

# OpenTheo

## April 26th: Numbers 22 & Mark 16

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Balaam and his ass. The resurrection of Jesus and the disputed end of Mark's gospel.

Some passages referenced:

Exodus 18:1-5 (Jethro at Sinai); Exodus 1:8-12 (Pharaoh and the Egyptians' fear of the multiplying Israelites); Genesis 12:3 (Abraham's blessing); Genesis 22:3 (Abraham, his donkey, and two young men); Genesis 22:10-12 (the Angel of the Lord stops Abraham); 2 Peter 2:12-22 (Peter treats Balaam as an example of a false teacher).

Mark 14:28 (Jesus declares that, after the resurrection, he will meet his disciples in Galilee); Matthew 28:9-10 (Jesus instructs the women to tell the disciples); Mark 1:14, 16:15 ('preach the gospel'); Mark 1:15, 16:16 (preaching and faith); Mark 10:32-34 (Jesus foretells his death and resurrection); Mark 5:21-43 (Jairus' daughter); Deuteronomy 7:1 (casting out seven nations); Titus 3:5 (washing of regeneration); 1 Peter 3:21 (baptism now saves us); Romans 6:1-14 (dead and buried with Christ in baptism, to be raised by the dead); Hebrews 2:3-4 (signs testifying to the apostolic message); John 14:12 (signs following); Mark 3:14-15 (authority to cast out demons given to the Twelve); Acts 28:3-6 (Paul survives being bitten by a serpent); Exodus 4:1-5 (Moses picks up a serpent).

Reflections upon the readings from the ACNA Book of Common Prayer (<http://bcp2019.anglicanchurch.net/>).

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## Transcript

Numbers 22 at that time, sent messengers to Balaam, the son of Beor, at Pithor, which is near the river in the land of the people of Amal, to call him, saying, Behold, a people has come out of Egypt, they cover the face of the earth, and they are dwelling opposite me. Come now, curse this people for me, since they are too mighty for me. Perhaps I shall be able to defeat them and drive them from the land.

For I know that he whom you bless is blessed, and he whom you curse is cursed. So the elders of Moab and the elders of Midian departed with the fees for divination in their hand, and they came to Balaam and gave him Balak's message. And he said to them, Lodge here tonight, and I will bring back word to you as the Lord speaks to me.

So the princes of Moab stayed with Balaam. And God came to Balaam and said, Who are these men with you? And Balaam said to God, Balak the son of Zippor, king of Moab, has sent me, saying, Behold, a people has come out of Egypt, and it covers the face of the earth. Now come, curse them for me.

Perhaps I shall be able to fight against them and drive them out. God said to Balaam, You shall not go with them. You shall not curse the people, for they are blessed.

So Balaam rose in the morning and said to the princes of Balak, Go to your own land, for the Lord has refused to let me go with you. So the princes of Moab rose and went to Balak and said, Balaam refuses to come with us. Once again Balak sent princes, more in number and more honorable than these.

And they came to Balaam and said to him, Thus says Balak, the son of Zippor, Let nothing hinder you from coming to me, for I will surely do you great honor, and whatever you say to me I will do. Come, curse this people for me. But Balaam answered and said to the servants of Balak, Though Balak were to give me his house full of silver and gold, I could not go beyond the command of the Lord my God to do less or more.

So you too, please stay here tonight, that I may know what more the Lord will say to me. And God came to Balaam at night and said to him, If the men have come to call you, rise, go with them, but only do what I tell you. So Balaam rose in the morning and saddled his donkey and went with the princes of Moab.

But God's anger was kindled because he went, and the angel of the Lord took his stand in the way as his adversary. Now he was riding on the donkey, and his two servants were with him. And the donkey saw the angel of the Lord standing in the road with a drawn sword in his hand.

And the donkey turned aside out of the road and went into the field. And Balaam struck

the donkey to turn her into the road. Then the angel of the Lord stood in a narrow path between the vineyards, with a wall on either side.

