1. A question to consider, how do verses 19-20 help us to understand the character of the church's mission in relationship to the work of Christ?