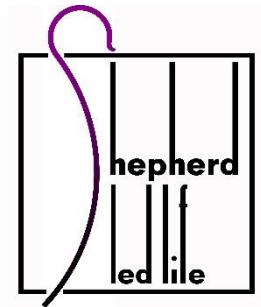


Devotional Reflections on The Gospel of Mark



Day 1: Good News!

The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

Mark 1:1

In the beginning, God...Genesis 1:1

God knows we need good news, which is why Jesus came. The Gospel of Mark is the good news about Jesus Christ, who is the Son of God.

So we have here two statements of fact: Jesus did come to earth, and He was (and is) the Son of God. The first fact people don't have an issue with.

It's the second fact that people are wanting to deny. But if Jesus is not the Son of God, then we have no good news to proclaim. And if you want to deny the deity of Jesus, then you want to live with bad news (which doesn't make any sense at all).

But Jesus is God, and He came to bring a new beginning. His name means "Yahweh is salvation."

Who is Jesus to you? A friend of mine shared a quote with me yesterday (from Timothy Keller) in which it was pointed out that religious people find Jesus useful, but true Christians find Jesus beautiful.

Jesus is indeed beautiful, and He needs to be introduced to a neighbour near you.

Day 2: Be Prepared

*As it is written in Isaiah the prophet,
"Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will
prepare your way,
the voice of one crying in the wilderness: Prepare the way of
the Lord, make his paths straight"
Mark 1:2-3*

If you want to understand the ministry of Jesus, you need to read the Old Testament. Mark is quoting both the prophet Isaiah and Malachi in his reference (there's a bit of Exodus too).

When someone important was due to visit a city, repairs to the roads would be done to facilitate a smoother journey. A messenger would go before the person to announce the arrival.

John (as we shall see tomorrow) had been appointed by God as the last of the OT style prophets to prepare the people of Israel to receive Jesus.

And there is an important lesson for us here. If we want people to receive Jesus as their Lord, then we need to pray for a heart preparation to receive Him.

And we need to make sure that our lives give reason to receive Jesus.

Does your life help or hinder faith in others?

Day 3: Anointed or Annoying?

Mark 1:4-8

John appeared, baptizing in the wilderness and proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins...Now John was clothed with camel's hair and wore a leather belt around his waist and ate locusts and wild honey. And he preached, saying, "After me comes he who is mightier than I, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie...(v4,6&7)

John must have caused quite a stir, and we know that he did. He was dressed as a holy man, lived ascetically and preached a strong message. He preached that repentance was needed, even by the Jews who thought they were safe because of their cultural identity as children of Abraham.

But what really touches me is his attitude to Christ. He considers himself not even worthy to touch the sandals of Jesus.

It's just so different from what I am seeing an increasing amount of in Christian leaders. I see so many making 'prophetic announcements' and it's almost like there is a competition of anointing to see who is more anointed. Like the church at Corinth, followers decide whom they want to follow (1 Cor 1:10-17).

One of the most godly and anointed men I ever had the privilege of knowing and sitting under for teaching was not a 'fancy' preacher, but a man who nonetheless had a deep impact and shaped many 'spiritual giants' within the church.

When I met him he was pastoring a small church that met in a school hall in a suburb. His name was Rev Donald MacPherson. He is in glory now, but is still a role model for me, and boy do I have a long way to go!

Humble and godly. Now that's an epitaph worth striving for.

Day 4: Better a dry saint than a wet sinner

I have baptized you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit. Mark 1:8

You can go through the waters of baptism as many times as you like, and you will still come out a wet sinner.

But if you genuinely go to Jesus, He will give you a new heart through the Holy Spirit – even if you don't get wet.

This is so important, because Jesus came to restore people into a relationship with Him, not to bring a bondage of religion.

So...are you born again?

Day 5: Baptizing God

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. Mark 1:9

I remember when I was staying in Israel, and a friend and I decided to do a bit of touring. Nazareth was one of our stops, and my friend and I laughed when we saw the travel guide said "John 1:46 pretty much applies"...

We're not told much about the upbringing of Jesus, but we know he grew up in a non-exciting place and became a carpenter. It was a hard regular first century life with its regular challenges. Jesus knows what it is to be human.

But now imagine you're holding a baptismal service. In the line you have Julius Malema, me, Donald Trump, your work colleague, your next door neighbour, Billy Graham, Mother Teresa, the Pope and the Queen of England.

I'm not saying who...but with some of those you would be quite comfortable baptising because you know they need it (but hopefully you would want to see evidence of repentance first!). Others you might feel somewhat inadequate baptising because compared to them you know you fall short.

All of which is to miss the point. You don't baptise people because you're better than them. Baptism takes place because we recognise the need for repentance and handing ourselves over to God.

So why on earth did Jesus get baptised? It's understandable that John felt unworthy (Matt 3:13-15).

Jesus got baptised because He was not ashamed to identify with sinful humanity. As 2 Cor 5:21 puts it:

For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

Wow. Now that's what you call a friend.

Day 6: All of God

And when he came up out of the water, immediately he saw the heavens opening and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased." Mark 1:10&11

What an incredibly powerful moment this must have been. All three persons of the Trinity reveal themselves at this point. We have the Father speaking, the Spirit descending and Jesus being baptised. God in three persons, equally and eternally co-existing, yet One.

God as Trinity is fundamental to our faith – the doctrines of the faith only make proper sense in this context (how else can you explain love?).

But there is more: Jesus needed the Spirit to fulfil His ministry (see Luke 4:18) – and so do we.

And what is more, there is no question as to the identity of Jesus. This gospel begins with Mark's confession that Jesus is the Son of God. Over here, we have God Himself identifying this.

Which brings us to the all-important question: Who do you say Jesus is? And the next question: Do you love Him? What evidence can you show for it?

Day 7: Can you take the heat?

The Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. And he was in the wilderness forty days, being tempted by Satan. And he was with the wild animals, and the angels were ministering to him. Mark 1:12-13

The Spirit that descended like a dove now drives Jesus into the wilderness. The length of time in the desert has echoes of both Moses and Elijah who also spent time in the wilderness.

Judging by what is popular teaching, life in the Spirit is all about victory and being on top of things. It's about the exciting experiences of prophetic words and tongues and even financial success. It's the American Dream with Jesus attached.

But if our Lord was sent into the wilderness and into the heat of battle, who are we to think that we should be exempt? Are we greater (John 15:20)?

Here is the truth: If you want to walk a road of faith that honours God, expect the wilderness. It is a necessary, pivotal part of discipleship. It is impossible for maturity to develop otherwise.

But also expect the ministry of the Holy Spirit to sustain and carry you through. He never sends you alone.

And Jesus knows what it's like (Hebrews 4:15).

Day 8: Who's your king?

Now after John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, proclaiming the gospel of God, and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel." Mark 1:14&15

John gets arrested and Jesus begins his ministry. He is preaching the gospel of God. He is preaching the Good News about God from God which brings us to God.

The invitation is extended: join in God's kingdom – submit yourself to God's rule in your life.

Repent: recognise that you need to change your way of thinking and actually physically turn your life around from the wrong way of living.

Believe: we need to place our absolute trust in Jesus and what He has done

Then we can receive forgiveness and restoration and live under King Jesus.

Living under King Jesus is not a once-off event.

Day 9: Fishers of Men

Reading: Mark 1:16-20

Passing alongside the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and Andrew the brother of Simon casting a net into the sea, for they were fisherman. And Jesus said to them, "Follow me, and I will make you become fishers of men." And immediately they left their nets and followed him (v16-18)

Have you ever tried to interrupt a fisherman to do something else?

The authority of Jesus is such that these men are willing to immediately become disciples of Jesus.

There's a sense of urgency about it isn't there? People need rescuing and redeeming, right there in the workplace where you are. You thought your employment was for your benefit – have you considered the probability that you are actually a missionary there?

Does your life prove that you are a follower of Christ? Or have you separated 'work' from 'spiritual'?

Let us remember that there is no such thing as a private faith.

And may we allow Christ to create in us that same sense of urgency about His Kingdom business.

Day 10: Effect vs Affect

And they went into Capernaum, and immediately on the Sabbath he entered the synagogue and was teaching. And they were astonished at his teaching, for he taught them as one who had authority, and not as the scribes. Mark 1:21-22

It would be so easy to ditch Christianity on the basis of my life.

But I'm not the basis of Christianity. If anything, I am what is wrong with it! Having said that, I am also what is right with it, in that I am unashamedly a trophy of grace.

Jesus is the centre of Christianity, and it is what He taught that needs to be paid attention to. The reaction of these first listeners is striking: they were astonished – it's as if they had been hit in the face! The inherent authority in his teaching was unmistakable.

Jesus did not have to quote scholars in his teaching to add weight to what he had to say. His authority came from God because he was and is God.

Have you examined the teachings of Jesus for yourself?

What do you make of His claims?

Have his teachings had any effect on you?

Day 11: Demonic Faith?

Reading: Mark 1: 21-28

And immediately there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit. And he cried out, "What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are – the Holy One of God. But Jesus rebuked him, saying, "Be silent, and come out of him!" v23-25

Demons are not stupid – they know who Jesus is. They believe in Him too (James 2:19).

What is more, in the realm of dubious spiritual activities, the demon could well have been identifying Jesus by His full name and title as a means of gaining a magic power over our Lord. The rationale behind this is the belief that if you know a person's true identity, through uttering their name you could gain control over that person.

That sounds suspiciously like religion: the idea of believing in God and doing what He wants as a means of using and manipulating Him to make our lives better. Tragically, there is one soul too many engaged in this lifestyle (Matthew 7:21-23).

But Jesus will not be controlled.

The question for you to ask yourself is this: Have I gladly and wholeheartedly submitted to Christ?

Day 12: Grateful Servant

Reading: Mark 1:29-34

And immediately he left the synagogue and entered the house of Simon and Andrew, with James and John. Now Simon's mother-in-law lay ill with a fever, and immediately they told him about her. And he came and took her by the hand and lifted her up, and the fever left her, and she began to serve them (v30&31)

It's always a good plan not to leave Jesus at church, but to bring Him into your home, to share in the blessings and challenges of your life.

The apostle Peter was married, and his mother-in-law was ill, and he was clearly concerned (not all son-in-laws are like this!). To have a fever is not a pleasant experience at all, and it really does debilitate one.

Jesus is asked for help, and clearly there was an expectation that He would heal. Jesus, in His compassion, takes her by the hand and heals her.

Her response? To serve.

I cannot think of a better way to express gratitude.

Day 13: Why do you love Jesus?

And rising very early in the morning, while it was still dark, he departed and went out to a desolate place, and there he prayed. And Simon and those who were with him searched for him, and they found him and said to him, "Everyone is looking for you." And he said to them, "Let us go on to the next towns, that I may preach there also, for that is why I came out." And he went throughout all Galilee, preaching in their synagogues and casting out demons. Mark 1:35-39

Jesus was not into the celebrity cult which we see so much of today. He understood the human heart. The crowds were only interested in him because he could work miracles.

People can be incredibly draining, and our Lord clearly knew this. He had the need to be alone and spend time with His Father, undoubtedly renewing His strength and being clear in His focus.

As then, so today. People are often more interested in what Jesus can do for them, as opposed to listening to His message. People still want entertainment over an appetite for God's Word. But 'deep worship' will never be a substitute for discipleship.

Let us resolve to seek the person of Jesus as opposed to His power. Let us rather hunger and thirst for righteousness as opposed to an experience.

And let's not try keep Jesus to ourselves. Let's share the gospel!

Day 14: I'm good and clean and fresh tra la la

Reading: Mark 1:40-45

And a leper came to him, imploring him, and kneeling said to him, "If you will, you can make me clean." Moved with pity, he stretched out his hand and touched him and said to him, "I will; be clean." And immediately the leprosy left him, and he was made clean (v40-42)

The radical nature of how this leper's life got changed cannot be underestimated. The law demanded that he wore torn clothes, have his hair unkempt, cover the lower part of his face and cry out 'unclean!' wherever he walked. He had to live alone (see Leviticus 13:45&46).

He broke the law to get to Jesus. He knew Jesus could heal, he was just wondering whether Jesus would. Don't we also sometimes have the same struggle? We believe in the power of God, but we wonder about His mercy.

Jesus doesn't just speak to the leper – he actually touches him. This was undoubtedly the leper's first experience of compassionate touch in years. Through this miracle, Jesus had healed this man physically, and restored him socially back into the community.

Jesus also broke ritualistic and ceremonial law through touching this man. It turns out that love is way more important.

God is a God of compassion. He cannot be manipulated, but He can be moved.

Day 15: Ex-Sinner

Reading: Mark 2:1-12

Which is easier to say, to say to the paralytic, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Rise, take up your bed and walk?' But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins' – he said to the paralytic – 'I say to you, rise, pick up your bed, and go home.'" And he rose and immediately picked up his bed and went out before them all...v9-12

In this much-loved miracle where four friends lower their paralytic friend through a roof, we can learn so much. The place is crowded because people want to be entertained by the miracles of Jesus, but instead he is preaching the gospel. He is addressing man's greatest need.

These friends put faith into action by doing something about not being able to get to Jesus – they lower him through the roof, and you can just imagine the commotion that must have caused!

And Jesus uses this opportunity to teach about man's greatest need: forgiveness. As Wiersbe puts it: Forgiveness is the greatest miracle that Jesus ever performs. It meets the greatest need; it costs the greatest price; and it brings the greatest blessing and the most lasting results.

Tragically the scribes failed to gladly agree to their own correct conclusion because of their critical hearts. But Jesus proved Himself to be God by healing this man, and he went away both healed and forgiven.

Have you had your greatest need met?

Day 16: I have decided...

Reading: Mark 2:13-17

He went out again beside the sea, and all the crowd was coming to him, and he was teaching them. And as he passed by, he saw Levi the son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax booth, and he said to him, "Follow me." And he rose and followed him...

Levi, a tax collector – not the sort of company a good Jew would want to be associated with. He worked for Rome and that made him a disgrace.

Well, he gave up his job for Jesus. In Luke's account (Luke 5:28) we are told he left everything behind. Rome would not have re-employed him. He is also known as Matthew, which means 'the gift of God.'

It really is a gift of God to be called to follow Jesus.

Who are you following?

Day 17: Us vs Them?

Reading: Mark 2:13-17

And as he reclined at table in his house, many tax collectors and sinners were reclining with Jesus and his disciples, for there were many who followed him. And the scribes of the Pharisees, when they saw that he was eating with sinners and tax collectors, said to his disciples, "Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?" v 15&16

Jesus had a knack for attracting people who were not like him, and we in the church seem to have a knack for preferring 'respectable' people who are like us. I remember how my heart sank after overhearing a group of people in a church I preached at joking about how they forgot to bring room freshener on account of a homeless person who was there.

But here Jesus is reclining at a table with the wrong crowd (in the eyes of the Pharisees). Jesus is extending the hand of intimate friendship. The wording seems to indicate that it was actually Jesus, rather than Levi, being the host! Perhaps this was a good-bye dinner for Levi as he leaves his job and follows Jesus, or perhaps (more likely?) Levi wanted his friends and colleagues to meet Jesus. Whatever the reason, I've always been challenged by how sinners flocked to Jesus, but for some reason they don't seem to flock to church (I think its Yancey that made me aware of that observation).

I don't know about you, but I for one am sure glad Jesus doesn't mind associating with me – in fact He calls me to be

His brother, His friend, and one day I will be dining with Him at a banquet prepared by Him for His family.

I can hardly wait – in the meantime, I want to create as many memories as possible of serving King Jesus and advancing His Kingdom, so that I can swop stories at that dinner with others on how amazing it was that Jesus did so much with so little. I can just picture it: Sitting with a brother or sister and saying “Remember the time when Jesus...?”

How do you want your life on earth to be remembered at that banquet? Advancing God’s kingdom, or yours?

Day 18: There's none so blind...

Reading: Mark 2:13-17

And the scribes of the Pharisees, when they saw that he was eating with sinners and tax collectors, said to his disciples, "Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?" 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." Mark 2:16&17

This has seriously got to be one of the greatest ironies in the Gospel.

Jesus declares an incredibly beautiful truth: not only does God save sinners, but that God actually loves and saves people as sinners. Those whom the religious leaders excommunicated so to speak were not considered rejects and outcasts by God. He loved them enough to reach out to them.

I can just imagine Jesus looking at the scribes when making that statement, waiting to see if any lightbulb would come on and have realisation dawning on the scribes.

The scribes and Pharisees were too self-righteous to know they needed God. They were also needing a physician, but unfortunately they were not as enlightened as the people they rejected. In their self-perceived theological correctness, they were tragically lost.

May we never, ever forget our continuous need of a Saviour!

Day 19: Do you take this God-man...

Now John's disciples and the Pharisees were fasting. And people came and said to him, "Why do John's disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?" And Jesus said to them, "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 in that day. Mark 2:18-20

Not only is Jesus keeping company with the wrong people, he actually seems to be enjoying it! He is not being pious. He is not being religious. The people observing this are not quite understanding what is going on. It's clear Jesus was from God, and yet...He just was not fitting their expectations.

There were various fasts that came into being during the course of Jewish history, but in terms of the law only one fast was required, and that was on the Day of Atonement. Fasting was a sign of mourning. And to the question posed to him, the answer of Jesus was simple (I like the way Wiersbe puts it): I came to bring gladness, not sadness. Life with God is an invitation to a wedding feast, not a funeral.

There will be times when fasting is appropriate, but while Jesus is with them, it is cause for celebration.

And as in marriage, so in our walk with Christ: we are called to say "I do" – for life.

Day 20: Made new

No one sews a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old garment. If he does, the patch tears away from it, the new from the old, and a worse tear is made. And no one puts new wine into old wineskins. If he does, the wine will burst the skins – and the wine is destroyed, and so are the skins. But new wine is for fresh wineskins. Mark 2:20-22

Jesus did not come to patch you up. He came to make you new.

Day 21: What's your creed?

One Sabbath he was going through the grainfields, and as they made their way, his disciples began to pluck heads of grain. And the Pharisees were saying to him, "Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the Sabbath?" And he said to them, "Have you never read what David did, when he was in need and was hungry, he and those who were with him: how he entered the house of God, in the time of Abiathar the high priest, and ate the bread of the Presence, which it is not lawful for any but the priests to eat, and also gave it to those who were with him?" 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." Mark 2:23-28

Whilst the disciples were picking grain, the Pharisees were once again picking nits.

What had been given as a gift by God to man (the Sabbath) as an opportunity for worship, rest and reflection, had been turned into yet another burdensome strait-jacket by the religious establishment. Jesus challenges their perceptions by referring them to Scripture and to the hero king David. David did something illegal, yet was not condemned for it.

Why? Because sometimes need overrules creed.
Compassion is in fact the creed we are called to live by.

And Jesus exemplified that by His own life, without which none of us would have hope.

Thank You Lord!

Day 22: Indifferent?

Again he entered the Synagogue, and a man was there with a withered hand. And they watched Jesus to see whether he would heal him on the Sabbath, so that they might accuse him...And he said to them, "Is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do harm, to save life or to kill?"....And he looked around at them with anger, grieved at their hardness of heart...(excerpts from Mark 3:1-6)

In this encounter, Jesus heals a man with a withered hand. Something beautiful has taken place.