And when the donkey saw the angel of the Lord, she pushed against the wall and pressed Balaam's foot against the wall. So he struck her again. Then the angel of the Lord went ahead and stood in a narrow place where there was no way to turn either to the right or to the left.

When the donkey saw the angel of the Lord, she lay down under Balaam. And Balaam's anger was kindled, and he struck the donkey with his staff. Then the Lord opened the mouth of the donkey, and she said to Balaam, What have I done to you, that you have struck me these three times? And Balaam said to the donkey, Because you have made a fool of me, I wish I had a sword in my hand, for then I would kill you.

And the donkey said to Balaam, Am I not your donkey, on which you have ridden all your life long to this day? Is it my habit to treat you this way? And he said, No. Then the Lord opened the eyes of Balaam, and he saw the angel of the Lord standing in the way with his drawn sword in his hand. And he bowed down and fell on his face.

And the angel of the Lord said to him, Why have you struck your donkey these three times? Behold I have come out to oppose you because your way is perverse before me. The donkey saw me, and turned aside before me these three times. If she had not turned aside from me, surely just now I would have killed you and let her live.

Then Balaam said to the angel of the Lord, I have sinned, for I did not know that you stood in the road against me. Now therefore, if it is evil in your sight, I will turn back. And the angel of the Lord said to Balaam, Go with the men, but speak only the word that I tell you.

So Balaam went on with the princes of Balak. When Balak heard that Balaam had come, he went out to meet him at the city of Moab, on the border formed by the Anan, at the extremity of the border. And Balak said to Balaam, Did I not send to you to call you? Why did you not come to me? Am I not able to honour you? Balaam said to Balaak, Behold, I have come to you.

Have I now any power of my own to speak anything? The word that God puts in my mouth, that must I speak. Then Balaam went with Balaak, and they came to Kiriath-huzath. And Balaak sacrificed oxen and sheep, and sent for Balaam and for the princes who were with him.

And in the morning Balaak took Balaam and brought him up to Bemaf-beil, and from there he saw a fraction of the people. The story of Balaam which begins in Numbers chapter 22 is a very strange one. First of all we should notice that the characters of Balaak and Balaam recall characters that we've met previously in scripture.

Rifki Stern observes the similarities between Balaak and Jethro and Pharaoh. In Exodus chapter 18 verses 1-5 we read, Jethro the priest of Midian, Moses' father-in-law, heard of all that God had done for Moses and for Israel his people, how the Lord had brought Israel out of Egypt. Now Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, had taken Zipporah, Moses' wife, after he had sent her home along with her two sons.

The name of the one was Gershom, for he said, I have been a sojourner in a foreign land, and the name of the other Eliezer, for he said, the God of my father was my help, and delivered me from the sword of Pharaoh. Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, came with his sons and his wife to Moses in the wilderness where he was encamped at the mountain of God. So here we can see a number of similar elements.

The reference to all that God had done for Moses, all the things that Israel had done that Balaak heard about. Zipporah and the fact that Balaak is the son of Zippor, the association with Midian in both cases, and the reference to the camp of the people of God. These are common elements in the story.

In the story of Pharaoh we see further similarities in Exodus 1, verses 8-12. Now there arose a new king over Egypt, who did not know Joseph. And he said to his people, Behold, the people of Israel are too many and too mighty for us.

Come, let us deal shrewdly with them, lest they multiply, and if a war breaks out, they join our enemies and fight against us and escape from the land. Therefore they set taskmasters over them to afflict them with heavy burdens. They built for Pharaoh store cities, Pithom and Ramses.

But the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied, and the more they spread abroad. And the Egyptians were in dread of the people of Israel. Here we can see further common details.

The reference to Israel being too mighty for them and this plan to come and to design some way to bring them down. The dread of the people of Israel that has fallen upon another people and the way that they multiply and spread abroad. All of these are common elements.

