

James Philip Bible Readings

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THE BOOK of MARK

John Mark, the writer of what is generally considered to be the earliest gospel narrative, was not an apostle, but knew Jesus in the days of His flesh (cf 14:51,52 -, the young man mentioned here is likely to have been Mark). He has written for us a "Gospel of action rapid, vigorous, vivid, Entering at once on the Lord's official and public career, it bears us on from one mighty deed to another with a peculiar swiftness of movement, and yet with the life of picturesque detail. Power over the visible and invisible worlds, especially as shown in the casting out of devils, is the prominent characteristic of the picture. St Peter's saying to Cornelius has been well noticed as a fit motto for this gospel, 'God anointed. Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Ghost and with power, Who went about doing good and healing all those who were oppressed with the devil'." (Bernard).

1) 1:1

The gospel of Jesus Christ. What do these words mean? 'Gospel' means 'good news' but we need to understand this aright. Mark does not mean 'the gospel that Jesus preached'. It is good news about Jesus that constitutes the message of grace. This is an important distinction, and one which has not always been understood or observed. It is not something that Jesus taught, but something He did, Dr. Dale of Birmingham once said, "Jesus came not to preach a gospel but in order that there might be a gospel to preach". Paul's words in Romans 1:1, 3 give it a full title, "The gospel of God concerning His Son". This must not be regarded as theological hairsplitting. Indeed a very great deal of harm has arisen for the Church because of this widespread misunderstanding as to the nature of its message, and the gospel has been reduced to little more than an ethical system propounded by a great Teacher Who by His life showed us an example of true living. This, however, people do not seem to have realised is not good news, but something to lead men to despair. What good is an ethical system which tells us how to live but cannot bestow the ability to fulfil its ideal? It is power for living that we need, and this the "gospel about Jesus" freely gives. And that is good news!

2) 1:1-3

We should notice the remarkable juxtaposition of words in 1 and 2. "The beginning of the gospel...as it is written in the prophets". There is deep significance in this. It tells us that the gospel story does not begin at Bethlehem, but in the prophecies of the Old Testament. Mark is saying here that we must trace its origin right back to God's first dealings with His people. This means that the whole Bible, not merely the New Testament, bears witness to Christ. The history of the Bible is His story, from Genesis to Revelation, and throughout, the subject-matter is one, In the Old Testament, we might say, Christ is predicted, prophesied, prepared for; in the gospels, Christ is manifested; in the Acts, Christ is preached; in the Epistles, Christ is expounded; in Revelation, Christ is unveiled in His glory as King of kings and Lord of lords. But to whichever part of the Scriptures we may turn, it is always Christ that is the subject-matter.

That this was central to the apostolic preaching is plain to readers of the Acts of the Apostles. They constantly asserted that what the prophets had predicted Christ had fulfilled in His life, death and resurrection. The first promises of redemption given to man after the Fall in the Garden of Eden, which were so to speak, like the faint gleams of the dawn of a new day, and which became ever more pronounced and clear with the passage of the centuries, came to fruition in the fulness of the times in the birth of Christ at Bethlehem, He was the sun of righteousness that had arisen with healing in His wings.

3) **1:4-8**

It is also true, in another sense, that the gospel began with the ministry of John the Baptist. There are two things that can be said about this great and significant movement. Firstly, it had all the characteristics of spiritual awakening - its emphasis on sin, the widespread conviction and confession, the mass-movement of the people. John was raised up by God for this purpose, and it is clear that his ministry electrified the whole country with its mighty, searing word of challenge. In the second place, however, it was only a preparatory movement leading to the fuller ministry of Jesus. This has something important to teach us.: Paradoxically, the gospel must first be 'bad news' before it can become 'good news' to men. Our forefathers used to speak of a 'killing work' performed by the law, before grace came to men's souls. They meant that the law of God must first deal all manner of death-blows to the proud, self-sufficient hearts of men, before they are ready to receive the healing balm of the gospel. Thus, in personal experience, disturbance comes first, to shake the foundations and break up the soil of our hearts to receive the saving word of truth. Conviction first, then conversion - such is the New Testament pattern.