It's exactly what the Pharisees wanted to see. They were not at the Synagogue to worship God, but to look for a reason to trap Jesus. They didn't care about the man who got healed; they only cared about their religious traditions. They were indifferent to the man.

If you want to arouse the anger of our Lord, be indifferent to those in need.

And in this synagogue service, where God incarnated was present, Jesus is angered and grieved at the hardness of heart. And He makes a powerful point which is obvious but which the Pharisees seemed to have miss because they preferred their own traditions: it's always right to do the right thing (even if it does mean upsetting the status quo). Mercy is a beautiful thing, no matter what day of the week it is.

If we look at the world around us, you will notice that Satan doesn't take a Sabbath. Evil is always at work, and so we

should always be seeking to promote the abundant life that only Christ can bring.

What we cannot afford to be is indifferent.

Day 23: Clays of Praise

Reading: Mark 3:7-12

Jesus withdrew with his disciples to the sea, and a great crowd followed... When the great crowd heard all that he was doing, they came to him (7&8b)

In this section, we see that people came from all over Palestine to see Jesus. They didn't exactly come because of who He was, but because of what He could do.

Jesus is incredibly gracious and nonetheless ministers, but He has to take measures so as not to be crushed by the crowd. It is also clear that Jesus is not taken in by the 'crowds mean success' mentality. He came to serve, not be a politician.

Jesus is still incredibly gracious. He knows we have needs, and that often we come to Him because He can meet our needs, as opposed to coming to Him simply for who He is.

In this section we also see that the demons recognised who Jesus was, although the crowds didn't seem to have that insight.

Demons are not exactly the appropriate vessels for proclaiming who Jesus is (and their proclamation certainly doesn't come from love). As we saw before, that appears to be nothing more than a futile attempt to somehow gain control over Jesus.

Why not spend some time today in worshipful prayer and simply praise Him?

Day 24: True unity in diversity

Reading: Mark 3:13-19

And he went up on the mountain and called to him those whom he desired, and they came to him. 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. He appointed twelve...

And so the 'new Israel' is conceived. Twelve men, one of whom we know later betrayed Jesus, are chosen for the express purpose of being with Jesus, being trained by Jesus, and being sent by Jesus.

You could not have asked for a more diversified and motley bunch. Fishermen, a hated tax collector, a radical and violent political party member (how did these two feel about being on the same team?). Different personalities and temperaments, and none with any formal theological training.

And yet these were the ones chosen and tasked with taking the gospel to the world.

And they did it too.

Praise God! Perhaps if we also focus on spending time with Jesus and allow Him to work in us we could also be agents of advancing God's kingdom?

And just maybe we could do it together, despite our differences.

Day 25: Sane or Insane?

Then he went home, and the crowd gathered again, so that they could not even eat. And when his family heard it, they went out to seize him, for they were saying, "He is out of his mind." Mark 3:20&21

The crowds are so demanding and keeping Jesus so busy, that He couldn't even get a bite to eat.

Desperate times call for desperate measures, and so his family decide they are going to take charge. They think Jesus is out of His mind (but who will help us if this ever happens to Omniscience?)

As Wiersbe points out, history has shown that servants of God are often misjudged and misunderstood by family and peers. The poet Emily Dickenson put it well:

*Much madness is divinest sense
To a discerning eye;
Much sense the starkest madness.
'Tis the majority
In this, as all, prevails.
Assent, and you are sane;
Demur – you're straightway dangerous,
And handled with a chain*

By the world's standards, Jesus was mad. Since when do you advance by lowering yourself?

I'm glad Jesus didn't care what the world thought. He came to show that He was the way, the truth and the life. Putting my trust in Him was the sanest decision I ever made.

Day 26: United we stand...

Reading: Mark 3:22-27

And the scribes who came down from Jerusalem were saying, "He is possessed by Beelzebul," and "by the prince of demons he casts out the demons." And he called them to him and said to them in parables, "How can Satan cast out Satan? If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand." Mark 3:22-24

Jesus is getting the attention of the religious leaders, and they are desperate to find an explanation for His behaviour.

And so they blame the devil. Sometimes he really does get way too much credit.

And Jesus points out the obvious through a parable, and the obvious is this: A kingdom divided against itself cannot stand, so how can Jesus possibly be in cahoots with the devil? How can the devil cast out the devil?

Rather, Jesus is destroying Satan's kingdom.

It should have been obvious.

Unfortunately, the inability to discern the obvious is still a malady within the body of Christ today. Many of us are guilty of looking at Christ and Scripture through the lens of our comfort rather than His Lordship.

Well, at least that's what I'm discovering about myself. How about you?

Day 27: Softies win, hardies lose

Truly, I say to you, all sins will be forgiven the children of man, and whatever blasphemies they utter, but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit never has forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin" – for they had said, "He has an unclean spirit." Mark 3:28-30

I have absolutely no desire to open a theological can of worms, but I do want to encourage you to seek deeper understanding on this issue. Scripture and the statements of Jesus always occur within a context! So get out your study bible (if you don't have one, my favourite is the ESV study bible – well worth every rand spent on it), and if you don't know about e-sword, do a google and download it to your computer!

What I do want to say is this (this is the pastor in me speaking 😊): if you are worried about having committed this sin, you're quite safe.

A heart that has deliberately hardened itself against God (our free will) despite clear evidence of and encountering God's love and power, will be a heart that doesn't want to repent, even if opportunity was given. The religious leaders were tragically guilty of this (see Stephen's reproach to them in Acts 7:51 just before they stoned him).

It's a heart that is at the other end of the spectrum to where God is – a heart that is in the east when God's love is in the west (an imperfect analogy but hopefully you get the idea).

So, keep your heart soft! Rather a soft hurting heart than a hard unfeeling one.

Day 28: Spirit is thicker than blood...

Reading: Mark 3:31-35

And a crowd was sitting around him, and they said to him, "Your mother and your brothers are outside, seeking you." And he answered them, "Who are my mother and my brothers?" And looking about at those who sat around him, he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God, he is my brother and sister and mother."

What an enigmatic passage!

The lesson is quite clear though: only those who actually do the will of God can be classified as family of Jesus.

Where does that leave you?

Day 29: Are you listening?

And he was teaching them many things in parables...Mark 4:2a

In this chapter, we are introduced to the idea of parables. I like Wiersbe's explanation of a parable:

"A parable begins innocently as a picture that arrests our attention and arouses our interest. But as you study the picture, it becomes a mirror in which we suddenly see ourselves. If we continue to look by faith, the mirror becomes a window through which we see God and His truth. How we respond to that truth will determine what further truth God will teach us (Be Diligent, 1987, p.38)"

There is a danger in being familiar with the parables, in that we can fall prey to the notion that since we know what the parable means, we can deceive ourselves into thinking that the message has taken root in us.

This is far from true. It is tragically true that we can continually hear God's Word and it never takes root.

Which is a lesson that comes out of the first parable we will look at (the sower).

Will you allow Jesus to examine your heart through His parables?

Day 30: Rain on me

...and in his teaching he said to them: "Listen! A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seed fell along the path, and the birds came and devoured it..." Mark 4:2b-4

"The sower sows the word. And these are the ones along the path, where the word is sown: when they hear, Satan immediately comes and takes away the word that is sown in them. Mark 4:14&15

Sometimes people hear God's Word, but it doesn't get a chance to sink in because of hardened hearts. Paths are hard because of continuous trampling, and it's so easy for birds to pick up seed on a path.

It's so easy for Satan to steal truth away from a person who has a hard heart, even if they hear the truth. And before we nod our heads in agreement because we know this is true, let's not relegate this parable to 'people out there,' but rather to our own hearts.

Have you ever hardened your heart because of experiences with other people?

If so, do you think that your heart suddenly becomes soft when coming before God? Does clay suddenly become wax in the sun?

Having a soft heart is painful, but it is part of our worship, and it enables truth to sink in. In the words of Hosea:

Sow for yourselves righteousness; reap steadfast love; break up your fallow ground, for it is time to seek the Lord, that he may come and rain righteousness upon you (10:12)

Day 31: Shallow Soil

Other seed fell on rocky ground, where it did not have much soil, and immediately it sprang up, since it had no depth of soil. And when the sun rose it was scorched, and since it had no root, it withered away. Mark 4:5&6

And these are the ones sown on rocky ground: the ones who, when they hear the word, immediately receive it with joy. And they have no root in themselves, but endure for a while; then, when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately they fall away (v16&17).

Yesterday we were presented with the hard heart from which Satan can easily steal. Today we encounter the shallow heart that doesn't really understand that there is a cost in following Jesus.

It's easy to fall in love with Jesus and the gospel.

But that love will be tested. When trials come because of faith, will you still be in love with Jesus, or will you doubt His love? As John Piper puts it, many Christians are willing to be God-centred if God would be man-centred. Why must God come to our table when we have been invited to His?

Let's keep our eyes firmly fixed on Jesus (Hebrews 12:1-3)! Transform those tribulations into jubilations through prayerful praise!

Day 32: Money – a thorny issue

Other seed fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked it, and it yielded no grain.

And others are the ones sown among thorns. They are those who hear the word, but the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches and the desires for other things enter in and choke the word, and it proves unfruitful. Mark 4: 7, 18&19

This is the state of heart that those of us who live in the West most have to be careful of. One of my spiritual heroes is a pastor by the name of Dr Paul Negrut (he is known as the Billy Graham of Europe). He lived under persecution under the reign of dictator Nicolae Ceausescu and proved that he was not a shallow soil Christian. When Romania became a free country, Dr Paul Negrut (along with many other Christians) has proven himself to not be a Christian sown amongst thorns either.

The world offers us many enticements, and the lure of financial freedom is in fact the bait to spiritual imprisonment. It obviously does not have to be this way, but let us be on our guard. As the saying goes, let us rather use money and love people, rather than the other way round.

Day 33: Need Compost?

"And other seeds fell into good soil and produced grain, growing up and increasing and yielding thirtyfold and sixtyfold and a hundredfold...But those that were sown on the good soil are the ones who hear the word and accept it and bear fruit, thirtyfold and sixtyfold and a hundredfold." Mark 4: 8&20

It's not the hard heart, the shallow heart or the distracted heart that bears fruit, but the heart that is openly receptive to God's Word and actually does something about it.

Knowing what the Bible says doesn't make you a Christian any more than the ability to speak Italian makes you Italian. Remember that the devil also believes in God.

When we allow God to penetrate our heart, there are certain fruits that will manifest (see Galatians 5:19-23).

And let's face it: the world is in dire need of fruitful Christians.

Will you be one of them?

Day 34: Hard of hearing?

And he said, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear." Mark 4:9

I remember a discussion I had with a fellow volunteer on a Kibbutz in Israel over which was more intense: hearing or listening. It's funny what we remember!

What is not funny though is the failure to take God's Word seriously. In this parable of the sower, we saw different states of heart to receiving God's Word. We saw the hard heart which gives our enemy Satan easy opportunity to steal God's Word from us. We saw the shallow heart in which emotions can counterfeit the truth, but persecution reveals the reality. We saw the distracted heart which is lured by the things of the world.

We saw the fruitful heart which brings glory to God.

And Jesus issues a challenge: He who has ears to hear, let him hear.

Are you hearing? Are you listening?

Day 35: Light up!

Mark 4:21-25

And he said to them, "Is a lamp brought in to be put under a basket, or under a bed, and not on a stand?" For nothing is hidden except to be made manifest; nor is anything secret except to come to light" (v21&22)

This parable of the lamp is in one sense enigmatic, which is kind of the point of a parable: to make one meditate and explore its meaning. This is why Jesus said "He who has ears to hear, let him hear."

Do you understand who Jesus is? Do you take the time to reflect on His person and His message? Like the oil lamp which needs replenishing in order to fulfil its purpose, we need to carefully listen to what God is saying to us. As we allow God's Word to fill us, so we shall be better able to reveal Christ.

If we do not take Christ and His Word seriously, we shall not be of any functional use.

As it stands, you and I are the means for revealing Christ to a world from whom He is hidden to many. One day Jesus will come again and all will see His glory.

But until then, let us share the glory of that hill Calvary.

Day 36: Growing: with or without you

And he said, "The kingdom of God is as if a man should scatter seed on the ground. He sleeps and rises night and day, and the seed sprouts and grows; he knows not how. The earth produces by itself, first the blade, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear. But when the grain is ripe, at once he puts in the sickle, because the harvest has come." Mark 4:26-29

I'm sure you've heard the expression that a big oak is just a small acorn that stood its ground.

How a seed becomes a plant is indeed a miracle mystery, but one thing is clear: the expectation and purpose of a seed is to become a plant (which will then produce more seed). Another reality is that this does not happen overnight.

Jesus tells us that His kingdom is like a seed. It will grow, even though we don't understand how. We are responsible for the watering and nurturing of the seed, but the growth belongs to God (see 1 Corinthians 3:5-9).

And one-day God's kingdom will be clearly visible, and there will be a harvest.

Will you be part of that harvest?

Day 37: Growth happens

And he said, "With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable shall we use for it? It is like a grain of mustard seed, which, when sown on the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth, yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes larger than all the garden plants and puts out large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade." Mark 4:30-32

Don't pre-judge results by the size of the beginning.

Jesus started with 12 disciples, and look where the church is today. Despite the presence of the proverbial birds to snatch away seeds, the kingdom of God has continued to grow. In the words of that hymn:

Mid toil and tribulation,
and tumult of her war,
she waits the consummation
of peace forevermore;
till, with the vision glorious,
her longing eyes are blest,
and the great church victorious
shall be the church at rest.

Are you part of the story?

Day 38: Who is this?

Mark 4:35-40

On that day, when evening had come he said to them, "Let us go across to the other side."...And a great windstorm arose, and the waves were breaking into the boat, so that the boat was already filling. But he was in the stern, asleep on the cushion. And they woke him and said to him, "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?" And he awoke and rebuked the wind and said to the sea, "Peace! Be still!" And the wind ceased, and there was a great calm. He said to them, "Why are you so afraid? Have you still no faith?" And they were filled with great fear and said to one another, "Who then is this, that even the wind and sea obey him?" (v35, 37-41)

The 'nice' lesson which we would all love to hear is how Jesus can still the storms of our lives.

And He can, but that is not the lesson here. The reality is that Jesus is not always going to still the storms of our lives, simply because He has a different agenda to ours.

There are three/four questions posed in this encounter. We'll start with the incredibly important last question: Who then is this?

It's a question we all need to answer. We are meant to clearly understand that Jesus is indeed God, because only God has the authority and power to control nature. As we are reminded in Colossians 1:15&16

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible...all things were created through him and for him.

This has huge implications for us. Do our lives reflect this recognition of who Jesus is? Do we have appropriate respect and reverence? Or have we tried to reduce Christ to the level of our own business?

May our vision and understanding of Christ become increasingly accurate!

Day 39: Jesus + Storm = Peace

On that day, when evening had come he said to them, "Let us go across to the other side."...And a great windstorm arose, and the waves were breaking into the boat, so that the boat was already filling. But he was in the stern, asleep on the cushion. And they woke him and said to him, "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?" And he awoke and rebuked the wind and said to the sea, "Peace! Be still!" And the wind ceased, and there was a great calm. He said to them, "Why are you so afraid? Have you still no faith?" And they were filled with great fear and said to one another, "Who then is this, that even the wind and sea obey him?" (v35, 37-41)

How often have you not questioned the care of God? Like the disciples, we also have our moments of crying out to God! And in response to the first question, Jesus responds with another: why are you so afraid? Do you still not have faith?

The disciples needn't have been afraid because they had the word of Jesus that they were going to get across to the other side – otherwise he wouldn't have said "Let's go to the other side!" They also had Jesus Himself in the boat with them, and He clearly wasn't perturbed by the storm.

The disciples didn't realise, just like we so often don't, that the storm was actually part of their training. They had heard Jesus teach, and Romans 10:17 tells us that the purpose of hearing God's Word is to produce faith.

And so we come to appreciate that the problem for these disciples wasn't the storm, but the state of their heart.

Do you believe that Jesus is the Son of God? Do you believe that Jesus is seriously greater than any little turbulence in your life?

What does the turbulence reveal about your heart?

Day 40: Because He Can

They came to the other side of the sea, to the country of the Gerasenes. And when Jesus had stepped out of the boat, immediately there met him out of the tombs a man with an unclean spirit. He lived among the tombs. And no one could bind him anymore, not even with a chain, for he had often been bound with shackles and chains, but he wrenched the chains apart, and he broke the shackles in pieces. No one had the strength to subdue him. Night and day among the tombs and on the mountains he was always crying out and cutting himself with stones. Mark 5:1-5

It is hard to imagine and comprehend the condition of this man. In verse 9 we are told the name of the demons possessing him as 'Legion, for we are many.' A Roman legion could contain up to 6000 soldiers.

Imagine the torment, as he cries out night and day and cuts himself. Society couldn't handle him. They tried chaining him up, but it didn't work. We don't know how he got to this stage of demonic possession, but I can tell you how it started – the devil was given a foothold.

And we are given an incredibly clear, graphic picture of what the devil likes to do: destroy lives.

That's why I love verse 1&2: Jesus came to rescue this man.

Because He cares. Because He can.

Day 41: Religious or Saved?

And when he saw Jesus from afar, he ran and fell down before him. And crying out with a loud voice, he said, "What have you to do with me Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I adjure you by God, do not torment me."...And he begged him earnestly not to send them out of the country...Mark 5:6, 7&10

This encounter is a snapshot into the reality of the spiritual world. What is sobering to realise is that just like many religious people, the demons believe that Jesus is the son of God, and they believe in prayer (see how they pleaded with Jesus?) – and in the reality of judgement. Unlike religious people, the demons are absolutely terrified of Jesus (see James 2:19).

Why are they terrified? I can think of a number of reasons. They know who they are in the light of who God is (and they cannot stand light). They also know that they are no match for the power of God and that they are a defeated foe. Understand that we do not live in a good versus evil universe (with equal but opposite forces), but in an 'evil-resisting/against-good' universe, or more accurately a 'Satan opposing God' universe.

Let us never forget that religion doesn't save: only Jesus can do that. Whereas the demons knowledge of Jesus causes them to be terrified, for the child of God it is reason to fall in love.

Day 42: Satan – just not Kosher

Now a great herd of pigs was feeding there on the hillside, and they begged him, saying, "Send us to the pigs; let us enter them." So he gave them permission. And the unclean spirits came out, and entered the pigs, and the herd, numbering about two thousand, rushed down the steep bank in the sea and were drowned in the sea. The herdsmen fled and told it in the city and in the country. And people came to see what it was that had happened. And they came to Jesus and saw the demon-possessed man, the one who had the legion, sitting there, clothed and in his right mind, and they were afraid.

Mark 5:9-15

The fact that 2000 pigs drowned as a result of demonic possession makes one aware of just how possessed this man was.

But he wasn't anymore. This man was no longer insane, but in his right mind. He was no longer naked, but clothed. Jesus had reached out to him and rescued him.

The demons were very clearly dealt with, and in the words of Wiersbe: "the drowning of the 2000 swine was a vivid object lesson to this Christ-rejecting crowd that, to Satan, a pig is as good as a man! In fact, Satan will make a man into a pig!"