So we can see that the character of Balak is like Pharaoh. He also stands as someone who is in some respects like Jethro, but in a way that invites us to see how he is the opposite of Jethro. Jethro is someone who sees how God is prospering his people.

He's a Gentile, he's a Midianite, but he sees that as a good thing. He's rejoicing in the blessing of the Lord upon Israel rather than perceiving it as a threat. So there are two contrasting responses to God's blessing on Israel from Gentile rulers.

And Balak reminds us of both these characters while clearly following the Pharaoh model. There's also similarities between the character of Balaam and Abraham of all

characters. David Foreman observes these.

That recalls Genesis chapter 12 verse 3. But there's more. In verses 21 to 22. Where have we heard this before? Genesis chapter 22 verse 3. There's further things to observe.

Numbers chapter 22 verse 22. And then in Genesis chapter 22 verses 10 to 12. Genesis 12 and 22 are great passages at the beginning and the end of Abraham's life in which he and his offspring Israel are blessed.

Now these blessings are starting to come into fulfillment and Balaam is called upon to curse them. And so the contrast should jump out at us. This is the fulfillment of the blessings of Abraham and now Balaam is brought in as a character who's supposed to push back against that.

David Foreman again observes the contrast between the characters of Balaam and Abraham. Abraham in his preparedness to sacrifice his son is an example of extreme obedience. This is a command that you would not want to hear.

You would not want to follow through. You'd go back to God again and again. Is this really what you want me to do? Constantly questioning perhaps if you are not a faithful person like Abraham.

And Balaam is an example of disobedience. But it seems strange to us. Doesn't God tell Balaam to go with them in verse 20? Balaam himself presents himself as a faithful prophet.

But Balak knows that he can be bought for the right price and with enough persistence. Balaam doesn't like the Lord's initial answer in verse 12. So he inquires again rather than simply obeying.

It becomes apparent that he is a mercenary prophet likely self-deluded about his faithfulness or even using that faithfulness as a cynical ploy to get more money for himself. God tells him to go because Balaam has already determined his course. He will keep on rolling the dice as it were until he gets the result that he wants.

Both Abraham and Balaam are arrested by the angel of the Lord on their path. But Abraham is stopped in his demonstration of his obedience to the most difficult command imaginable. Whereas Balaam is stopped in his willful pursuit of material gain.

What's with the donkey in the story? It's a rather comic story with the prophet carrying on a conversation with his donkey and this long episode with the donkey disobeying on these three occasions. Why is this in the text? And why on earth does the donkey speak? These are perhaps some of the most strange things that hit us immediately about this chapter. Robert Alter has some perceptive remarks upon this.

And first of all we need to notice there are three actions of resistance to Balaam as the rider. The donkey takes him into a field. The donkey squeezes his foot against a wall.

And then the donkey finally just lays down beneath him. And there's a parallel between the first and the second half of the narrative that Alter observes. Balaam three times tries to get his donkey to cooperate without success before realising the presence of the angel of the Lord.

Balak will three times try to get Balaam to curse Israel without success before again it becomes clear that the Lord is behind it all. Balaam is the donkey relative to Balaak, usually entirely cooperative but resisting on this occasion due to the Lord's intervention. And the speaking donkey also helps us to understand Balaam himself when near the end of this chapter he declares to Balaak in verse 38 Behold I have come to you.

Have I now any power of my own to speak anything? The word that God puts in my mouth, that I must speak. A question to consider. In 2 Peter chapter 2 verses 12 to 22 we read But these like irrational animals, creatures of instinct, born to be caught and destroyed, blaspheming about matters of which they are ignorant, will also be destroyed in their destruction, suffering wrong as the wage for their wrongdoing.

They count it pleasure to revel in the daytime. They are blots and blemishes, reveling in their deceptions while they feast with you. They have eyes full of adultery, insatiable for sin.