4) 1:4-8

The account given here of the nature of John's preaching, though brief, is very telling. It was a Christ-exalting ministry; he spoke of "One mightier than I", and elsewhere in the Scriptures his faithfulness to the Person of Christ is evidenced. "Behold the Lamb of God" he cries in John 1: 29, and in John 10:41 it is said of him, "John did no miracle, but all the things that he spake of this Man were true". There could be no higher praise for any preacher than this, and we should be wise and discerning enough to make this the true criterion of judgment in assessing the worth of a ministry, in an age when oratorical brilliance and spectacle seem to be more important than a faithful testimony to Jesus Christ. It is surely not without significance that John effected a moral transformation in the nation. His was a voice of authority because he was faithful to Christ, a voice that could call the nation to repentance and new obedience.

Not only so. His words, "There cometh One mightier than I" should be true in the spiritual sense of every real preaching of the Word. The preaching should "bring" the mighty One nigh to men. This corresponds to the "signs following" which Mark speaks of at the end of his gospel (16:20). It has pleased God by the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe, and no-one, be he preacher or hearer, should be content if the ministry of the Word is not attended by the demonstration of the Spirit and of power.

5) **1:9-11**

The Baptism of Jesus has a deep significance. What could it mean that Jesus should be baptized? John's baptism was one of repentance but Jesus was without sin, and had therefore no need of it. There can be only one explanation: it is that in baptism Jesus was identifying Himself with sinful humanity, standing in with them in their sinful predicament, pledging Himself to bear their burdens and lead them into rest. In other words, we see something even here of the substitutionary work He had come to fulfil in the Cross. He was baptized for us, and was repenting for us, and in this symbolic act He was foreshadowing the fiery baptism of His Cross, when He was made sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him. We ought not to be blind to the implications of this act, standing as it does at the outset of His public ministry. Nothing could indicate more clearly what He had come to do. He did not purpose merely to be a great Teacher, or Healer, although He spake as never man spake, and went about in tenderness and compassion healing broken bodies and minds; His coming was as the suffering servant of God, to give His life a ransom for many. And if He suffices for us in the ultimate and eternal issues, we may be sure that in lesser needs He will not fail us. He stands by us in all things, in every situation, our merciful and faithful High priest and Advocate. He Who went down into the waters of baptism for our sakes comes down, by His Spirit, to where we are, in the particular circumstances of our need, to encourage and help and sustain us "I will never leave you nor forsake you", He assures us (see Acts 23:11).

6) 1:12-13

In the light of yesterday's comment, the baptism of Jesus might well be regarded as His anointing for service, the service of atonement through sacrifice. The Temptation which immediately followed may then be regarded as His going forth to battle. We should not miss the force of the statement in 12, that it was the Spirit that drove Him into the wilderness. The initiative was with Him, not with the powers of darkness, and Christ was carrying the war into the enemy's camp. The temptation was not something that He suffered so much as something He accomplished, and in that it stands, with His baptism, at the outset of His ministry, it reveals a principle later stated by Him in the words, "First bind the strong man, and then spoil his house". This is what Jesus did in the wilderness. Ever after, He had no truck with evil spirits. He refused to allow them to speak. He commanded them and they obeyed.

There are of course numerous other lessons for us to learn here. For one thing, we are taught that to resist temptation adds moral power and vigour to our lives, and in view of this we should realise that, as in Christ's own experience so in ours, God not only permits temptation, He arranges it, for it is the fire that puts temper into the steel of our character. We should not therefore pray for an easier time, when beset with many pressures; we should pray to be made stronger men. Indeed, the measure of future usefulness may often be discerned by the extent of present difficulty and trial. It is our testing time, and God chooses His men in the furnace of affliction.

7) **1:14-22**

The authority with which Jesus issued forth from the wilderness temptation is very evident in this passage. A simple word of command was all that was necessary to win the allegiance and loyalty of Peter and Andrew, James and John. They recognized their rightful Lord, and all who heard Him in the synagogue recognized with astonishment the authority of His words.

A comparison with the opening chapter of John's Gospel seems to indicate that the events recorded there preceded those here, and took place before John the Baptist was imprisoned. Jesus had therefore already called these men to discipleship and they had accompanied with Him from time to time. Now, they were called from their daily tasks to be with Him constantly, to be trained for the service of soul-winning. Note particularly the words, "make you to become". Christ undertakes to make us proficient in His service. It is not a question of possessing natural or even, spiritual gifts, but of submitting ourselves to the discipline of His word and will. If we put our lives into His hands, He will shape us, fashion us, mould us into usefulness. It will not matter if we should think ourselves lacking in basic essentials or gifts. He who made a young lad's picnic lunch into a feast for the five thousand will not be hard put to make of our poor store a source of blessing for multitudes. For the disciples it meant two years of arduous personal discipline; it cannot mean less for us, and we should learn to interpret our experience as disciples in the light of this "make you to become". In all the varied pressures and testings that come upon us, it is this that He is doing, did we but know it.