Which is not the condition God desires to leave us in. To quote Paul (Romans 6:23): For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Hallelujah! What a Saviour!

Day 43: What's your story?

And they came to Jesus and saw the demon-possessed man, the one who had had the legion, sitting there, clothed in his right mind, and they were afraid. And those who had seen it described to them what had happened to the demon-possessed man and to the pigs. And they began to beg Jesus to depart from their region. As he was getting into the boat, the man who had been possessed with demons begged him that he might be with him. And he did not permit him but said to him, "Go home to your friends and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and how he has had mercy on you." And he went away and began to proclaim in the Decapolis how much Jesus had done for him, and everyone marvelled. Mark 5:15-20

An encounter with the power of God can leave one feeling legitimately afraid, especially if you perceive it as a threat to your existence.

The people didn't want Jesus, and incredulously, that is the reality of human nature. People respond differently to Jesus dependent on the state of their heart. This is why, in reaching out to people, we need to pray that God would first work in their hearts.

And what do we share? What Christ has done for us. This man was sent as a missionary to the gentiles to minister in his own home context. Each child of God has a story of grace to share. It may not be as dramatic as this man's, but your story is still dramatic, because you moved from darkness to light because of God's grace. And where you have been planted, is where you have been called to share.

Don't stop sowing!

Day 44: Who do you call?

Reading: Mark 5:21-42

"Talitha cumi...get up" Mark 5:41

In this next section of Mark's narrative, there are two miracles of healing. Please take the time to read it when you can, and try to picture the scene. It's filled with the hustle and bustle of crowds, and at the same time the heartache and yearnings of two individuals, who were vastly separated from each other in terms of social status.

Jairus was a ruler of the synagogue, so he was clearly a respected figure in the community. The other person we don't even have a name, and is identified as a woman with a bleeding disorder (who would have thus been isolated from worship and had to let people know she was unclean). She was bankrupt from spending money on doctors who were unable to help.

While Jesus was on his way to heal Jairus's daughter, he stops because he knows he has been touched. How did Jairus feel about this interruption on the way to healing his dying daughter?

But Jesus takes the time to acknowledge this woman and publicly restore her dignity. And he then goes to the house of Jairus and raises his daughter to life.

Jairus would not have been popular with his peers for going to Jesus in the first place. The woman had an imperfect superstitious faith.

Both knew they needed Jesus, both believed Jesus could help, and Jesus in His compassionate mercy responded. Jesus shows Himself to be the one with authority over disease and death.

It turns out that Jesus is indeed pro-life, and He graciously met these two individuals where they were at.

And He's willing to meet you too.

Day 45: Amazing Grace?

Reading: Mark 6:1-6

And on the Sabbath he began to teach in the synagogue, and many who heard him were astonished, saying, "Where did this man get these things? What is the wisdom given to him? How are such mighty works done by his hands? Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary...And they took offense at him...And he marvelled because of their unbelief (excerpts from passage)

So the people in Jesus's home town had a hard time accepting who he was. They figured they knew him and were even derogatory by calling him a son of Mary (you were normally identified by your father – ironically they were speaking the truth, because Jesus was not the biological son of Joseph – even if they were hinting at Jesus being illegitimate!).

Now I don't think anyone reading these devotionals would have such an attitude to Jesus, but let us nonetheless be aware of a danger we can fall into: thinking we know Jesus to the extent we have Him figured out, and subsequently not having the ability to develop a deeper relational knowledge of Him.

And we certainly don't want to amaze Jesus for all the wrong reasons – namely a lack of belief and trust in Him!

Day 46: Repent

Reading: Mark 6:7-13

And he called the twelve and began to send them out two by two, and gave them authority over the unclean spirits...So they went out and proclaimed that people should repent. And they cast out many demons and anointed with oil many who were sick and healed them (v7,12 &13)

And so the practical for the apostles after all the teaching begins. Jesus calls them, and Jesus empowers them, and part of their training this time round is to not take more than they need, but to trust God fully for provision.

And what is central to their mission? The message that people should repent. The authority over demons and the capacity to heal were clear supporting aids to their message.

Repent. This is the core message of extending God's kingdom. If you walk into a 'Christian' bookstore today, or turn on 'Christian' TV, you're likely to find a lot of other messages too. You'll find things like God having a purpose for you, or how God wants to give you health and wealth, or how you can achieve success etc etc etc...

There is always a danger when peripheral issues become central.

The gospel is good news, but the Bible also has bad news – but the transition from the bad news to the good news is this: Repent. Without that key, we do not have a hope in hell.

A sobering and liberating truth.

Day 47: Femme Fatale

Reading: Mark 6:14-29

...For John had been saying to Herod, 'It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife.' And Herodius had a grudge against him and wanted to put him to death. But she could not, for Herod feared John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man, and he kept him safe. When he heard him, he was greatly perplexed, and yet he heard him gladly. V 18-20

Politics, greed, grudges, corruption – they've been around a long time, and not only in government. Take note of where the desire to put John to death came from: holding a grudge against someone who spoke truth. Herodius didn't like the messenger. If you read the passage, you will see she got her way.

And she got her way because her husband made a foolish oath, after watching a dubious dance from his niece. The swaying of the female form can indeed make men say and do silly things!

One thing I find intriguing is Herod's fascination with John. Herod was a ruler, and yet he feared John, because John was a righteous and holy man. Darkness has never taken to light, and darkness in the heart doesn't take to truth. But what I find bizarrely tragic is that he enjoyed listening to John, but clearly never acted on the message.

And his conscience bothered him, because now he was wondering whether Jesus was John raised from the dead (see v14).

And in this messy world we live in, people who are courageous enough to speak the truth are going to get a mixed reception. Some will, by God's grace, fortunately respond to the truth and grow. Others will display a fascination with 'an interesting perspective,' whilst others will hold a grudge against the truth-speaker, and powers that be may even try to silence the voice.

But God's Kingdom will continue to advance.

Day 48: Minimalist Space

Mark 6:30-43

The apostles returned to Jesus and told him all that they had done and taught. And he said to them, "Come away by yourselves to a desolate place and rest a while." For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat. And they went away in the boat to a desolate place by themselves. V30-32

People who are not in full time ministry will have a hard time accepting the notion that Jesus will call His servants away for the sole purpose of rest. Good church communities who have full time pastors or missionaries will ensure that their ministers and missionaries get rest and sabbaticals.

But it is not only 'full time ministers' who need rest. We all need rest. We all need a space in the pace of life where we retreat and spend time with God.

But why a 'desolate place?' The idea of a wilderness is an important theme in Scripture. Remember how Jesus was in the wilderness before entering ministry? Remember how the Israelites had their rest from slavery in the wilderness?

In a desolate place, there is no distraction and one is also dependent entirely upon God. This creates the environment where God can work in the hearts of men and women, bringing both restoration and preparation.

But what is most wonderful is that Jesus cares. People may not, but Jesus does.

Day 49: Compassionate Shepherd

Reading: Mark 6:30-43

Now many saw them going and recognized them, and they ran there on foot from all the towns and got there ahead of them. When he went ashore he saw a great crowd, and he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd. And he began to teach them many things. V33&34

So much for the planned rest.

The people are hungry for more of Jesus, to the extent we are told that the people ran on foot to get to the destination before Jesus and the disciples.

And Jesus forgoes His rest, because He had compassion. One look at this crowd and He sees a shepherd-less flock. I am pretty sure Jesus was thinking of what was spoken through Ezekiel, when those leaders who were meant to be shepherding Israel had failed miserably. God had some strong things to say (from Ezekiel 34):

Ah, shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep? You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fat ones, but you do not feed the sheep. The weak you have not strengthened, the sick you have not healed, the injured you have not bound up, the strayed you have not brought back, the lost you have not sought, and with force and harshness you ruled them...my sheep were scattered...

God then goes on to promise how He himself will seek out the sheep and He Himself will shepherd them. And here is Jesus shepherding them. How? Through teaching.

Have you said thank you to God for seeking you out? Have you responded to Him? Have you obeyed?

Day 50: Seriously?

Mark 6:30-43

But he answered them, "You give them something to eat." And they said to him, "Shall we go and buy two hundred denarii worth of bread and give it to them to eat? And he said to them, "How many loaves do you have? Go and see." And when they had found out, they said, "Five, and two fish." (v37&38)

The disciples were not being unreasonable in suggesting that the folk go and get themselves something to eat (take-aways have been around for a while!). But they clearly were not expecting the response of Jesus (does that experience sound familiar?).

I must confess I probably would have responded in a like-sarcastic manner. Where must we get 8 month's salary from (200 denarii would be 200 days of work for a labourer)?

But Jesus has a long sleeve, and instructs them to go find out. The disciples comply, but I still sense some possible sarcastic exasperation...kind of like 'we have five...and two fish! Whoopee!' I could be wrong – maybe they were just resigned to wondering what Jesus was going to do next.

This small snippet serves to remind me that we don't see the full story, but we're called to trust within it. God does not ask us to do strange things because He has a twisted sense of humour, but because He has a glorious purpose.

And sarcastic arguing with God is really not going to get us anywhere (believe me I know),but working with God will definitely get you somewhere!

Day 51: A little goes a long way...

Then he commanded them all to sit down in groups on the green grass. So they sat down in groups, by hundreds and by fifties. And taking the five loaves and the two fish he looked up to heaven and said a blessing and broke the loaves and gave them to the disciples to set before the people. And he divided the two fish among them all. And they all ate and were satisfied. And they took up twelve baskets full of broken pieces and of the fish. And those who ate the loaves were five thousand men. Mark 6: 39-44

A crowd of over five thousand (there were also women and children there), and only five small loaves of bread and two fishes: just enough to feed a young boy (it was his lunch).

Jesus organises the crowd into groups (He is a God of order), and he then blesses the food, and one lunch goes a long, long way (with some left over). Isn't that an amazing statement: "And they all ate and were satisfied"?

That's Jesus for you: compassionate and practical in His care.

Of course, you'd have to be God to pull off such a stunt (except this wasn't a stunt...it was a glorious miracle revealing who He was!).

And let's not forget the young lad who gave his lunch. He was one of God's youngest co-workers recorded for us in the gospels. It was not a lot of food he had, but its everything he had, and he gladly gave it.

And Jesus used it to bless the multitudes. As I tell my daughter every morning: she's blessed to be a blessing.

We too can be used of God.

Day 52: Walking on water

Reading: Mark 6:45-51

Immediately he made his disciples get into the boat and go before him to the other side...

In this reading, we have the famous miracle of Jesus walking on the water, and there are many lessons we can draw out of it. The most important lesson is to simply remind ourselves of who Jesus is: the son of God with complete authority who is both willing and able to save.

Little did the disciples know that they were being sent into a storm. Storms certainly have a knack for both revealing and testing our faith. And I certainly also would have freaked out thinking it was a ghost if I saw Jesus walking on water!

Isn't it wonderful that Jesus does come to us and does not desire to leave us alone. But sometimes we also fail to recognise His presence in the storm and we shout at God instead of inviting Him or asking for eyes to see.

When we walk with our Shepherd, we will know His presence – and that makes all the difference.

Day 53: Be the church

Mark 6:53-56

And wherever he came...they laid the sick in the marketplaces and implored him that they might touch even the fringe of his garment...

The mentality still exists today that if you want to meet Jesus, you have to 'go to church.'

Unfortunately, what also happens is that it is not always exactly Jesus that gets met either. Sometimes I think that Christians are more interested in Jesus enabling them to be more motivated and self-sufficient in their lives, and as things turn for the better, then naturally "God is so good...all the time..." Perhaps Christians think this is what will be a witness to others, especially if it is couched in spiritual sounding language such as 'to God's glory.'" Cynical of me? Yip...but it's because of what I see here in this passage.

I find this short description so challenging. Jesus was not only found in the Synagogue. The people laid the sick in the marketplaces because that is where you could find Him. And they also implored him. They knew their need of Jesus. They cried to Him for a touch from Him.

What was it about Jesus, the perfect Son of God, that people felt the freedom to come to Him for help? Was it His amazing positivity and self-sufficiency? Or was it that He had compassion?

I don't know about you, but I need to ask God for the courage to give Him my heart so that He can transform it, and that just maybe, through my life, whether in church or in the marketplace, people will meet Him rather than be impressed or 'wowed' by my wonderful 'can-do' attitude or how I am experiencing 'favour.'

Because then I can get on with actually being the church.

Day 54: Get Brain-washed

Reading: Mark 7:1-5

Now when the Pharisees gathered to him, with some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem, they saw that some of his disciples ate with hands that were defiled, that is, unwashed...and the Pharisees and scribes asked him, "Why do your disciples not walk according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands? (v1, 2 & 5)

By way of background, this is not a hygiene issue, but a ceremonial law issue. The Pharisees were undertaking their role of being doctrinal watchdogs, checking out how they could discredit Jesus. They were upset because Jesus was not observing their ceremonial traditions, which they placed on par with the law.

This means Jesus was undermining their centuries old authority. This means Jesus was undermining their rituals which led to pride and arrogance.

There is an important lesson here: if your theology has the fruit of arrogance, there's a problem. If your doctrine doesn't lead to worship, there's a problem. If you think you're right (and you may have good reason for believing so), you may just miss the opportunity of learning something new.

As a friend of mine puts it: Don't believe everything you think.

To which I add: Think about everything you believe.

Day 55: I have decided to follow (insert name)

Reading: Mark 7:1-7

And he said to them, "Well did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written, "This people honours me with their lips, ' but their heart is far from me; In vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men. You leave the commandment of God and hold to the tradition of men." (v6-8)

God doesn't do hypocrisy. And it is so easy to criticise the Pharisees for how they valued their traditions more than the people they were meant to be a witness to. I mean, surely we wouldn't fall into a similar trap?

As long as we still carry our sinful nature with us, we obviously can. We can do all the religious things, play by the rules and look good on the outside, but inside our hearts are far from God. And God knows, because He cannot be fooled.

But there is another area that I believe we need to be so careful of. To paraphrase in more modern terms what the Apostle Paul said in 1 Corinthians 1:11-13...

For it has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there is quarrelling among you, my brothers. What I mean is that

each one of you says, "I follow Calvin," or "I follow Arminius" or "I follow Piper" or "I follow Wright" or....(you get the idea)

I've been in churches where I felt they could have ended the prayer with "in the name of Calvin," and I have been with believers whose theological persuasion is different to my own, and yet their passion and devotion to the person of Jesus and His mission has put me to shame.

Whatever the lens we use to understand God's revelation to us in His Word, may we (and yes, I am quoting Piper here!) have hearts that want what God wants it to want.

Day 56: Don't quench the Word

And he said to them, "You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God in order to establish your tradition! For Moses said, 'Honor your father and your mother'; and, 'Whoever reviles father or mother must surely die.' But you say, 'If a man tells his father or his mother, "whatever you would have gained from me is Corban"' (that is, given to God) – then you no longer permit him to do anything for his father or mother, thus making void the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down. And many such things you do." Mark 7:9-12

Jesus doesn't just give a blanket criticism of hypocrisy, he points out the evidence. It's hard to believe that we would place human tradition above Scripture, but we need to be so careful because it is a trap we can easily fall into.

Jesus was citing an example of how the Pharisees would enable adult children to negate their responsibility towards supporting their parents by 'giving the money to God.' Naturally the Pharisees would be beneficiaries of money given to the temple.

We need to recognise that as children of God, Scripture is our authority, and not a person's interpretation of it. We need to further guard ourselves against twisting Scripture to suit our own ends, which unfortunately happens far too often.

Let us rather allow God's Word to do its work in our lives!

Day 57: How's your heart?

And he called the people to him again and said to them, "Hear me, all of you, and understand: There is nothing outside a person that by going into him can defile him, but the things that come out of a person are what defile him....For from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person" Mark 7:14-15, 21-23

So you think you're pretty good? That you're doing ok spiritually?

It's easy to think that if we get into the comparison game, and compare ourselves to those we consider ourselves better than. Oops – pride has just reared its head.

And it's so easy to give an opinion over someone and share how you disagree and are shocked by their actions when they are not in your presence...oops, there comes slander.

And it's just so easy to be jealous of the successes and lifestyle of another person...oops, there's coveting.

And it's easy not to care about what is happening in the world, and to just focus on doing our own thing...which is pretty foolish.

Yip, there's a reason why we are taught to guard our hearts, because it is indeed the wellspring of life (Proverbs 4:23).

I've said it before: the heart of the issue is the issue of the heart.

Let us ensure it is Holy Spirit controlled!

Day 58: Save the Syrians

And from there he arose and went away to the region of Tyre and Sidon. And he entered a house and did not want anyone to know, yet he could not be hidden. But immediately a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit heard of him and came and fell down at his feet. Now the woman was a Gentile, a Syrophenician by birth...(Mark 7:24-26)

Jesus now ventures out of Galilee and enters Gentile territory. He is clearly wanting to get away from the public eye (the text says he did not want anyone to know). Let us remember that Jesus was fully human as well as fully God. In His humanity He also got tired and needed to take time out. We can only speculate as to His reasons, but perhaps it was for rest, or spiritual preparation for the next stage of ministry, or both.

Of course let us not miss something very significant (more on this tomorrow). Jesus was also reaching to the Gentiles.

And a woman whose daughter had a demon comes for help. It's naïve to brush off the reality of demon-possession. But this woman knew where she could get help.

Did you notice her nationality? In those days, Phoenicia was administratively under Syria.

Jesus loves the Syrians too, and if you're not aware, He is still reaching out to them. And you can also be a part of that. Check out project Cedar tree at www.incontextinternational.org (click on the projects link and scroll)

Day 59: Witty Faith

Now the woman was a Gentile, a Syrophenician by birth. And she begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. And he said to her, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs." But she answered him, "Yes, Lord; yet even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." And he said to her, "For this statement you may go your way; the demon has left your daughter." And she went home and found the child lying in bed and the demon gone. Mark 7:26-30

Do yourself a favour and also look at Matthew's recounting of this incident in Matthew 15:21-28 – you will then appreciate even more the faith that this woman displayed. She was determined to get to Jesus and to get help from Him, despite the obstacles in her way (obstacles such as her nationality and the attitude of the disciples).

In asking Jesus for help, this is not the answer from Jesus that was expected! The answer of Jesus was pointing out that the message (bread) of Jesus was first for the Jewish people (children) and not for the Gentiles (dogs).

It may not be a big deal to some, but I do find it interesting that Jesus actually uses a different word for dog than the Pharisees would have used. The Pharisees saw the Gentiles as dirty scavenger dogs, but Jesus uses a word referring to puppies kept as pets.

In the enigmatic statement of Jesus, there are two anchors of hope – the first is that the message was first for the Jews, thus implying that the Gentiles would also be beneficiaries of

the message next. The second is that a more positive term of dog is used.

And these two anchors are latched onto very quickly by the woman in her faith filled and witty response.

And Jesus just loves faith (and I think He likes wit too!)