They entice unsteady souls. They have hearts trained in greed, accursed children, forsaking the right way they have gone astray. They have followed the way of Balaam, the son of Beor, who loved gain from wrongdoing, but was rebuked for his own transgression.

A speechless donkey spoke with human voice and restrained the prophet's madness. These are waterless springs and mists driven by a storm. For them the gloom of utter darkness has been reserved.

For speaking loud boasts of folly, they entice by sensual passions of the flesh those who are barely escaping from those who live in error. They promise them freedom, but they themselves are slaves of corruption. For whatever overcomes a person, to that he is enslaved.

For if, after they have escaped the defilements of the world through the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, they are again entangled in them and overcome, the last state has become worse for them than the first. For it would have been better for them never to have known the way of righteousness, than after knowing it, to turn back from the holy commandment delivered to them. What the true proverb says has happened to them.

The dog returns to its own vomit, and the sow, after washing herself, returns to wallow in the mire. In this long description of false prophets, Balaam is set up as a great example of the false prophet, the false teacher. How can we see Balaam as an example of the false teacher, and the ways of the false teacher, within Numbers chapter 22? When the Sabbath was passed, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome brought spices, so that they might go and anoint him.

And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb. And they were saying to one another, Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance of the tomb? And looking up, they saw that the stone had been rolled away. It was very large.

And entering the tomb, they saw a young man sitting on the right side, dressed in a white robe, and they were alarmed. And he said to them, Do not be alarmed. You seek Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified.

He has risen. He is not here. See the place where they laid him.

But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going before you to Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you. And they went out and fled from the tomb, for trembling and astonishment had seized them.

And they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid. Now when he rose early on the first day of the week, he appeared first to Mary Magdalene, from whom he had cast out seven demons. She went and told those who had been with him, as they mourned and wept.

But when they heard that he was alive and had been seen by her, they would not believe it. After these things he appeared in another form to two of them, as they were walking into the country. And they went back and told the rest, but they did not believe them.

Afterward he appeared to the eleven themselves as they were reclining at table, and he rebuked them for their unbelief and hardness of heart, because they had not believed those who saw him after he had risen. And he said to them, Go into all the world and proclaim the gospel to the whole creation. Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned.

And these signs will accompany those who believe. In my name they will cast out demons, they will speak in new tongues, they will pick up serpents with their hands, and if they drink any deadly poison it will not hurt them, they will lay their hands on the sick, and they will recover. So then the Lord Jesus, after he had spoken to them, was taken up into heaven, and sat down at the right hand of God.

And they went out and preached everywhere, while the Lord worked with them, and confirmed the message by accompanying signs. Mark chapter 16 is the final chapter of

the Gospel of Mark. It's 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 the tomb.

White clothes, as we see elsewhere in scripture, are associated with heaven, they're heavenly clothes. He's sitting there, which is strange, he's 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's the one who does things straight away, suddenly, immediately. And here we see Christ again going before them, he's leading the way, he's calling his servants to a staging ground of a new mission. And he's 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 chapter 28, verses 9-10 And behold, Jesus met them and said greetings. And they came up and took hold of his feet and worshipped him.

Then Jesus said to them, Do not be afraid. Go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee, and there they will see me. 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, and others 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. 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, 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, these elements 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 shows 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, When the Lord your God brings you into the land that you are entering to take possession of it, and clears away many nations before you, the Hittites, the Gergeshites, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites, seven nations, more numerous and mightier than you. 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 that 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 public 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 chapter 2 verses 3 to 4 says, It was declared at first by the Lord, and it was attested to us by those who heard, while God also bore witness by signs and wonders, and various miracles, and by gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to His will. 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 chapter 14 verse 12, Jesus also declares to His disciples, And then in Mark chapter 3 verses 14 to 15, He 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 to 6, 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 Justus, named Barsibas, drank a deadly poison without consequences. Justus, 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 to 20 help us to understand the character of the Church's mission in relationship to the work of Christ?