8) **1:14-22**

Two other points should be noted in this passage before we pass from it. Jesus said, "The time is fulfilled". By this He meant that the time of preparation which had gone on for centuries throughout the Old Testament ages was now come to an end. The dawn, long promised and eagerly awaited, was now breaking, and the kingdom to which the prophets had borne witness was even then breaking in. We must view Christ's ministry in this tremendous light, as the fulfilment of long ages of prophecy and preparation, the fulfilment in time of something planned in the counsels of eternity.

Secondly, the central word of our Lord's message was the summons to repentance. Is this not a strange message, rigorous and even stern, to be called 'good news'? It is significant that whenever an authentic word has come to men from God down the ages, it has been couched in these terms. The O.T. prophets without exception; the Baptist, Christ, the apostles - all alike speak with one voice in calling men to repent. This is the word of grace and hope that leads men into peace. Any word that is to be worthy of the living God must be one that will deal with sin. That is the root problem of mankind, and anything that trifles with it is of no avail. Remember, the gospel is the fulfilment of the age-old promise given in the Garden of Eden - a promise of deliverance from sin and Satan. 14 and 15 are to be taken as a summary of Christ's Galilean ministry. This was His theme, and His grand design, to call men to repentance and this must therefore be the basis of any true gospel ministry.

9) **1:23-28**

We come in these verses to the first miracle of our Lord's recorded in this gospel, and we pause to reflect on the significance of His miraculous workings as a whole. In the first place, we may say that they stand in the record as a testimony to the fact that "miracle" is what the whole story of the gospel is about. It is the story of God's miraculous intervention in the human situation, Secondly, if we think of Christ as having come forth as a King, then the miracles may be regarded as the credentials of the King who has come from God, the evidence that His claim to kingship is not an idle claim. Considered thus, the miracles and signs assume a notable significance as proving that He is the promised King and the fulfilment of the age-long hopes and yearnings of the Old Testament. The New Testament Church had a great clarion call in their preaching and testimony - "Jesus is Lord" - and it is this that Mark is concerned to communicate to His readers, this his purpose in recording the miracles.. Thus we see His Lordship manifested over nature, disease, devils and death, in the miracles He performed during His ministry. They demonstrate His absolute authority in all these realms.

Nor is this all. The miracles are evidences and tokens of the new order that Christ came to inaugurate. The kingdom has come, but only in its first-fruits as yet, and we await its glorious consummation. They point beyond themselves to the coming Day of God. They have a forward look. C.S. Lewis, in his book on miracles illustrates this point well when he likens them to the snowdrops that appear in the early months of the year. They are the harbingers of spring. There may be many storms still to come, and the weather may be bleak and desolate, but the tokens of spring have been seen, and it is sure to come. So the miracles tell us that grace has at last decisively breached this weary, sinsick world of ours, and that a new day is about to dawn. In these works of His power man has been privileged, so to speak, to have a brief glance at the last chapter of the story, to see how it all ends. In this sense, the words of the well-known hymn are particularly applicable, "Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord".

10) 1:23-28

There is another legitimate way of interpreting the miracles. It is to regard them as illustrations of the answer of the gospel to the problem of sin, that is, to spiritualise them. John makes particular use of this method in his gospel when he speaks of them as "signs", indicating that the work of power in the physical realm points to a still greater work in the spiritual realm. For example, the man at the pool of Bethesda illustrates the paralysis of sin, and Christ's word of power to him speaks of the power in the gospel to liberate men from the bondage that sin brings upon their lives. That there is Scriptural authority for this method of interpretation is clear from our Lord's own use of the miracle of the feeding of the five thousand as a basis for a sermon on the bread of life that alone satisfies the spiritual hunger of men's souls. And, of course, there is a connection between physical and mental disability and sin. Sin is the root of all human malady. This does not mean that any particular disability or affliction is caused by the sin in that particular life - although sometimes this is in fact the case (see Mark 2:5). What it does mean is that the entrance of sin into the world has affected the whole stream of humanity with countless woes and sorrows. Such is the Biblical position, and this is the connection which permits us to look at any of these objects of Christ's compassion - leper, palsied, lame - as illustrations of the sickness of sin.