Day 60: Unplugged

...and they brought to him a man who was deaf and had a speech impediment, and they begged him to lay his hand on him. And taking him aside from the crowd privately, he put his fingers into his ears, and after spitting touched his tongue. And looking up to heaven, he sighed and said to him, "Ephphatha," that is, "Be opened." And his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly. Mark 7:32-35

This miracle has a special place in my heart, since as a very small child I was healed of my hearing loss through the ministry of a Zulu minister by the name of Pastor Duma. Interestingly my hearing loss returned after a two week period, but not as severe as before. I also remember attending speech therapy to help my speech development, which clearly worked 😊

I just love the way Jesus gives personal individual attention to this man. But why the fingers in the ears and placing spit on the tongue? To quote Calvin (get ready for some old English!):

The laying on of hands would of itself have been sufficiently efficacious, and even, without moving a finger, he might have accomplished it by a single act of his will; but it is evident that he made abundant use of outward signs, when they were found to be advantageous. Thus, by touching the tongue with spittle, he intended to point out that the faculty of speech was communicated by himself alone; and by putting his fingers into the ears, he showed that it belonged to his office to pierce the ears of the deaf...

The ability to hear and speak is indeed a gift of Jesus. To the deaf person, the actions of Jesus would have been powerful sign language (he wouldn't have heard Jesus speak remember). And he didn't hear Jesus, but the creation of Jesus did, and the man was healed.

That's Jesus for you: the source and embodiment of authority and compassion.

Day 61: #sinmustfall

And looking up to heaven, he sighed and said to him, "Ephphatha," that is, "Be opened." And his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly. And Jesus charged them to tell no one. But the more he charged them, the more zealously they proclaimed it. And they were astonished beyond measure, saying, "He has done all things well. He even makes the deaf hear and the mute speak." Mark 7:34-37

Why did Jesus sigh?

Given the fact that He was looking up to heaven, it was a prayerful response to what he was seeing. Jesus came into a world that had been affected by sin. Sin affects everything – from our hearts to our bodies to creation.

Let us never forget that Jesus is not unaffected by what He sees. And while He came to deal with sin, He also came to set us free into a new kingdom under His rule (not a temporary political overthrow where #Romemustfall).

And one significant mark of this new kingdom is that "He does all things well" – a reminder of how good creation was. And in this new kingdom, Jesus is the King – and in Him "the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then shall the lame man leap like a deer, and the tongue of the mute sing for joy (Isaiah 35:5&6).

What a wonderful Messiah!

Day 62: Spiritual Amnesia?

Reading: Mark 8:1-10

In those days, when again a great crowd had gathered, and they had nothing to eat, he called his disciples to him and said to them, "I have compassion on the crowd, because they have been with me now three days and have nothing to eat. And if I send them away hungry to their homes, they will faint on the way. And some of them have come from far away." And his disciples answered him, "How can one feed these people with bread here in this desolate place?" Mark 8: 1-4

This is the second feeding miracle we read about. If you read the passage you will see that this time Jesus feeds 4000 with seven loaves and a few fish, and seven baskets of leftovers was collected.

One of the strangest interpretations of the first feeding miracle (of the 5000) is that it wasn't really a miracle, but rather that the people were inspired to share their own lunch!

People do not want to accept the miraculous, and the interpretation of sharing lunch isn't available here. It is clear that there is nothing to eat, and Jesus has compassion on them. The folk had been filled with spiritual food, but their bodies also needed nourishment.

And the disciples are still operating within their own frame of reference, despite what they have seen the Lord do.

But let's not be too hard on them – haven't we also quickly forgotten how the Lord is able and is in control?

Day 63: Any sign of faith?

The Pharisees came and began to argue with him, seeking from him a sign from heaven to test him. And he sighed deeply in his spirit and said, "Why does this generation seek a sign? Truly, I say to you, no sign will be given to this generation." And he left them, got into the boat again, and went to the other side. Mark 8:11-13

The Pharisees totally missed the point about faith.

They came to test Jesus, demanding further proof of who He was. They did not believe, because their hearts were hard.

Their attitude causes Jesus to grieve within Himself: these leaders, who knew the Scriptures, should have known better. He refuses to comply with their demand and makes a strong declaration: no sign shall be given.

If you read Matthew's account (12:38-42) you will see that Jesus refers to one sign: that of Jonah. The reference is to His own death and resurrection – which is a sign that you and I know about and to which history and God's Word testify.

The humiliation of the cross – not exactly the sign people were looking for.

But to those who have faith and believe, it is the pathway to eternal life.

Day 64: Bread Provider

Now they had forgotten to bring bread, and they had only one loaf with them in the boat. And he cautioned them, saying, "Watch out; beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and the leaven of Herod." And they began discussing with one another the fact that they had no bread. And Jesus, aware of this, said to them, "Why are you discussing the fact that you have no bread? Do you not yet perceive or understand? Are your hearts hardened? Having eyes do you not see, and having ears do you not hear? And do you not remember? When I broke the five loaves for the five thousand, how many baskets full of broken pieces did you take up?" They said to him, "Twelve." "And the seven for the four thousand, how many baskets full of broken pieces did you take up?" And they said to him, "Seven." And he said to them, "Do you not yet understand?" Mark 8:14-21

If you have Jesus, you have all you need.

Day 65: Let Jesus Decide

And they came to Bethsaida. And some people brought to him a blind man and begged him to touch him. And he took the blind man by the hand and led him out of the village, and when he had spit on his eyes and laid his hands on him, he asked him, "Do you see anything?" And he looked up and said, "I see men, but they look like trees, walking." Then Jesus laid his hands on his eyes again, and he opened his eyes, his sight was restored, and he saw everything clearly. And he sent him to his home, saying, "Do not even enter the village." Mark 8:22-26

Somewhere along the way this man had lost his sight (he knew what trees looked like). We are told that some people brought this man to Jesus (it's always a good idea to bring hurting people to Jesus).

But Jesus doesn't respond in the usual way here. He draws the man aside privately, and engages in a two stage process of healing. There is a spiritual analogy being played out here, which will become clear in the next section: that of learning to see who Jesus is.

This miracle does reveal something important though. When we come before God with our requests, we need to come with trusting believing faith. We all know that, but trusting believing faith also means trusting God to answer in the way He sees best. Jesus could have easily done an instantaneous healing. He chose not to – for His reasons.

If I were to make some 'rules' for our walk with God, one of them would be this: Do not confine God to your expectations of how He must act.

Day 66: What's your answer?

And Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi. And on the way he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that I am?" And they told him, "John the Baptist; and others say, "Elijah; and others, one of the prophets." And he asked them, "But who do you say that I am?" Peter answered him, "You are the Christ." And he strictly charged them to tell no one about him. Mark 8:27-30

Following on from the miracle of healing the blind man comes what is arguably the most crucial question any of us can answer, and need to answer: Who do you say that I am?

The world still has many answers to this question: just a great teacher, a guru, a prophet. Secular humanism, New Age, Islam, Marxism – they all have a perspective.

But who do you say Jesus is? This is the question the gospel has been building up to so far (we have reached the half-way mark!). Peter gets it right: Jesus is the Messiah.

If you had asked the citizens of Caesarea Philippi who was Lord, their answer would have been 'Caesar.' If we were to take a look at our lives over the past week, what would our lives reveal about who is Lord over us?

Day 67: Discipleship

Reading: Mark 8:31-38

And he began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes and be killed, and after three days rise again. And he said this plainly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. But turning and seeing his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, "Get behind me Satan! For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man." And calling the crowd to him with his disciples, he said to them, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it. For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul? Mark 8:31-37

Following on an understanding of who Jesus is comes the necessity of understanding what it means to follow Him.

Notice how we are told that Jesus 'said this plainly.' Clearly it is not what Peter was wanting to hear. I have a sneaky suspicion Peter may just have been thinking along prosperity lines. Exactly what was Peter rebuking in Jesus? And by whose authority? Was Peter telling Jesus that God had a plan for him – to prosper him and not to harm him (please tell me you see the absurdity of this!)?

Never a good idea to rebuke Jesus. Never.

Peter finds himself on the receiving end, and what was the impact when he hears Jesus calling him Satan? Peter didn't

realise that he had been duped into being a mouthpiece for Satan.

And Jesus nips in the bud any wrong notions of discipleship and makes it clear that following Jesus is about setting our thoughts and lives on the things of God, not the attractions of this world. It is about having a heavenward orientation and not an earthly one. It is not about how to use God and get principles on how to make it in this world - it is about how to lose ourselves in this world and make it in heaven.

Back to my knees I go.

Day 68: Glorious Discipleship

And after six days Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his clothes became radiant, intensely white, as no one on earth could bleach them. And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, and they were talking with Jesus. And Peter said to Jesus, "Rabbi, it is good that we are here. Let us make three tents, one for you and one for Moses and one for Elijah." For he did not know what to say, for they were terrified. And a cloud overshadowed them, and a voice came out of the cloud, "This is my beloved Son; listen to him." And suddenly, looking around, they no longer saw anyone with them but Jesus only. Mark 9:2-8

What would you have said if you saw this?

I know that like Peter, James and John I would have been terrified as well. Throughout Scripture, whenever a glimpse of God's glory is seen, the human result is to be terrified.

There is so much to learn from this encounter – we can look at the significance of Moses and Elijah and how Jesus is greater than them. We can see how Jesus is vividly illustrating that suffering (the price of discipleship) ultimately gets transformed into glory.

And in this incredible encounter, what does God have to say?

"This is my beloved Son; listen to him."

Have you been listening?

Day 69: Grow Deep

Reading: Mark 9:14-29

I believe; help my unbelief!.. "This kind cannot be driven out by anything but prayer..."

What must it have been like for the mom and dad to have such a child? How many times did they experience utter helplessness and despair as the demon mistreated their child?

The disciples were unable to cast out the demon, and Jesus steps in to help, and points out that all things are possible for those who believe, to which the dad replies with the statement we all can identify with: I believe – help my unbelief! This gives us all hope because Christ in His mercy responds to imperfect faith.

Having said that, when the disciples ask why they could not drive out the demon, Jesus responds with the statement that 'this kind cannot be driven out by anything but prayer.'

As Christians we know that we have authority in Christ, but that is not our licence to keep our walk at the status quo. We too need to take the responsibility to grow in our walk, so that our faith can increase. Prayer and God's Word are two vital ingredients to growing in faith.

One wonders what opportunities to be used of God we have missed, simply because we have not cultivated our walk. It's not so much about the strength of the demon as much as it is about the depth of the believer. With the world we

are living in, Christians simply cannot afford to stay in nappies.

`May we desire Christ above all.

Day 70: Deadly Commitment

“They went on from there and passed through Galilee. And he did not want anyone to know, for he was teaching his disciples, saying to them, “The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men, and they will kill him. And when he is killed, after three days he will rise.” But they did not understand the saying, and were afraid to ask him.”

Mark 9:30-32

This is the second time Jesus is explaining what must happen in terms of his death (the first time was in Mark 8).

Embedded within this explanation is the understanding that it is God who is doing this, yet on the surface it will look like evil men doing it.

Jesus knew what lay ahead, and He did not shrink back from it. Because our Lord did not shrink back, we are enabled to know God and His salvation. No Cross – No Redemption.

Why did the disciples not understand? Let us not be too hard on them, because we too are guilty of often not understanding the ways of God, no matter how plainly we are told. We so often come with a preconceived notion of how God must work.

And yet there perhaps was an element of understanding...because they didn't want to ask. Perhaps the truth was dawning on them that the death of the Messiah could well mean their death too.

Day 71: Anointed or Annoying? (to quote a book title)

And they came to Capernaum. And when he was in the house he asked them, "What were you discussing on the way? But they kept silent, for on the way they had argued with one another about who was the greatest. And he sat down and called the twelve. And he said to them, "If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all." And he took a child and put him in the midst of them, and taking him in his arms, he said to them, "Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, and whoever receives me, receives not me but him who sent me." Mark 9:33-37

Jesus had just been speaking about His impending cruel death, and the disciples soon shift the conversation amongst themselves as to who is the greatest.

They're too embarrassed to admit it to Jesus.

And we might go 'tut tut – how can they be so superficial.' But the reality is that this game is still played out in the church today. It's just that in the question of who is the greatest, we have replaced the word great with a more spiritual sounding word: anointed.

Who is the most anointed? Lack of discernment causes people to confuse charisma with anointing, vibe with presence, and psychology with theology.

And Jesus still answers the question of who is the greatest and who is the most anointed: it's the one who has paid the greatest price. It is the leading servant – the one with utter trust in God.

Day 72: Who are you serving?

John said to him, "Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us." But Jesus said, "Do not stop him, for no one who does a mighty work in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me. For the one who is not against us is for us. For truly, I say to you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you belong to Christ will by no means lose his reward. Mark 9:38-41

To the human heart, few things are more irksome than the success of someone else where you have failed! Injured pride hurts.

The disciples had earlier been unsuccessful in casting out a demon, and here is someone who is clearly not one of the exclusive twelve having success at this! I mean, surely this person should have gone on a training course with them first?

Jesus has a different perspective. God's power is not limited to the twelve: He can work through whoever He wants to – and this person must have anyway been a believer in Jesus and at the very least was giving credit to the source of authority.

And Jesus makes a powerful statement (see also Matt 12:30) which forces each of us to consider where we stand with Jesus – we simply cannot be neutral.

Of course impressive miracles are not the only way to prove our love for Christ. Do you notice how Jesus gets to the

heart of the issue as to what He is looking for? It's not about the authority we have to cast out demons – it's about our ability to serve, and in this case, the ability to lovingly serve our spiritual family.

Day 73: Deal with it

Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him if a great millstone were hung around his neck and he were thrown into the sea. And if your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life crippled than with two hands go to hell, to the unquenchable fire. And if your foot causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life lame than with two feet to be thrown into hell. And if your eye causes you to sin, tear it out. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into hell, where their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched. Mark 9:42-48

These are incredibly strong words from our Lord. It is clear that He is not advocating we go on a self-mutilating spree, because He has already taught us that the root of sin is our heart (7:20-23). Cutting off body parts is not going to solve the problem.

So why such strong language? Is it for dramatic effect? Our Lord was not a thespian, so what we have here is intensity of heart: incredibly clear warning and teaching on the seriousness of sin and our need to deal with it.

Sin and hell have been radically downplayed nowadays (I'm busy working through this doctrine), but if sin and hell are not real, then Calvary makes no sense. It turns out we're meant to weep over sin, not go 'oops.'

Christians need to take sin seriously, because sin doesn't only affect ourselves, but those around us too – and more seriously, it is an offense against our loving, holy Father.

Day 74: Feeling In-salted?

For everyone will be salted with fire. Mark 8:49

If you're scratching your head over this verse, you're not alone. It turns out quite a few commentators have been scratching their heads and offering various perspectives. I'm no scholar but what I share I personally think makes the most sense:

The background reference is most probably this verse: You shall season all your grain offerings with salt. You shall not let the salt of the covenant with your God be missing from your grain offering (Leviticus 2:13).

Jesus has also just been speaking about the cost of discipleship in the sense of the utter need to radically deal with sin: sacrifice your limbs if you have to.

In a very real sense, people on earth have the choice of two fires. There is the tragic 'unquenchable fire' spoken of by Jesus for those who reject Him.

But there is also the fire of suffering as we offer our lives as a living sacrifice. As Wiersbe puts it: "Would you rather endure the fires of hell as a lost sinner or the purifying fires of God as a sacrifice for His glory? Remember, Satan promises you glory now, but the pain comes later. Jesus calls us to suffering now, and then we will enjoy the glory."

My one commentary points out how this statement must have been of tremendous encouragement to the early Roman church as they were being taught that their

persecutions were not to be seen as strange or unusual, because “everyone will be salted with fire.”

How will you respond to the process?

Day 75: Please pass the salt

Salt is good, but if the salt has lost its saltiness, how will you make it salty again? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another. Mark 9:50

Jesus is still using the image of salt, but from a different angle, but obviously consistent with what He has been saying so far!

Not only will we go through trials, but we ourselves need to have salt in ourselves. We need to have that attitude of self-sacrifice and commitment, otherwise we will be utterly useless as disciples sharing the gospel message.

Nowadays it doesn't take a fiery trial to potentially distract us from Christ and our calling – just a focus on the self will do. When we focus on our rights, our wants, our opinions, then discipleship falls by the wayside and the gospel witness is damaged. Chaos, and not peace, ensues.

But if we have a common commitment to the cause of Christ, then the devotion to Him replaces self-interest, and Jesus is glorified.

How we need to be on our guard, because a lifetime of character can be destroyed in a moment. Trying to put that together again is like trying to fix a rose whose petals have been scattered by the wind.

It's like trying to make 'salty-less salt' salty again.

Day 76: Change my heart

Reading: Mark 10:1-10

...And Pharisees came up and in order to test him asked, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?"

The Pharisees are at it again: trying to find some way to incriminate Jesus. Now they want to see what Jesus has to say about divorce (perhaps they were hoping Herod Antipas would sort Jesus out like he did John over his comments about Herod's adulterous marriage!).

There's a lot more to this passage than meets the eye, but let's deal with the clear message:

Jesus affirms that marriage is of God, is for life, and is between a man and a woman. You may have noticed how marriage as an institution is under attack both at a cultural level and political one (tragically Christians vote for political parties that endorse these attacks).

But what lies at the heart of divorce? It what lies at the source of all relational breakdowns and sins against God: a hard heart (vs some rabbis allowed men to divorce their wives for unfair reasons, since they misinterpreted the law of Moses in Deut 24).).

Which is why we so desperately need the grace of God to work in us.

Day 77: Become a child

And they were bringing children to him that he might touch them, and the disciples rebuked them. But when Jesus saw it, he was indignant and said to them, "Let the children come to me; do not hinder them, for such belongs to the kingdom of God. Truly I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it." And he took them in his arms and blessed them, laying his hands on them. Mark 10:13-16

I must confess to this being one of my favourite 'episodes' (the correct word to use is pericope) in the life of Jesus. Children are just as important as adults in the eyes of God.

In fact, as adults, we need to look to children as our teachers when it comes to living by faith. Children live by faith all the time: if something goes wrong, they go to mom or dad for help. They don't have the capacity to be independent – they know their need.

Do you know your need of God? Far better to be a God-made man than a self-made one.

Day 78: Good enough?

And as he was setting out on his journey, a man ran up and knelt before him and asked him, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" And Jesus said to him, "Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone. You know the commandments..." Mark 10:17-19a

From the outside, this young man had everything going for him. Not only was he wealthy, but we know from the account in Luke 18 that he was also a ruler, clearly holding some official position.

He certainly comes up to Jesus in an appropriate way (running and kneeling), but one can't help but wonder if there wasn't perhaps a sycophantic element in his approach (that's me being cynical). Jesus quickly challenges him to think about what he has just said by calling Jesus "Good Teacher."

Rabbi's didn't like to be called 'good' because of the same reason Jesus gave: only God is good.

And if we're going to approach God, we need to know this truth: only God is good. We need to further know that Jesus is God.

And we would be foolish to think we could impress God with our goodness; and yet many within the church define spiritual life in these terms. Many seek to do good things and play by the rules because they want to score brownie points with God.

They want to be masters of their salvation.

Ain't going to happen.

As the Good Teacher is going to make clear: no-one can save themselves. We're simply not good enough.

Day 79: Who's your Saviour?

And he said to him, "Teacher, all these I have kept from my youth." And Jesus, looking at him, loved him, and said to him, "You lack one thing: go, sell all that you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me." Disheartened by the saying, he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions. Mark 10: 20-22

This young man was sincere in his declaration that he had kept all the commandments. Like Paul, before he came to Christ, he measured his life in terms of external conformity to the law.

What many people fail to realise today is that the road to hell is paved with sincerity (and good intentions). The notion exists that belief doesn't matter, as long as it is sincere.

Jesus disagrees. He loves people for their sincerity, but He does not want them to be sincerely wrong.

And in this instance, Jesus gets to the heart of the issue for this young man: his love of money and status. The issue is always the heart. The law makes us aware of our heart, but it cannot change our heart – only the grace of God can do that.

Jesus invites this young man to let go of his idols, and to follow Jesus instead. It's an invitation to a living faith in Jesus.

Tragically, this young man couldn't do it. He went away sorrowful.

Religion is a lousy Saviour. That's why we need Jesus.

Day 80: Saving Money?

And Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, "How difficult it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!" And the disciples were amazed at his words. But Jesus said to them again, "Children, now difficult it is to enter the kingdom of God! It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God." And they were exceedingly astonished, and said to him, "Then who can be saved?" Mark 10:23-26

The disciples were closet prosperity believers. In the Jewish background, it was not so much that you gave to get back from God, but certainly wealth was seen as an indication of having the blessing of God.

Jesus comes along and says this man's wealth has just robbed him of the blessing of God. Jesus then makes a startling pronouncement: it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of the needle than for a rich person to enter God's kingdom. By the way, there isn't any evidence to support the notion of some small entrance to the city which camels had to kneel down if they were to get through.

Jesus is making a strong point, and the disciples clearly get it – because they are astonished and ask a simple question: who can be saved?

Money is a wonderful servant but a lousy master. Money won't save you and get you into God's kingdom, no matter how much you give away.

You need Jesus for that.

Day 81: Even me

And they were exceedingly astonished, and said to him, "Then who can be saved?" Jesus looked at them and said, "With man it is impossible, but not with God. For all things are possible with God." Mark 10:26&27

After the statement of Jesus about how difficult it is for a rich man to enter heaven (comparing it to a camel going through the eye of a needle), it's like there is a lightbulb moment with the disciples and a realisation dawns...

"Then who can be saved?"

And the answer is: none of us – at least not by our own efforts. Only God can save. What we are not able to do, God graciously does for us.

But it does require a response – to either accept God's saving grace or refuse it. One wonders if the rich man was within earshot when Jesus said this.

That is speculation. What isn't speculation is you reading this right now.

What is your response to God's saving grace?

There is no depth of sin where God's grace is not able to reach and lift us up. As Timothy Keller puts it: We are more sinful than we care to admit, but more loved than we dare believe.

Even I can be saved – because all things are possible with God.

Day 82: God Can

Jesus looked at them and said, "With man it is impossible, but not with God. For all things are possible with God." Mark 10:27

If riches cannot save, and if it is impossible for a rich man to enter heaven, then who can be saved? This was the question posed to Jesus by the disciples in the previous verse.

The answer Jesus gives is simple: God is the answer. God can save. No one is beyond the reach of God's arm. All things are possible with God.

We naturally like to take this statement of Jesus and reduce it to how God can bring a change in our difficult circumstances and bring us to a place of success.

And God most certainly can.

But He can do something even more miraculous than that. He can change and transform your heart.

Will you let Him? Imagine how different the world would be.

Day 83: Gains that outweigh losses

Peter began to say to him, "See, we have left everything and followed you." Jesus said, "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, and in the age to come eternal life. Mark 10:28-30

After pointing out how difficult it was for a rich man to enter God's kingdom (unless God intervenes), Peter makes a statement, and in Matthew's account (Matt 19:27) we see the heart of Peter's concern: what's in it for us?

Many Christians still think this way. They are expecting an exchange, a type of business deal with God – "I serve you and do things your way, so You must favour me in some form." Like the disciples, life is thought of in material terms rather than spiritual values.

And Jesus graciously responds with a promise. Isn't it interesting that Jesus, who is the Truth, begins by saying "Truly, I say to you"? This tells us that this is quite a serious pronouncement He is about to make.

Read the promise again.

It is so true, and my limited encounter of the true global body has been glorious. Even amongst those receiving these devotions there is a wide spectrum of places represented

(even Kimberly and St Helena's Island!). My immediate family is small, but my spiritual family is huge.

God is into restoring spiritually what is taken away physically. And that is the mindset we need to have.

Day 84: Which world you're living for?

Peter began to say to him, "See, we have left everything and followed you." Jesus said, "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, and in the age to come eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and the last first." Mark 10:28-31

In Matthew's account (19:27), Peter poses the question of 'we have left everything...what's in it for us?' (paraphrase). That is a rather crass view of Christian living isn't it? But let us be honest – who of us have not come before God with an attitude of "You owe me"?

Jesus gives a two-edged promise: those whose motive is correct in giving their lives for Jesus and His gospel will experience blessings and persecutions. And I must admit, in my very limited sphere (I am blessed to have friends who have experienced this truth at a far greater and deeper level than I), I have experienced the truth of being welcomed into the homes of believers not just in other towns in my country, but in other countries. The true body of Christ is wonderfully diverse and hospitable.

But Jesus also says that we will experience persecution, of which the persecuted church knows this intimately. Christians in the 'free world' also experience a type of persecution at times (God has His ways of maturing His children) but nothing like what Christians in many parts of the world experience – ranging from North Korea to China to

the Middle East and many parts of Africa. It is our privilege to serve them in whatever capacity we can.

Jesus also promises eternal life, which will be utterly glorious.

So as an orienting attitude to life, let us not focus on trying to make it in this world – but to make it in the next.

Day 85: Persecution Promised

...with persecutions, and in the age to come eternal life. Mark 10:30b

Yesterday we saw the promise that Jesus gave of how we gain a huge family when we are willing to give up ours for the sake of the gospel. Most people are willing to give up the family they are born into for the sake of careers or marriage, so why not for the glorious gospel? What we gain outweighs what we lose.

But there is another part to the promise: persecution. Living the life of faith does not mean that everything is going to be 'hunky dory.' There will be much difficulty, and that is when we shall also see our true spiritual family.

But hopefully none of us have entered the life of discipleship for what we can get out of it. Hopefully we have all entered into it out of love for and commitment to our Lord, and if hardships be par for the course, then so be it. After all, consider what Jesus did for us.

We are nonetheless told there will be reward: eternal life in the age to come.

That's going to be amazing.

Day 86: Who wants to be last?

But many who are first will be last, and the last first. Mark 10:31

Jesus had a knack for making onion-statements: layers of meaning!

We constantly need reminding that God's Kingdom does not operate according to worldly values. The evaluation standards that God uses is very different.

We look at prestige, power and wealth. God looks at humility and gratitude.

Our discipleship must not be based on expected reward, but on the person of Jesus (although we will be rewarded!). Check out the parable of the labourers in the vineyard in Matt 20:1-16.

In God's economy, the full-time mom who lives as unto the Lord is no less a Christian than the full time missionary.

The issue is who you are living for, and why.

Day 87: I want to die, so I can rise

And they were on the road, going up to Jerusalem, and Jesus was walking ahead of them. And they were amazed, and those who followed were afraid. 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." Mark 10: 32-34

This is the third time Jesus is explaining what will happen. No analogies, no metaphors, no swooning: Jesus will be mocked, flogged and killed.

It's no wonder the disciples were afraid. But Jesus had a different perspective. He was a man on a mission. In the words of Isaiah 50:6&7:

*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.
But the Lord God helps me;
therefore I have not been disgraced;
therefore I have set my face like a flint,
and I know that I shall not be put to shame.*

Why do we get so caught up in our wants?

Day 88: Thank you Jesus

And they were on the road, going up to Jerusalem, and Jesus was walking ahead of them. And they were amazed, and those who followed were afraid. 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." Mark 10:32-34

As I read these verses, I find myself experiencing such a mixture of emotions. I am experiencing wonder, marvel, amazement, awe – at Jesus who knew precisely what He was in for, and yet He is the one walking in front.

But I'm also feeling an incredible sense of shame...unworthiness...because I know that it was me that wanted Him crucified, and yet it was for me too. Such love is beyond my capacity to understand, and I know that my discipleship can never, ever match what He did for me, and it would be proud of me to think that I could impress Jesus with my discipleship.

All I can really say is...

Thank you Jesus, for coming into this world to save sinners, of whom I am the worst (see Romans 5:8 & 1 Tim 1:15)

Day 89: Looking for a Throne Discount?

And James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came up to him and said to him, "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you." And he said to them, "What do you want me to do for you?" And they said to him, "Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory." Mark 10:35-37

After what Jesus has just explained about His upcoming death, and hearing this request of James and John, I am sure most of us would in embarrassment cover our eyes, shake our heads and then in disbelief say to them: Seriously???

In a very real sense, these brothers were "naming it and claiming it" (see Matt 19:28). They were being selfish.

But let us be brutally honest with ourselves – aren't we often like that in our own prayer lives? We want to come before Jesus and say exactly what they said: Please do whatever we ask.

And in a very real sense, many of us are looking for free thrones. We're quite ok with Jesus paying the price for us, but we still want to be selfish in our living. We want things our way.

May we have the courage to allow God to realign our hearts.

Day 90: Fearful Wrath...Amazing Love

Jesus said to them, "You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or to be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?" And they said to him, "We are able." Mark 10:38&39

When Jesus asks a question, it is always wise to carefully consider your answer: always.

This is an incredibly serious question posed by Jesus, and James and John answer way too quickly – and naively.

The cup that Jesus drank, and the baptism which He endured, is beyond what any of us can fathom. Who can endure God's anger? How can we possibly understand what Christ went through on the cross?

Yet despite our lack of understanding and even full appreciation, Christ nonetheless chose to drink the cup.

And this is how God showed His love for us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us (Romans 5:8).

Amazing love! How can it be?
That Thou, my God
Shouldst die for me?

Day 91: Ask my Dad

And Jesus said to them, "The cup that I drink you will drink, and with my baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized, but to sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared." Mark 10:39&40

Time proved Jesus right (naturally). James was martyred (see Acts 12) and John experienced much persecution as well.

But what is truly amazing is that Jesus refused to usurp the authority of God the Father. It was the Father's decision as to who sat where.

Jesus is fully God, and we get a glimpse of the amazing unity of the Trinity.

Jesus knew full well what submitting to the Father meant.

He did it anyway...

For God's glory...for you...

What is your response?

Day 92: Leading Servants

And when the ten heard it, they began to be indignant at James and John. And Jesus called them to him and said to them, " You know that those who are considered rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. But it shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." Mark 10:41-44

As my friend Mike puts it, we're not called to be servant leaders as a type of leadership style, but rather we are called to be leading servants.

So, served anyone lately?

Day 93: Just another day

And they came to Jericho. And as he was leaving Jericho with his disciples and a great crowd, Bartimaeus, a blind beggar, the son of Timaeus, was sitting by the roadside. And when he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to cry out and say, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" And many rebuked him, telling him to be silent. But he cried out all the more, "Son of David, have mercy on me!" Mark 10:46-48

Quite a few years ago (1989 to be more precise), gifted musician Phil Collins released a socially aware album 'but seriously,' and included a song "Another Day in Paradise." Here are some of the lyrics:

*She calls out to the man on the street
'Sir, can you help me?
It's cold and I've nowhere to sleep,
Is there somewhere you can tell me?'*

*He walks on, doesn't look back
He pretends he can't hear her
Starts to whistle as he crosses the street
Seems embarrassed to be there*

*Oh think twice, it's another day for you and me in paradise
Oh think twice, 'cause it's just another day for you,
You and me in paradise, think about it*

It's a scene that gets repeatedly played out in our day as well – and in Jesus' day beggars on the side of the road were also a common sight.

And we forget a simple thing: each person has a name and a story – just like this man Bartimaeus.

I just wanted to highlight that.

Day 93: Keep on praying

And many rebuked him, telling him to be silent. But he cried out all the more, "Son of David, have mercy on me!" And Jesus stopped and said, "Call him." And they called the blind man, saying to him, "Take heart. Get up; he is calling you." And throwing off his cloak, he sprang up and came to Jesus. And Jesus said to him, "What do you want me to do for you?" And the blind man said to him, "Rabbi, let me recover my sight." And Jesus said to him, "Go your way; your faith has made you well." And immediately he recovered his sight and followed him on the way. Mark 10:48-52

Jesus is on His way to Jerusalem to get crucified. On the way He hears a cry for help, from a blind beggar who nonetheless had the insight to use a Messianic title for Jesus. Neither does he let the crowd silence him. Jesus calls for the blind man, and the crowd now have a change in tune – from wanting to silence him they now encourage him.

Jesus asks a simple question: what do you want? The answer would reveal the amount of faith Bartimaeus had.

You know, sometimes you just have to persevere in prayer, and we must always believe in a God who can do 'far more abundantly than all we ask or think (Eph 3:20)' That doesn't necessarily mean you'll get what you want, but you will at least then hopefully have the wisdom to submit to God's chosen answer.

Day 94: Not a holy cow...

Now when they drew near to Jerusalem, to Bethphage and Bethany, at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two of his disciples and said to them, "Go into the village in front of you, and immediately as you enter it you will find a colt tied, on which no one has ever sat. Untie it and bring it. If anyone says to you, "Why are you doing this?" say, "The Lord has need of it and will send it back here immediately." Mark 11:1-3

Who would have thought that a donkey could be holy? A colt, which Mark specifically mentions had never been ridden, would be appropriate for sacred use.

And as we begin this week, let us remind ourselves that we too are called to be set apart for our Lord to use in whatever way He sees fit.

Are you freely available?

Day 95: Make Way

And they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks on it, and he sat on it. And many spread their cloaks on the road, and others spread leafy branches that they had cut from the fields. And those who went before and those who followed were shouting, "Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the coming of our father David! Hosanna in the highest!" Mark 11:7-10

There is a lot that can be drawn out of this incident – the fulfilment of prophecy (Zechariah 9:9), treating Jesus as royalty through the laying out of cloaks and branches – and the Messianic Psalm quoted (Psalm 118:25-26), with Hosanna meaning “Save me.”

Look at Jesus – worthy of our worship – not shirking away from Calvary but riding to it.

He could have made a political kingdom there and then and avoided the cross.

But then there would have been no forgiveness available.

What an incredible King!

Day 96: Go figure...

On the following day, when they came from Bethany, he was hungry. And seeing in the distance a fig tree in leaf, he went to see if he could find anything on it. When he came to it, he found nothing but leaves, for it was not the season for figs. And he said to it, "May no one ever eat fruit from you again." And his disciples heard it...Mark 11:12-14

This action of Jesus would undoubtedly jar the image most people have of Him. Why curse a fig tree? Why not rather speak life?

Given what follows next (which we will look at), we know that this was not some irritable reaction from Jesus, but an enacted parable.

Whilst Jesus was addressing a specific situation (the Jews and their lack of true worship), the lesson is timeless: It is so easy to look the part, but still fail to bear fruit. We call it hypocrisy.

And those who claim to be Christians need to listen: Jesus is looking for fruit.

He is not looking for moral outrage at others for their actions – anyone can criticize. He is looking for fruit – in you.

And lack of fruit has consequences.

Sobering isn't it?

Day 97: That's Pray with an 'a' – not 'e'!

And they came to Jerusalem. And he entered the temple and began to drive out those who sold and those who bought in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the moneychangers and the seats of those who sold pigeons. And he would not allow anyone to carry anything through the temple. And he was teaching them and saying to them, "Is it not written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations? But you have made it a den of robbers.' And the chief priests and the scribes heard it and were seeking a way to destroy him, for they feared him, because all the crowd was astonished at his teaching. And when evening came they went out of the city. Mark 11:15-19

So, the 'To Do' list for our Lord on this day was:

1. Clear the temple (it's Mine anyway) and fulfil Malachi 3:1-3
2. Give challenging teaching
3. Upset the chief priests and scribes by challenging their authority

Again, we encounter a picture of Jesus that we don't associate with Him. For some reason, we don't really want our Lord to have zeal, unless it is for us.

The temple ministry had lost its focus, and had transitioned from being a place of worship and witness to a place of corruption and greed. Selling animals for sacrifice and providing foreign currency exchange was the order of the day, and it took place in the section of the temple known as the Court of the Gentiles, which, as Wiersbe points out,

should have been the place of missionary work! “The Court of the Gentiles should have been a place for praying, but it was instead a place for preying and paying.”

A house of prayer – that’s what we’re called to be.

What a privilege – let’s not get distracted! (For a challenging message on this incident, check out Jim Cymbala’s message ‘My house shall be called a house of prayer’ – you will find it on youtube)

Day 98: Dead Wood

As they passed by in the morning, they saw the fig tree withered away to its roots. And Peter remembered and said to him, 'Rabbi, look! The fig tree that you cursed has withered.'
Mark 11:20

And as he came out of the temple, one of his disciples said to him, "Look, Teacher, what wonderful stones and what wonderful buildings!" And Jesus said to him, "Do you see these great buildings? There will not be left here one stone upon another that will not be thrown down." Mark 13:1-2

Of course the fig tree withered – it had been cursed by Jesus. And what Jesus says will happen, happens. As surely as the fig tree responded to the judgement of Jesus, so too Jerusalem and the temple would experience judgement.

And in AD 70, Jerusalem was sacked and the temple got destroyed by the Roman general Titus.

So, we have very good reason to believe in Jesus and what He says.

He also said He was coming again.

You ready?

Day 99: Name it and claim it?

And Jesus answered them, "Have faith in God. Truly, I say to you, whoever says to this mountain, "Be taken up and thrown into the sea, and does not doubt in his heart, but believes that what he says will come to pass, it will be done for him. Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours." Mark 11:22-24

Name it and claim it...really?

This is one of those verses that have been isolated and twisted from the rest of Scripture as a proof text that we can get whatever we want from God. If this is your attitude to prayer, then you are still on the throne of your heart and you perceive God as your cosmic servant.

The pronouncement begins by saying that we must have faith in God – and this is just after Peter has seen the fruitless dead fig tree that was cursed by Jesus.

To have faith in God means to trust God, and if we trust God, then we logically trust God with the correct answer to our prayer as well. God will certainly answer prayer to removing difficulties that are preventing the development of fruit in your life (mountains are a Biblical image for difficulties – see for example Zechariah 4:7) – although difficulty is usually the means for developing fruit!

The faith is to be in God, not the intensity of our feeling. God is not obligated to answer your prayer in the affirmative no matter how intense your feeling is!

Our Lord set the example Himself in Gethsemane: "Abba, Father, all things are possible for you. Remove this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will (Mark 14:36)."

Calvary was the only way Jesus could bear the fruit of our salvation.

Jesus trusted His dad; it cost Him His life.

He was ok with that.

For you.

Day 100: A Forgiving Spirit

And whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone, so that your Father also who is in heaven may forgive you your trespasses. Mark 11:25

When you understand your own need for forgiveness, then you understand the need to forgive others. As the Apostle John writes (1 John 4:20&21):

If anyone says, "I love God," and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen. And this commandment we have from him: whoever loves God must also love his brother.

Just like we use the same tongue to praise God and then criticize others, so the same heart is used to worship God and then be bitter to others. Hurts have a way of hardening the heart.

It's probably the toughest challenge of the Christian life: keeping the heart soft.

But in Christ it can be done.

Day 101: Do you really want to know?

And they came again to Jerusalem. And as he was walking in the temple, the chief priests and the scribes and the elders came to him, and they said to him, "By what authority are you doing these things, or who gave you this authority to do them?" Jesus said to them, "I will ask you one question; answer me, and I will tell you by what authority I do these things. Was the baptism of John from heaven or from man? Answer me." And they discussed it with one another, saying, "If we say, 'From heaven,' he will say, 'Why then did you not believe him?' But shall we say, 'From man?' – they were afraid of the people, for they all held that John really was a prophet. So they answered Jesus, "We do not know." And Jesus said to them, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things." Mark 11:27-33

You don't clear out the temple unnoticed. And the Sanhedrin, at a very superficial level, were doing their job of investigating the claim of someone who said he was sent from God.

Its superficial because what they really wanted was to find a way to get rid of Jesus. Of course when you ask Jesus a question, you are asking Someone who can read your heart.

Their hypocrisy gets exposed (they were more concerned about playing it safe than seeking truth), and they should not expect any 'new revelations' from God if they haven't yet obeyed the 'old revelation' as revealed through John the Baptist (and in our day, God's Word).

Ironically, Jesus in posing the question answered their question, but when you don't want to hear truth and submit to it, then it cannot change you.

Submission to truth is a prerequisite for transformation of heart. Sometimes we forget that don't we?

Day 102: Are you a good tenant?

Reading: Mark 12:1-12

In this parable, we see tenants not wanting to fulfil their obligations to the landlord, scheming to keep the land for themselves and using violent means to do so.

The background imagery for this parable can be found in Isaiah 5, where Israel represents the vineyard planted by God. In Isaiah, the vineyard was unproductive, despite the loving care given to it by God. In this parable, it is the tenants, representing Israel's spiritual leaders, who are the target. They have failed to give the required harvest to God.

And we know what happened: the leaders did indeed kill Jesus, and they did not go unpunished.

And the mission of producing a harvest from the vineyard got transferred to new tenants: the Church. It began with the first disciples, and it has continued ever since.

And you and I are evidence of this, if we have trusted in Christ for our salvation. And we too have been entrusted with producing fruit, with extending the Kingdom of God. Producing fruit is an expectation that God has upon our lives.

Let us not test God's patience, but let us root ourselves deep in Christ! That is the best way to bear fruit (John 15).

Day 103: Taxing times

Reading: Mark 12:13-17

But knowing their hypocrisy, he said to them, "Why put me to the test?" v 15

It's never wise to try and trap Jesus, but nonetheless with typical political skulduggery, opposing parties unite (Herodians and Pharisees) against a common enemy: Jesus.

With words dripping with honey, they come almost sycophantically to Jesus with their question of whether taxes should be paid to Caesar. If Jesus says no, then the Herodians will have reason to charge Jesus with insurrection. If he says yes, the Israelites would get upset and claim Jesus is in collusion with the oppressors.

But Jesus knows their hearts, and for all their political experience, they are no match for His authority.

The answer is simple: yes, you must pay your taxes. And yes, you must give to God.

As Christians, our calling is to live as citizens of heaven, and if government has an issue with that (and in many parts of the world they do) then so be it.

We also need to be cautious before we go jumping on any anti-government bandwagon. Let's be the light. And pray for our leaders.

Day 104: One Bride for Seven Brothers?

And Sadducees came to him, who say that there is no resurrection...Jesus said to them, "Is this not the reason you are wrong, because you know neither the Scriptures nor the power of God...have you not read in the book of Moses, in the passage about the bush, how God spoke to him, saying, "I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob? He is not God of the dead, but of the living...(excerpts from Mark 12:18-27)

Firstly, I cannot resist, as every student of Baptist theology knows, pointing out that the Sadducees didn't believe in the resurrection, and that's why they were 'sad you see...'

Ok, now that I have that out of the way...

The Sadducees only accepted the first five books of the OT as authoritative (the Books of Moses), and so did not accept such things as the afterlife and associated teachings. They come to Jesus with a purely hypothetical question (for them) about a widow who goes through seven husbands (see Deuteronomy 25:7-10). Whose wife would she be at the resurrection?

Now, if you're going to approach Jesus with a theological question, at least try and make sure that at the minimum you have your assumptions correct.

Which the Sadducees didn't, and the reason they had made false assumptions about how there had to be marriage in heaven, was because they knew 'neither the Scriptures nor the power of God.'

Based on their own belief (this is awesome apologetics!), Jesus points out their error. If they accept the law of Moses as authoritative, then surely they can pick up the detail that God is the God of the living? God didn't say "I was the God of..." but "I am the God of..."

The challenge remains true today: to know the Scriptures and the power of God – because we do indeed serve the Living God of the living! He proved that on Easter Sunday...

Day 105: Are we there yet?

And one of the scribes came up and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well, asked him, "Which commandment is the most important of all?" Jesus answered, "The most important is...And the scribe said to him, "You are right, Teacher. You have truly said that he is one, and there is no other beside him. And to love him with all the heart and with all the understanding and with all the strength, and to love one's neighbour as oneself, is much more than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices." And when Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him, "You are not far from the Kingdom of God" (Excerpts from Mark 12:28-34)

You see, not all the scribes and Pharisees were bad!

In response to the question of the greatest commandment, Jesus makes it very clear: to love God completely (see Deut 6:4&5), with the second greatest being to love your neighbour as yourself. This is a good litmus test of your walk with God: love for people will naturally flow out of a love for God. You will treat others the way you want to be treated. I love the way Wiersbe puts it: We do not live by rules but by relationships...

The scribe answers Jesus affirmatively, and points out how love is far more meaningful to God than the rituals of burnt offerings and sacrifices.

It is the observation of Jesus that challenges me: this man knew the Scriptures, but was not yet in the Kingdom. We don't know if he ever entered the Kingdom. But he wasn't far.

But it also encourages me: if we seek, we shall find.

Day 106: Who?

And as Jesus taught in the temple, he said, "How can the scribes say that the Christ is the son of David? David himself, in the Holy Spirit, declared,

"The Lord said to my Lord,

Sit at my right hand,

Until I put your enemies under your feet."

David himself calls him Lord. So how is he his son?" And the great throng heard him gladly.

Mark 12:35-37

Now it's the turn of Jesus to ask a question, and it's an absolutely pivotal one: who do you understand the Messiah to be? The answer has eternal implications.

The Scribes taught that the Christ would be the son of David. There is no disputing that the Messiah would be descended from David, but, there is no way that the Christ would be junior to David!

As the psalm declares: the Lord said to my Lord. And as Jesus points out: how can the Christ then just be a son? There is a clear superiority to David revealed here.

The only way David's son could be David's Lord is if God came in human flesh.

So, who do YOU believe is the Messiah?

Day 107: Choose your role models carefully

And in his teaching he said, "Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes and like greetings in the marketplaces and have the best seats in the synagogues and the places of honour at feasts, who devour widows' houses and for a pretense make long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation. Mark 12:38-40

As a scribe, the point of your life would have been to serve God. To go around enjoying and even expecting glory and honour was to seriously miss the point. God will not tolerate those who try to steal His glory, but will certainly honour those who revel in bringing Him glory.

It is not the clothes you wear or the position you hold that counts in God's Kingdom, but the heart you show.

Day 108: Financial Freedom: Lessons from a widow

And he sat down opposite the treasury and watched the people putting money into the offering box. Many rich people put in large sums. And a poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which make a penny. And he called his disciples to him and said to them, "Truly, I say to you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the offering box. For they all contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on." Mark 12:41-44

I've always found this passage challenging. Firstly, I see that Jesus takes note of what we give. I also see that He is not impressed by large donations if we're able to afford it! If anything, it's expected! But it is also clear that the Lord looks at the heart. People can be guilty of giving big donations for religious rather than spiritual reasons.

What I also learn is that generosity is not defined by amount, but by the cost to oneself. And I also notice that Jesus, knowing this is all the woman had, didn't stop her.

This unnamed widow is a heroine to me. I reckon she had a deep faith in the living God, entrusting herself to Him for further provision. I suspect she also had a deep understanding of God's grace, because this is a key to developing generosity.

God's grace is not for personal enrichment, but kingdom advancement.

And that is probably the toughest lesson to learn!

Day 109: Who says?

And as he came out of the temple, one of his disciples said to him, "Look, Teacher, what wonderful stones and what wonderful buildings!" And Jesus said to him, "Do you see these great buildings? There will not be left here one stone upon another that will not be thrown down." Mark 13:1&2

Herod, for all his pride and paranoia, was a great builder. In a shrewd political move, he built a huge temple that was bigger than Solomon's. With such a solid structure in place, it must have seemed invincible.

But it was destroyed, by Titus, in AD 70.

Which brings me to the main point: What Jesus says is true.

Day 110: The End is Nigh?

And as he sat on the Mount of Olives opposite the temple, Peter and James and John and Andrew asked him privately, "Tell us, when will these things be, and what will be the sign when all these things are about to be accomplished? And Jesus began to say to them, "See that no one leads you astray. Many will come in my name, saying, "I am he!" and they will lead many astray. And when you hear of wars and rumours of wars, do not be alarmed. This must take place, but the end is not yet. For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be earthquakes in various places; there will be famines. These are but the beginnings of the birth pains. Mark 13:3-8

So a 'pre-mil' walks into a bar...

Sorry – that is me being obscure – why? Because this is a passage which, in conjunction with other Scriptures, would generate much debate on the nature of the end times (the names given to doctrinal viewpoints are pre-millennialism, a-millennialism and postmillennialism). I loved the way one of South Africa's greatest theological minds put it – Dr Rex Matthie (now in glory) – He used to quip that he was a pan-millennialist – it would all pan out in the end!

Let us take note of what Jesus said. This destruction of the temple was obviously of huge concern and a shock to hear by the disciples: it's only natural that they wanted to know more. Surely such an event would signal the end of the age?

Jesus doesn't give in to their desire for dates, but rather focuses on the need to be alert. He says "see that..." which

can also be translated as 'watch.' What must we be careful of? That no-one would lead us astray. There will be false messiahs.

But in stark contrast to what I would call a 'triumphalist theology,' Jesus tells us that we are indeed to expect wars and famines and earthquakes, and that these actually form part of the plan of God. What is more, it doesn't mean that the end is near, but rather that it is beginning. Every generation has had its 'the end is near' people, but one thing is for certain: after 2000 years of seeing the fulfilment of this, we can know we are closer than ever before.

These wars and rumours of wars are not cause for us to be afraid, but rather opportunity to be involved in kingdom advancement. And just as Jesus 'birthed' the Kingdom through the pain of Calvary, so we too can expect that God's Kingdom will be birthed in pain.

But what a beautiful result will be seen.

Day 111: Be a watchdog

But be on your guard. Mark 13:9

We will elaborate on this further on Monday, but let us remember that Jesus is speaking to the disciples about what to expect.

And to be on our guard is divine counsel to take with us through life. We have an enemy that wants to weaken our witness, whether that be through the pain of persecution or the seduction of prosperity.

It is counsel that applies to all areas of life: relationships, family, business, sports, schools, churches etc. All areas of our lives have the opportunity within them to weaken our witness, to lead us astray.

Let us train ourselves to live to the glory of God (1 Cor 10:31), through abiding in Him (John 15).

Day 112: Keep Following

But be on your guard. For they will deliver you over to councils, and you will be beaten in synagogues, and you will stand before governors and kings for my sake, to bear witness before them. And the gospel must first be proclaimed to all nations. And when they bring you to trial and deliver you over, do not be anxious beforehand what you are to say, but say whatever is given you in that hour, for it is not you who speak, but the Holy Spirit. Mark 13:9&10

Firstly, please note that this is not the proof text for not needing to prepare messages as I have heard some ministers do. There is a huge difference between standing on trial for your faith and standing in front of fans...

I wonder how what Jesus said impacted the disciples when they heard this. Fishermen, tax collector, zealot...now going to appear before religious and political leaders, get beaten and mistreated – all because they love and follow Jesus?

Is this some type of reverse psychology motivational speech?

Not at all. Jesus was speaking the truth (when you are truth personified, that is what you do), and this is exactly what the disciples encountered, and many Christians throughout church history and the world today still experience persecution for choosing to follow Jesus.

And the Holy Spirit still sustains and enables, giving courage and strength and the words to speak as needed.

And so we need never give up on following Jesus.

Day 113: Whose enemy are you?

And brother will deliver brother over to death, and the father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death. And you will be hated by all for my name's sake. But the one who endures to the end will be saved. Mark 13: 12&13

It's hard to believe isn't it, that families would turn against each other over the person of Jesus. In western civilisation it is more likely to take the form of a parting of the ways, perhaps putting up with some mockery, but in honour-and-shame based cultures (especially Islam, but also in Asian cultures), turning to Jesus Christ is to sign your own death warrant.

To love Jesus and follow Him is to live in enemy territory in this world. Darkness is not a fan of light. But to be hated by all is a small price to pay, considering that I am loved by Jesus.

I'd rather be an enemy of the world than an enemy of God.

Day 114: Abominably yours...

Reading: Mark 13:14-18

But when you see the abomination of desolation standing where he ought not to be (let the reader understand), then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains. Mark 13:14

Few verses and phrases make 'end time specialists' as giddy as this phrase of 'the abomination of desolation.' It is a phrase taken from Daniel when he was given a prophecy of what was to come (see especially Daniel 9:27) regarding Jerusalem.

I am going to leave the arguments to those more scholarly than I (which is not hard to be) as to the nitty gritty of this verse. I will venture however to say that I believe this is one of those 'spiral prophecies,' which gets a multiple fulfilment. The little insert of 'let the reader understand' (note reader, not hearer) tells us that we need to dig deeper to understand.

We need to read the signs of the times, but we also need to examine the heart of the church. We each need to examine our own hearts, because the dramas of the grand plan of God also gets played out in your heart and mine.

Any sin is ultimately an abomination of desolation, because as children of God we are called to have the Holy Spirit rule in the temple of our hearts. And we need to be on our guard, because some abominations can masquerade as 'blessings.'

If we stay close to the Lord, we will recognise a true blessing from a counterfeit one.

Day 115: Election Time

For in those days there will be such tribulation as has not been from the beginning of the creation that God created until now, and never will be. And if the Lord had not cut short the days, no human being would be saved. But for the sake of the elect, whom he chose, he shortened the days. Mark 14:19-20

Tribulation...elect...words that get a very mixed reception in theological circles – some cherish them, others are not quite sure what to make of them.

Me? Well, they are God's Words, not mine.

It simply reminds me that God is in charge of history; that God works in ways we do not understand; and that I am utterly, totally, thoroughly dependent upon the mercy of God. I know that if He had not worked in me first, I would still be lost.

And because of that, I have elected to follow Him.

Day 116: There He is! No wait...that's not Him

And then if anyone says to you, 'Look, here is the Christ!' or 'Look, there he is!' do not believe it. For false christs and false prophets will arise and perform signs and wonders, to lead astray, if possible, the elect. But be on guard; I have told you all things beforehand. Mark 13:21&22

Deception is a powerful weapon, and Satan is the master of it. People are visual creatures, so if looks real, it gets believed. That is why we love magicians who are so good at creating illusions (because they're actually really good at distracting you!).

Signs and wonders are not always the hallmarks of the presence of God, and certainly a huge clue to help in simple discernment is to take a look at who is getting the glory when these things happen – is it God or the flashy guy in front?

And it is hard to believe that people will follow a person claiming to be the Christ or claiming to have special anointing from Christ – and yet it is happening all the time.

So please be on your guard – and stick to the Word of God.

Day 117: Are you ready?

But in those days, after the tribulation, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens shall be shaken. And then they will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory. And then he will send out the angels and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven. Mark 13:24-27

Unlike the first time, the Second Coming of Jesus is not going to be a quiet event (not that it was all that quiet!). It will be unmistakably clear that Jesus has arrived, and all those who love Him will go to be with Him.

It's not the world that has the final say over history – it's Jesus.

And so we continue to hope, and serve.

Day 118: Have you read The Fig Tree lately?

From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts out its leaves, you know that summer is near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates. Truly, I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away. Mark 13:28-31

This is not the easiest of passages to interpret, and many views have been put forward in trying to explain 'this generation.'

The essence of the passage however is quite clear: read the signs and be prepared. The words of God are eternal, and what He says will happen, will indeed happen.

In an age where distractibility from important matters is the norm, it takes discipline to focus on what is really important.

Let us not forget that we are called as citizens of heaven with the task of advancing the Kingdom of God wherever we have been placed. Let us not forget that God is on the throne and we will one day stand before that throne. (For a useful resource in looking at what is going on in the world, check out www.incontextinternational.org and sign up for their newsletters. Think of it as Time magazine for Christians)

Day 119: Ever Ready?

"But concerning that day or that hour, no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Be on guard, keep awake. For you do not know when the time will come. It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his servants in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to stay awake. Therefore stay awake – for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, 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." Mark 13:32-37

It always amazes me how people insist on trying to figure out a date for the return of Jesus, especially since Jesus Himself said 'no-one knows!'

What we are told to be however is awake. Look at how many times we're told a variation of the same instruction in these short verse: *Be on guard, keep awake...stay awake...stay awake.*

And given the fact that we are 2000 years (give or take) down the line from when Jesus said this, it makes sense to be even more awake! I reckon complacency must be our greatest enemy in such times as these.

Is your heart ready?

Day 120: Wanted: Dead AND Alive

It was now two days before the Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread. And the chief priests and the scribes were seeking how to arrest him by stealth and kill him, for they said, "Not during the feast, lest there be an uproar from the people." Mark 14:1-2

And so begins the narrative which unfolds the final events of the life of Jesus – the Passion week.

The chief priests and scribes were looking for a way to kill Jesus, and they are trying to devise their own plan. They didn't want it done during Passover.

What they failed to realise (you can't really blame them) was that God also wanted Jesus dead...

Sounds weird to put it like that, but this was a different kind of 'wanted.' God was not going to delight in the death of His Son, but it was the path required for salvation to be made possible for you and me. The most famous verse in the world (John 3:16) reminds us of this truth!

And it was God who was going to be in charge of the timing, not man.

They were unwittingly going to carry out the will of God.

Let us willingly carry out His will!

Day 121: The Worship Leader

And while he was at Bethany in the house of Simon the leper, as he was reclining at table, a woman came with an alabaster flask of ointment of pure nard, very costly, and she broke the flask and poured it over his head. There were some who said to themselves indignantly, "Why was the ointment wasted like that? For this ointment could have been sold for more than three hundred denarii and given to the poor." And they scolded her. But Jesus said, "Leave her alone. Why do you trouble her? She has done a beautiful thing to me. For you always have the poor with you, and whenever you want, you can do good for them. But you will not always have me. She has done what she could; she has anointed my body beforehand for burial. And truly, I say to you, wherever the gospel is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in memory of her." Mark 14:3-9

What a powerful moment. Read through it again – try immerse yourself in it. We'll explore this further, but for now – just read through it again.

And again.

Day 122: Tut tut...

And while he was at Bethany in the house of Simon the leper, as he was reclining at table, a woman came with an alabaster flask of ointment of pure nard, very costly, and she broke the flask and poured it over his head. There were some who said to themselves indignantly, "Why was the ointment wasted like that? For this ointment could have been sold for more than three hundred denarii and given to the poor." And they scolded her. Mark 14:3-5

Hmmm...nothing quite like a bit of self-righteous indignation from a hypocrite to kill an amazing moment of pure worship.

We know from Matthew's (26:8) and John's gospel (12:4-5) that the indignation came from the disciples (who should have known better) and most especially Judas, towards a woman whose hospitality they had enjoyed (being the sister of Martha and Lazarus)!

Judas gets upset over Mary wasting money, and is later willing to waste his life as he betrays Jesus for far less (incidentally the going rate for a price of a slave).

Its so easy to criticize...and it can blind us to ourselves.

How we need to guard our hearts!

Day 123: Fragrant Worship

And while he was at Bethany in the house of Simon the leper, as he was reclining at table, a woman came with an alabaster flask of ointment of pure nard, very costly, and she broke the flask and poured it over his head...Mark 14:3

This perfume was more expensive than Chanel No.5 – the cost was equivalent to a year's salary for a worker. And the behaviour of Mary was not exactly prim and proper.

We have seen the righteous indignation of Judas and others as they scolded her. But don't you just love the response of Jesus? He comes to her defence and says "Leave her alone...she has done a beautiful thing (v5) and later says 'wherever the gospel is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in memory of her (v9)."

I wonder how long it actually took to break the flask and pour it over the head of our Lord? I imagine not more than a few minutes.

And yet this simple act ministered to our Lord deeply, and we are still told about it today. Can you imagine the fragrance that filled the room? True worship does that – it blesses our Lord, and our lives can then be a fragrance to others (some will be blessed as they respond, others won't – see how Paul described his ministry in 2 Cor 2:15-16)

This woman openly, sacrificially and lavishly displayed her love for Jesus.

Let's follow her cue.

Day 124: Anointed for burial

She has done what she could; she has anointed my body beforehand for burial...Mark 14:8

What a powerful statement and act of worship. Did Mary know that this is what she was doing? We don't know for certain if she realised the full implication of her act of worship and how the Lord would interpret it, but what we do know is that she did what she could to bless her Lord.

Perhaps Mary knew something at an intuitive level...perhaps she simply understood that the Lord meant what He said when He predicted His death. We know that Mary was a listener.

And really, that is at the heart of worship isn't it? Being sensitive to the opportunities to honour our Lord, to listen to Him and serve Him.

Day 125: I'll never be like Judas...

Then Judas Iscariot, who was one of the twelve, went to the chief priests in order to betray him to them. And when they heard it, they were glad and promised to give him money. And he sought an opportunity to betray him. Mark 14:10-11

In the space of 11 verses, Mark has revealed to us stark contrasts in terms of responses to Jesus. The opening verses of this chapter show the priests and scribes looking for a way to quietly arrest and kill Jesus. Then we have extravagant devotion and worship expressed by Mary, and now we have Judas, who is one of the twelve, going out to betray him.

You cannot truly encounter Jesus and remain neutral. And Judas just serves to further remind us that the heart of the issue is the issue of the heart. He had the best teacher, saw overwhelming evidence of God's power, went through the best discipleship training one could go through – but it was not the Jesus he wanted.

And let's be honest, how many of us have not fallen into a variation of this trap? We create a Jesus we can sing nice songs to on Sunday, but who doesn't actually require discipleship from us on Monday. We look for churches that give us the Jesus we want, as opposed to letting Jesus actually work in our hearts.

Perhaps it's because we haven't quite grasped salvation, or the other way round.

Day 126: Keep Moving Forward

And on the first day of Unleavened Bread, when they sacrificed the Passover Lamb, his disciples said to him, "Where will you have us go and prepare for you to eat the Passover?" And he sent two of his disciples and said to them, "Go into the city, and a man carrying a jar of water will meet you. Follow him, and wherever he enters, say to the master of the house, "The Teacher says, Where is my guest room, where I eat the Passover with my disciples? And he will show you a large upper room furnished and ready; there prepare for us." And the disciples set out and went to the city and found it just as he had told them, and they prepared the Passover. Mark 14:12-16

Isn't this incredible? Jesus had made preparation to have his last meal with his disciples.

Jesus knew what lay ahead.

The writer to the Hebrews, in quoting Habakkuk, says the following(10:38):

"but my righteous one shall live by faith, and if he shrinks back, my soul has no pleasure in him."

Jesus set the example here: he did not shrink back, and those who claim to be children of God are called to have that same faith, as Hebrews continues in the next verse: "But we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who have faith and preserve their souls."

Those who are genuinely God's children will have that faith, as we recognise our utter dependency upon both His saving and sustaining grace.

Brothers and sisters, let us not entertain sin, but let us move forward and be God's instruments of advancing His kingdom, no matter how tough it may get. God will carry us.

And one day He will even give us glory, even though it is Him who did the work! Who ever heard of a pot getting rewarded for being a pot?

But that is our God for you.

Day 127: Grace to the betrayer

And when it was evening, he came with the twelve. And as they were reclining at table and eating, Jesus said, "Truly, I say to you, one of you will betray me, one who is eating with me." They began to be sorrowful and to say to him one after another, "Is it I?" He said to them, "It is one of the twelve, one who is dipping bread into the dish with me. For the Son of Man goes as it is written of him, but woe to that man by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It would have been better for that man if he had not been born." Mark 14:17-21

It hurts when you invest your life in someone and they turn their backs on you, because you understand that it is themselves, and not you, that they were interested in.

I marvel at the grace of our Lord. Judas would have had his feet washed by Jesus, and dipping the bread into the dish was an act of fellowship – a gesture of love. Jesus had given Judas ample opportunity to change his mind. You can just imagine the shock in that room – these are men that had walked closely with each other and with the Lord, and now this dramatic announcement. All of a sudden the discussion is not about who was the greatest (as they had once debated), but rather who was the worst?

Tragically, the heart of Judas was not Christ centred but self-centred. He wanted a Jesus that would serve his own purpose.

And the words of Jesus pronounce the sobering sentence.

The words of David become my plea (Psalm 51:10-12):

*Create in me a clean heart, O God
And renew a right spirit within me
Cast me not away from your presence
And take not your Holy Spirit from me.
Restore to me the joy of your salvation
And uphold me with a willing spirit*

Day 128: Broken for you

And as they were eating, he took bread, and after blessing it broke it and gave it to them, and said, "Take; this is my body."
Mark 14:22-23

If I could somehow do a movie scene on this, I would zoom in on the hands breaking the bread, and then flash images of what was about to happen in terms of the beating, whipping and crucifixion...

And in the light of that understanding, I hear Jesus blessing the bread and giving thanks.

He then distributes it among his disciples, and it is a powerful reminder that He is with each and every one of us that love Him.

Of course we see the crucifixion, and it is horrific. But there is another reality which movies can never portray – the absorbing of the wrath of God, the pain of separation from His Dad.

Nonetheless, Jesus offers Himself – so that we can know redemption.

Love so amazing, so divine – demands my soul, my life, my all.

Day 129: Blood on my hands

And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, and they all drank of it. And he said to them, "This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many." Mark 14:23&24

I remember walking through the rubbish dump of Cairo, where a large Christian community lives (you've never seen such happy people!). I saw blood on the ground from a freshly slaughtered animal and it spoke to me: sin is messy, slaughtering an animal is messy, crucifixion is messy.

Every lamb slaughtered throughout the Old Testament history was a pointer to Jesus. You couldn't just choose any lamb (no defects allowed!), and Jesus wasn't just any man. He was (and is) the perfect Son of God. I must confess, at one level it sounds strange to say this, but only Jesus was good enough to take away sin.

Without the shedding of blood, there can be no forgiveness of sin. Sin is messy, and its consequence is messy. And why should Jesus be subjected to that? Why should he endure hatred and cruelty by those who were vastly inferior to Him anyway?

I cannot fathom that kind of love, but I am deeply grateful for it.

Forgiven. It's my all-time favourite word.

Day 130: I'll drink to that!

Truly, I say to you, I will not drink again of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God. Mark 14:25

Jesus is waiting for a drink. Not just any drink, but specifically the fruit of the vine. It's called wine (I know, you prefer the term grape juice).

Jesus knows what lies immediately ahead, but He also knows what lies after that: celebration.

And all those who love our Lord will be enjoying the feast with Him. There will be so much to celebrate: complete redemption, tears wiped away, looking forward to an eternity of utter joy, no crime, amazing fellowship.

And Jesus. Jesus will be celebrating us with Him, and we will be celebrating Him!

And this future is what enabled Jesus to go through Calvary (see Hebrews 12:1&2), and we too need to keep our eyes fixed on Jesus, so that we do not give up.

His grace is truly sufficient.

I'll drink to that...

Day 131: Can't deny that...

And when they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives. And Jesus said to them, "You will all fall away, for it is written, "I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered." Peter said to him, "Even though they all fall away, I will not." And Jesus said to him, "Truly, I tell you, this very night, before the rooster crows twice, you will deny me three times." But he said emphatically, "If I must die with you, I will not deny you." And they all said the same. Mark 14:26-31

Among the many marks (no pun intended) of authenticity of Scripture, this is one of my personal highlights. If you want to start a religious movement to gain power and authority, you do not admit or reveal personal weakness.

Peter is full of bravado. And who can blame him? He is a larger than life personality, who experiences life intensely, and whose tongue is periodically on autopilot – I just love him.

And in response to the prophecy of Jesus, they all say never...

How does that expression go? Never say never?

But look at our Lord. He knows He is going to be deserted, but that doesn't stop Him loving them.

That's the one thing that cannot be denied: the love of God.

The Lord never ever loved me because of my performance. He loved me because that is who He is.

And that kind of love makes me want to live for Him, in whatever season or place of life He has placed me.

It is just such a privileged to be loved by God, let us not take it for granted and become complacent.

Day 132: Is there no other way?

And they went to a place called Gethsemane. And he said to his disciples, "Sit here while I pray." And he took with him Peter and James and John, and began to be greatly distressed and troubled. And he said to them, "My soul is very sorrowful, even to death. Remain here and watch." And going a little further, he fell on the ground and prayed that, if it were possible, the hour might pass from him. Mark 14:32-35

We have all had to face things we didn't want to face, but this stands apart as utterly unique and awful.

For the first time in eternity, Jesus was going to experience an absence of His Father and the presence of The Judge on Him personally. He would also experience evil unleashed against Him. It is a reality too terrible to contemplate.

It was however the plan, made in eternity past.

Redemption does not come cheaply.

So why do we cheapen it?

Day 133: Whose will?

And he said, "Abba, Father, all things are possible for you. Remove this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what You will." Mark 14:36

I cannot imagine the depth of turmoil that our Lord was experiencing at this moment. Do you see the intimacy with which He speaks to His Dad?

If there could just be some other way...

There was another way offered to our Lord, when He first began His ministry. Satan offered Jesus glory without Calvary in exchange for being worshipped.

Jesus wouldn't have it. Satan was and is a liar in any case.

It had to be the Calvary road, if salvation was going to be made possible.

And in such stark contrast to the many prayers of today, Jesus learns obedience unto death (Philippians 2:8), and prays: "yet Not my will...but what You will"

And that's an attitude that needs restoring in the lives of many of us...

Day 134: Cinderella with Amnesia?

And he came and found them sleeping, and he said to Peter, "Simon, are you asleep? Could you not watch one hour? Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak." Mark 14:37&38

Hmmm...how many of us would hear "are you asleep? Could you not watch one minute?"

Challenging isn't it?

I have absolutely no desire to be a bride-basher, but I have to marvel at our Lord's patience with us, His body. After all, we can all see that in many respects, many within the body have fallen into temptation where the world has indeed infiltrated us.

My prayer is that the Church would understand how beautiful we actually are because of what Christ has done, and that in all areas Christ would be the focus. And that we would indeed become a watching and praying body. As Michael Griffiths put it in his aptly named book 'Cinderella with Amnesia', the church seems to be forgetting who we are.

It begins with me.

Day 135: Resolved

And again he went away and prayed, saying the same words. And again he came and found them sleeping, for their eyes were heavy, and they did not know what to answer him. And he came the third time and said to them, "Are you still sleeping and taking your rest? It is enough; the hour has come. The Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners. Rise, let us be going; see my betrayer is at hand." Mark 14:39-42

I cannot remember the source, but one commentator observed that the reason Calvary took place is that Jesus had won the battle in Gethsemane, which is where the real battle took place.

In other words, Jesus had resolved in Gethsemane to submit to the will of His Father.

He knows what is at hand, and His attitude is phenomenal. Although His disciples were letting Him down badly (how would you feel if in your darkest hour your friends are not there for you?), He nonetheless gets up and gets ready to face His ultimate assignment: to die for you and me, to the glory of His Father. He actually says "Rise, let us be going; see my betrayer is at hand."

Jesus was resolved. Nothing was going to stop Him. I am so grateful.

Let's pray for that same Spirit to work in us.

Day 136: Kiss of death? Or eternal life?

And immediately, while he was still speaking, Judas came, one of the twelve, and with him a crowd with swords and clubs, from the chief priests and the scribes and the elders. Now the betrayer had given them a sign, saying, "The one I will kiss is the man. Seize him and lead him away under guard." And when he came, he went up to him at once and said, "Rabbi!" And he kissed him. Mark 14:43-45

*And why did it have to be a kiss – that's not what a kiss is for –
Michael Card*

Talk about incongruity – approaching the Prince of Peace with swords and clubs; identifying Truth by calling Him "Rabbi" and trading Him for the deceit of material riches; betraying Love personified with a kiss; approaching the Light of the world in darkness.

It was a battle of hearts: anger, hate and disillusionment was going to do its level worst to get rid of Jesus with His heart of holy, authoritative love.

On the surface, if you were a betting man, the odds were seriously stacked against Jesus.

But we're not called to look at the surface – we're called to focus on the unseen reality.

God's in charge. Check out Psalm 2...

Day 137: An earful

And they laid hands on him and seized him. But one of those who stood by drew his sword and struck the servant of the high priest and cut off his ear. And Jesus said to them, "Have you come out as against a robber, with swords and clubs to capture me? Day after day I was with you in the temple teaching, and you did not seize me. But let the Scriptures be fulfilled." And they all left him and fled. Mark 14:46-50

We know from John's account that it was Peter who drew the sword and sliced the ear of the high priest (Peter was probably planning more permanent damage), and we know from Luke's account that Jesus put it back! I am sure that servant Malchus had very mixed feelings about his assignment after that...

Even though Jesus was on the receiving end of the rough treatment, it becomes clear where the true authority lay – not in the soldiers who had to resort to swords and clubs to arrest an unarmed man, but in Jesus Himself.

And Jesus questions them on their approach to Him. He isn't a robber (unless you call rescuing us from darkness stealing) – all He has done is teach life giving truth about God and His Kingdom.

"But let the Scriptures be fulfilled" – Jesus knew why He was here. This had been planned in eternity past.

Isn't that amazing?

Day 138: Reverse Discipleship?

And a young man followed him, with nothing but a linen cloth about his body. And they seized him, but he left the linen cloth and ran away naked. Mark 14:51&52

Only Mark records this incident, and commentators understand it to be Mark referring to himself. He was actually there and saw what happened, but he too ran away and left the Lord alone.

Discipleship is about forsaking all and following Him, not running away. But the naked truth is that I too would have done the same. I am not a brave man.

But our Lord, who merely needed to utter a command, could have overthrown the lot by the word of His mouth.

The One who was actually in control was handing Himself over. It's a most unusual way to be a Saviour.

A Saviour who has never once deserted me.

Day 139: The Lion and The Lamb

And they led Jesus to the high priest. And all the chief priests and the elders and the scribes came together. Mark 14:53

Yet another moment of incongruity, adding to the whole irony of the drama being played out before us.

Religious and political power coming together to judge the source of authority. Ants and worms judging a lion – its utterly absurd.

But it's Jesus who is actually in charge. He is purposefully allowing Himself to be led like a lamb to the slaughter, because He IS The Lamb, the perfect sacrifice, and our Great High Priest.

Can you fathom such love? Would you have come up with such a plan?

He did it for you.

Day 140: Distant Discipleship

And Peter had followed him at a distance, right into the courtyard of the high priest. And he was sitting with the guards and warming himself at the fire. Mark 14:54&55

I cannot begin to imagine the conflicting emotions that Peter must have felt at this point. In his zeal he cut off the ear of Malchus, but he also ran away. He has made his appearance again, but he is careful to keep his distance (although he is sitting with the guards!). It's obviously cold, and he is warming himself at the fire.

I must be honest, there have been times in my life where I did want to be more passionate in my discipleship, but yet found myself also wanting to rather keep my distance – not get too involved. Playing it safe just seems easier sometimes, and tragically, even easier to justify under the guise of wisdom.

I have such deep respect and admiration for folk who serve uncompromisingly on the frontlines of faith, whether that be in missions or the workplace or the church or the home – in our world salt and light is sorely needed.

But I what I love more is a Saviour who restores those who have fallen.

Day 141: Truth on Trial

Now the chief priests and the whole Council were seeking testimony against Jesus to put him to death, but they found none. For many bore false witness against him, but their testimony did not agree. And some stood up and bore false witness against him, saying, "We heard him say, 'I will destroy this temple that is made with hands, and in three days I will build another, not made with hands.'" Yet even about this their testimony did not agree. Mark 14: 55-59

In Jewish law, only on the testimony of a minimum of two witnesses can a person be put to death (see Numbers 35:30), and Commandment 9 is quite clear on the issue of bearing false testimony (Exodus 20:16).

But when you're putting Truth on trial, you're going to have to grasp at straws to find a conviction. Jesus gets misquoted, and the lies just don't add up, other than to reveal a web of deceit and corruption.

You're not going to condemn Jesus based on lies.

Throughout history, Jesus has been put on trial. Questions have always been raised about His authenticity and His claims.

I'm just wondering what kind of witness I am.

Day 142: Torn Apart

And the high priest stood up in the midst and asked Jesus, "Have you no answer to make? What is it that these men testify against you? But he remained silent and made no answer. Mark 14:60 &61

Jesus was not going to give dignity to lies by answering the false accusations, and his silence does obviously complicate things a bit for the high priest. The high priest now has to adopt the role of a prosecutor:

Again the high priest asked him, "Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed? And Jesus said, "I am, and you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power, and coming with the clouds of heaven." And the high priest tore his garments and said, "What further witnesses do we need? You have heard his blasphemy. What is your decision?" And they all condemned him as deserving death. And some began to spit on him and to cover his face and to strike him, saying to him, "Prophesy!" And the guards received him with blows. Mark 14: 61-65

Jesus is asked a direct question about His identity, and He answers affirmatively – and adds a prediction. It is just too much for the high priest – this is absolute blatant blasphemy deserving of death.

Except for one huge detail: Jesus was speaking the truth!

In his zeal for God's honour, the high priest tears his garment. In His love for His Father's glory and your salvation, Jesus was about to have His body torn. Remember how He said "This is my body, broken for you?"

Day 143: Piercing Clarity

And as Peter was below in the courtyard, one of the servant girls of the high priest came, and seeing Peter warming himself, she looked at him and said, "You also were with the Nazarene, Jesus." But he denied it, saying, "I neither know nor understand what you mean." And he went out into the gateway and the rooster crowed. And the servant girl saw him and began again to say to the bystanders, "This man is one of them." But again he denied it. And after a little while the bystanders again said to Peter, "Certainly you are one of them, for you are a Galilean." But he began to invoke a curse on himself and to swear, "I do not know this man of whom you speak." And immediately the rooster crowed a second time. And Peter remembered how Jesus had said to him, "Before the rooster crows twice, you will deny me three times." And he broke down and wept. Mark 14:66-72

In Luke's account (see Luke 22:61) we are also told that the Lord looked at Peter after the rooster had crowed.

That crow must have been the most piercing crow in all of human history – of course it wasn't the crow was it? It was the memory the crow triggered: it reminded Peter of the words of Jesus (Mark 14:30). One can just feel Peter's pain: he was trying to save his skin, but his spirit has been pierced.

Whether you are in a courtyard denying Jesus, or in your office alone, or out in the mission field or listening to the Sunday message, God's Word has the ability to penetrate the heart. There is a reason Hebrews 4:12 says the following:

For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart.

Do you submit to God's authoritative Word?

Day 144: Authoritative Meekness

And as soon as it was morning, the chief priests held a consultation with the elders and scribes and the whole Council. And they bound Jesus and led him away and delivered him over to Pilate. And Pilate asked him, "Are you the King of the Jews?" And he answered him, "You have said so." And the chief priests accused him of many things. And Pilate again asked him, "Have you no answer to make? See how many charges they bring against you." But Jesus made no further answer, so that Pilate was amazed. Mark 15:1-5

If you are falsely accused, what is your gut reaction?

If your life was on the line, and you are falsely accused, what would your reaction be then?

The Jewish leaders had to convince Pilate that Jesus was an insurrectionist guilty of treason and therefore of capital punishment.

But standing before Pilate was a prisoner like no other he had seen: the demeanour and dignity of Jesus amazed him.

An unlikely king, but a true one – worthy of our worship...and more. Meekness is seriously not weakness.

Day 145: Who do you choose?

Now at the feast he used to release for them one prisoner for whom they asked. And among the rebels in prison, who had committed murder in the insurrection, there was a man called Barabbas. And the crowd came up and began to ask Pilate to do as he usually did for them. And he answered them, saying, "Do you want me to release for you the King of the Jews?" For he perceived that it was out of envy that the chief priests had delivered him up. But the chief priests stirred up the crowd to have him release for them Barabbas instead. Mark 15:6-11

Pilate had the insight to recognise the true source of the problem with Jesus: the envy of the Jewish leaders. Jesus was making the religious leaders look bad.

Barabbas however, with his notorious track record, makes them look distinctly good. Barabbas also, in a perverse way, represents the type of hero people want – he took on the Romans (he clearly didn't win, and you can be certain he was destined to be crucified as well).

A murderer is chosen over the Son of God.

It's a drama that is continually played out in every culture and every heart when Jesus is encountered: some just cannot cope with the type of Saviour Jesus is – they cannot cope with His moral and exclusive claims. They put Jesus on trial and they prefer their own version of Barabbas.

By God's mercy and grace, others see the person of Jesus, and their own sinfulness by comparison, and recognise that they fall short of God's glory and need a Saviour.

A Saviour who took Barabbas's place.

Day 146: Tis Mystery All

And Pilate again said to them, "Then what shall I do with the man you call the King of the Jews?" And they cried out again, "Crucify him." And Pilate said to them, "Why, what evil has he done?" But they shouted all the more, "Crucify him." So Pilate, wishing to satisfy the crowd, released for them Barabbas, and having scourged Jesus, he delivered him to be crucified. Mark 15:12-15

Pilate was clearly a pragmatic politician. I must confess to not having quite worked out how to define a good politician and a bad one – the definition seems to be interchangeable based on the perspective you have!

The tragedy, humanly speaking, is that Pilate failed to show some backbone. He wasn't interested in doing what was right, but took a more populist approach in that he went the route of pleasing the crowd. In this moment, peer pressure led to Decide.

The question Pilate posed was absolutely correct: "Why, what evil has he done?"

And we know the answer: absolutely none.

And yet, as 2 Cor 5:21 clearly states: For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

I'm actually scared to write what I am thinking as I seek to unpack that truth – it just seems so wrong. There is amazing

mystery in there, and the best suggestion I can make is this:
lets worship Him.

Day 147: Its not fair

And the soldiers led him away inside the palace (that is, the governor's headquarters), and they called together the whole battalion. And they clothed him in a purple cloak, and twisting together a crown of thorns, they put it on him. And they began to salute him, "Hail, King of the Jews!" And they were striking his head with a reed and spitting on him and kneeling down in homage to him. And when they had mocked him, they stripped him of the purple cloak and put his own clothes on him. And they led him out to crucify him. Mark 15:16-20

It's not fair!

Why should sarcasm and sadism come together through a few hundred soldiers and blatantly and cruelly mistreat a man who had healed many, including a Centurion's servant (Luke 7)? That is Satan for you.

How is it that Jesus displayed such patience and meekness and self-control? He could have taken them all out by simply speaking a word...

He did it so that you don't have to receive justice...you can receive grace and mercy instead.

Which isn't fair at all, but, boy oh boy oh boy am I deeply grateful. I can sincerely and truthfully say that I for one absolutely do not deserve such love.

Amazing love – how can it be – that Thou my God shouldst die for me?

Day 148: Undeserved death; Undeserved favour

And they led him out to crucify him. Mark 15:20

What goes through a man's mind while he is being led to be crucified? It's a one-way journey to the most agonizing death possible – remember, its where we get our word excruciating from. Add to this that the body of our Lord has already been shredded and has lost significant amount of blood.

Isaiah shares with us (about 700 years beforehand!) the following:

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 that before its shearers is silent, so he opened not his mouth (53:7).

Let's just pause for a moment at least...Let us marvel at this Lord that allows His creation to mistreat Him so, receiving the punishment that they themselves deserve.

He doesn't complain about it either – He doesn't protest His innocence.

Folks, as Timothy Keller so aptly puts it: you are more sinful than you care to admit, but you are more loved than you dare believe.

Yes – you are.

Day 149: Complete the Mission

And they compelled a passerby, Simon of Cyrene, who was coming in from the country, the father of Alexander and Rufus, to carry his cross. Mark 15:21

The Romans were masters of compelling people to do things, and we are given a name of a person, as well as his two sons, to carry the cross of Jesus. If you have the chance, read the Afrikaans novel *Man van Cirene* by F A Venter, based on this person.

We cannot know for certain, but there is speculation that because the names are specifically mentioned (which gives strong credibility to the eye-witness nature of the account and could have been easily disputed as well as giving the indication that they were known amongst early believers), that the Rufus mentioned by Paul in Romans 16:13 could possibly be same one – and whose mom clearly ministered in a significant way to Paul as well.

I would love to know the story behind this, that in the midst of this awful travesty of justice, God was nonetheless connecting lives. What impact did this event have on Simon and his family?

What is clear is that after all that Jesus had been through physically, emotionally and spiritually, there was no strength left in him to carry the cross: and the worst was still to come.

Again, He could have just spoken the word and the angels would have been there in a flash in full strength and glory...

But the mission was not yet over, and He had come to carry it to completion.

You were the mission.

Day 150: Excruciating Grace

And they brought him to the place called Golgotha (which means Place of a Skull). And they offered him wine mixed with myrrh, but he did not take it. Mark 15:22-23

Yet another astounding window into the persistent endurance of our Lord on our behalf. He got offered a painkiller – an opportunity to numb the pain a bit.

Jesus chose to embrace the pain – to properly experience what He needed to experience in order to make the way for reconciliation possible. In other words, He chose to experience the wrath of God, along with the full weight of sin, the full force of evil thrown against Him, and to go through this alone – along with the excruciating pain of crucifixion in addition to what He had already endured.

Grace and peace do not come cheaply.

Let's not take these gifts for granted.

Day 151: What a Saviour!

And they crucified him and divided his garments among them, casting lots for them, to decide what each should take. Mark 15:24

See how 'matter-of-factly' this is stated. For the Romans, it was just another workday, another 3 crucifixions, and casting lots for the garment Jesus wore because it was a good quality and Jesus didn't need it anymore.

David in his Psalm 22 wrote an incredibly moving and deeply felt lament – so much so that Jesus used it Himself on the cross in processing and exclaiming what He was experiencing. The psalm is so clear in its language and imagery of suffering that it is rightfully regarded as a prophetic expression of what Jesus Himself would go through – including the casting of lots. In v18 of the psalm it says:

They divide my garments among them, and for my clothing they cast lots.

For everyone else, life was going on.

For Jesus, His life was ebbing away, but ours was being restored.

Such love is hard to fathom and comprehend – we actually need strength to do so – as Paul prayed in Ephesians 3:14-21 (check it out!)

Day 152: Things are not what they seem

And it was the third hour when they crucified him. And the inscription of the charge against him read, "The King of the Jews." And the with him they crucified two robbers, one on his right and one on his left. And those who passed by derided him, wagging their heads and saying "Aha! You who would destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days, save yourself, and come down from the cross!" So also the chief priests with the scribes mocked him to one another, saying, "He saved others; he cannot save himself. Let the Christ, the King of Israel, come down now from the cross that we may see and believe." Those who were crucified with him also reviled him.
Mark 15:25-32

No-one saw that Jesus was fulfilling prophecy – a read through Isaiah 53 even points out that 'he was numbered with the transgressors (v12).'

But this has got to be one of the greatest moments of things not being what they seem...

If you were a Pharisee, you would have thought Jesus was getting His just punishment from God for His blasphemy...

If you were one of the loved ones of Jesus, you would be in utter despair and confusion, not understanding what is going on, thinking that God must have deserted Him.

And if you were one of the soldiers, it was just another day of crucifying another criminal and gambling for his clothes. They didn't know this was God's Son, that Truth Personified had just been crucified by lies.

Of course we know that Jesus was being punished, but not for His sin, but ours. We know that God had deserted Him, again, not because of His sin, but ours.

And yet, behind the scenes, 2 Cor 5:19 tells us that ***'God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation.***

Don't judge God's character and work by superficial circumstances. His love for you is far greater than you can fathom or imagine – Calvary is proof.

Day 143: Not Forsaken

And when the sixth hour had come, there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour. And at the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice, "Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?" which means, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" And some of the bystanders hearing it said, "Behold, he is calling Elijah." Mark 15:33&34

It was indeed a dark moment in human history, and it is only appropriate that physical darkness was experienced too. I do wonder if this darkness caused many of his accusers to question what was going on?

For Jesus it was awful – and He uses Scripture to express and undoubtedly process His experience: He is quoting Psalm 22:1 directly. For the first time in eternity, a breach in the Trinity had taken place, and Jesus felt and was utterly alone in the midst of enemies.

We cannot comprehend what really took place, but we can say thank you, and we can appreciate and live in the fullness of the presence of God without ever having to fear being alone or being condemned.

Because nothing, absolutely nothing, can separate God's children from His love (Romans 8). God's children will never have to cry "My God...why have You forsaken me?" Because God will never, ever forsake His loved ones.

And that's a promise.

Day 144: It is Finished

And someone ran and filled a sponge with sour wine, put it on a reed and gave it to him to drink, saying, "Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to take him down." And Jesus uttered a loud cry and breathed his last. Mark 15:36&37

If ever you thought that the wine was given out of sympathy, it probably wasn't – it was probably given in order to prolong the suffering. In Luke's account we see the soldiers offering it mockingly (Luke 23:36).

But Jesus accepted this mixture. He didn't accept the earlier one which was supposed to numb the pain a bit, but he accepted this one which would have helped quench a parched throat.

Jesus wanted to make sure his next words would be heard...It Is Finished!

The Romans may have wanted to prolong the suffering, but they didn't understand that they couldn't take the life of Jesus...He had to give it.

And He did:

In the words of the hymn Man of Sorrows by Philip Bliss:

Bearing shame and scoffing rude,
In my place condemned He stood;
Sealed my pardon with His blood.
Hallelujah! What a Savior!

Day 145: Divine Rip Off?

And the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom – Mark 15:38

God will see you now – you can go in.

When before you had to rely on a high priest to access the very Holy of Holies on your behalf, once a year – you may now go in yourself without all the ceremonial washings and purification rites.

That priest must have gotten the shock of his life. There is no way humanly possible for that curtain to have been torn by human hands, especially from top to bottom – it was just too huge and too thick. My ESV Study Bible describes it as follows (footnote for Matt 27:51):

"The curtain between the Holy Place and the Most Holy Place was an elaborately woven fabric of 72 twisted plaits of 24 threads each. It was 60 feet (18m) high and 30 feet (9.1m) wide."

That is seriously one thick curtain! You couldn't just waltz into the presence of God. Now we are instructed to boldly approach the throne of grace with confidence! Our true High Priest has had Himself ripped and sacrificed on our behalf (the book of Hebrews goes into great detail about this – see Hebrews 4:14-16 for a brief summary).

You get God – and God gets you...assuming of course, you want Him.

Day 146: See with the Centurion

And when the centurion, who stood facing him, saw that in this way he breathed his last, he said, "Truly this man was the Son of God!" Mark 15:39

I've lost count of the number of men I have crucified.

I have slowly and gruesomely put to death many – and have trained others in the art. Men have screamed and agonised in pain and anger at me and at what I represent.

It's part of my job. After the first few you grow hardened to the pain you're causing.

But never, ever, in all my years of crucifying scum (that's how I see them), have I encountered what I encountered in this who was charged "King of the Jews."

I saw no anger towards me or resentment – through his pain and in his eyes I still saw...dare I say it...love? I didn't ever think I would see dignity and crucifixion together.

This is no ordinary man – this is no ordinary Caesar – this is truly the Son of God – I must find out more!

Day 147: Ladies: Thank You

There were also women looking on from a distance, among whom were Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James the younger and of Joses, and Salome. When he was in Galilee, they followed him and ministered to him, and there were also many other women who came up with him to Jerusalem. Mark 15: 40&41

Personally, I believe that if it were not for women, the church would not have survived.

Women played an essential role in the ministry of Jesus while He was on earth, and they remained with Him to the end – and were the first to witness the resurrection.

Men are great at bravado.

Women are superb at ministering.

So: to all those women out there who make ministry possible – thank you.

And praise be to God for such a marvellous gift!

Day 148: Corpus Christi

And when evening had come, since it was the day of Preparation, that is, the day before the Sabbath, Joseph of Arimathea, a respected member of the Council, who was also himself looking for the kingdom of God, took courage and went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. Pilate was surprised to hear that he should have already died. And summoning the centurion, he asked him whether he was already dead. And when he learned from the centurion that he was dead, he granted the corpse to Joseph. Mark 15:42-45

My amazing wife, who is also a forensic pathologist, once did a presentation for a special Easter service we held called CSI: Calvary.

There is no doubt that Jesus died. Those who want to claim that Jesus fainted and was revived have got way more faith than I could ever hope to have.

Consider the above encounter: this is from the Gospel of Mark, a recognised historical source (and probably the earliest) and Pilate is surprised that Jesus died so quickly. He was quite experienced in how long victims could last. He accepted the word of the centurion who was also experienced in recognising death since his job entailed being an executioner.

Jesus really did die; corpses, by definition, do not breathe.

That's the one thing I wanted to highlight.

I also wanted to highlight Joseph of Arimathea – a respected member of the Council – a man, who although part of the Sanhedrin, loved Jesus and 'was looking for the kingdom of God.'

It's very popular to knock the so-called traditional churches, and truth be told, many do deserve challenging on how they express our faith (as do so-called many non-traditional churches). Even though it was the Council that sought to kill Jesus, God was nonetheless still at work in the hearts of some.

Never, ever doubt God's ability to work.

Day 149: It's Friday

And Joseph bought a linen shroud, and taking him down, wrapped him in the linen shroud and laid him in a tomb that had been cut out of the rock. And he rolled a stone against the entrance of the tomb. Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Jesus saw where he was laid. Mark 15:46&47

I really appreciate Joseph. He courageously showed his support for Jesus by being determined to ensure that Jesus at the very least gets a decent burial. You can just feel the tenderness as he seeks to give some measure of dignity to the Son of God.

And Jesus gets put in a proper tomb, one that is cut out of the rock – which only the wealthy could afford.

And a stone is rolled against the entrance – probably the most significant rock & rolling stone in all of human history...

Both Mary's saw where Jesus was laid.

Perhaps it helped give them some closure to the awful events they had witnessed. I wonder if they thought about what Jesus had predicted? After what they had witnessed, resurrection must have seemed highly unlikely.

How privileged we are to know that this was not the end of the story. To quote a message made popular by Tony Campolo: It's Friday...but Sunday's a coming...

Day 150: Jesus 1 – Death o

When the Sabbath was past, Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of James and Salome bought 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 back – 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." Mark 16:1-6

Man – how cool is that?

That's my Jesus – He even gets up after death. As Paul so aptly put it (1 Cor 15:54&55):

Death is swallowed up in victory. O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?

Where indeed?

Day 151: Encounters of the Numinous Kind

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. Mark 16:6-8

This was shattered expectations of a good sort, even though it was terrifying to encounter! But don't you just love how Peter, the disciple who had vehemently denied Jesus, gets a special mention?

And you can just picture the two ladies – stunned silence, in shock and jaws dropped.

And the angel knows exactly why they are there, and the message of the resurrection is reinforced: "you're looking for Jesus – the One who got crucified – who was buried here – He's not here – He rose from the dead. He told me to tell you to get yourselves to Galilee where He will meet you..."

Exactly how do you respond to an encounter like that? The ladies were terrified. This is not a wish-fulfilment hallucination, because then you would have hallucinated Jesus there and you would hug him in your fantasy...

No – Jesus rose. You just simply will not find the corpse of Jesus anywhere.

The Christian faith is rooted in historical reality – if not, then we're disastrously deluded (see Paul's comment on this in 1 Cor 15:7).

I'm so grateful we're not...and this is the ground of my hope. After all, if Jesus can defeat death, He can defeat lesser things too.

Eternity is going to be amazing.

Day 152: Spread it Forward

Reading: Mark 16:9-20

Focus verse: And he said to them, "Go into all the world and proclaim the gospel to the whole creation" (v15)

The reading today is an interesting one because there is debate over whether it is meant to be included in the gospel (it is not contained in all of the early manuscripts). And that in itself is a testament to the integrity of our faith: if we don't have full information, we can openly say so – we don't have to concoct stories or demand utter unquestioning blind belief.

The verses however contain material that we find elsewhere, so nothing is in effect added or taken away by including these particular verses.

The essence of these verses is this: Christ did indeed rise from the dead, and He has entrusted us with proclaiming this truth. To not believe arises from a hard heart.

The disciples did a phenomenal job, as we can testify to over 20 centuries later.

But we must still continue – there are people, even in this age of google, who have not heard or do not have a proper understanding of Jesus and His Gospel.

Let's make sure we're part of the solution to that reality, and not part of the problem.

A Shepherd Led Life Resource