11) 1:23-28

This incident took place on the Sabbath day. The Lord of the Sabbath towered over the unrest that sin had made, and brought peace in place of torment, fulfilling the purpose and intention of the Sabbath day. This is some indication of what any Sabbath day ought to be, for the purpose of the gospel proclaimed in God's House is simply to bring about that spiritual order, and lead men out of anxiety, sorrow and sin into the rest and peace of God.

The implications of these verses are, from quite a different point of view, very considerable, for here is an assertion of the fact of demon-possession. There is sharp disagreement with this in modern minds today. Some say, "This was simply their way in those days of describing sickness, especially mental sickness". There is a simple answer to this objection. It is not true. Not only is physical sickness distinguished from demon possession (Peter's wife's mother had a fever, not a spirit), but also mental illness is distinguished from demon-possession. Look at Matt. 4:24 - here a precise distinction is made between divers diseases and torments on the one hand, and demon-possession on the other, and between the latter and those who were mentally ill (lunatic). In any case, it is quite misleading to suppose that demon-possession necessarily has mental symptoms. On what grounds can we assume this? Some forms of possession in the Scriptures had purely physical symptoms (cf, the woman with a spirit of infirmity, and the man with a deaf and dumb spirit). Nor is it wise to assume lightly that demonism is something that belongs to the past, and riot a factor in Christian work today. There are those who believe that many of the serious and intractable problems in pastoral work can be explained and helped only on the supposition that demonism is a fact. The New Testament regards the human heart as the battleground of the powers of darkness and the powers of light, It makes nonsense of the Cross where Jesus is said to have spoiled principalities and powers, if we persist in refusing to take seriously the reality of terrible demon forces at work in the lives of men. This is something that the Church has to re-learn. The saints of earlier days knew far more about these matters than we do today, and this may explain in some measure the effectiveness of their testimony by comparison with ours in this modern, enlightened age.

12) 1:29-45

There are several lessons for us in these verses. We have already stressed the authority of Christ (22, 27), but there is another note ringing throughout, equally vital and characteristic of the gospel, the compassion of Christ (41). This does not stand in contrast to the other - both are integral to the gospel. The Lordship of Christ is a compassionate one, and the compassion of Christ is a strong vital, authoritative thing, with nothing maudlin or sentimental about it. It is often keen as the surgeon's knife, but always infinitely tender.

We should not miss the connection between the manifestation of authority and compassion, and the life of prayer which our Lord lived. In 35 we read that "He departed into a solitary place and there prayed". This was the fountainhead of all the blessing that gladdened hearts and homes in Capernaum in those days. And the lesson for us is simple and plain. It is prayer that releases the authority and the compassion of God upon the lives of men. Do we want to see the power of God manifest in our day? Do we long for the compassionate touch of the Saviour's hand upon the broken lives around us? Then we must be much in prayer to God, for in no other way will this be. If we were to ask how many, or how few, prayer meetings there are throughout the Church, and how many, or how few, people attend the prayer meetings that there are, we might perhaps have stumbled upon the real reason why the Church in our land is in such a parlous state today, so barren and of life and power and authority. A prayerless Church is a Church that is dead.

13) 1:29-45

The story of the cleansing of the leper comes, in Matthew's Gospel, immediately after the Sermon on the Mount, as if to suggest that it was after hearing Christ teaching that the outcast came, with the conviction that here was One great enough and powerful enough to meet his need. Faith came, it would seem, by hearing the voice of the Son of God. A question however remained in his mind. He felt Christ could cleanse him, but would He? Whence the doubt? Leprosy was a foul disease, and had a moral stigma attached to it, involving ostracism from society (hence cleansing, not healing, is the word used for its cure), But Christ's compassion broke into his tragic isolation. He stretched forth His hand and touched him. Now we must not miss the significance of this. It was not the touch of His hand that cleansed him. Scripture is precise about this. It was His word that wrought the miracle (42). The "I will" was with power. But the touch was something different. It was Christ's discernment of the comfort that the man needed. He had been shunned, and regarded as unclean, and it was the first time any hand had touched him since contracting the disease. It was his reinstatement to humanity, telling him that he mattered to God, and that he was welcomed into fellowship with Him. And it gives us the assurance that none is too vile or loathsome for the Saviour's grace.

14) 1:29-45

One further point requires to be emphasised before we leave this passage. Jesus said, (38) "Let us go into the next towns, that I may preach there also: for therefore came I forth". It was through preaching that His authority and compassion were communicated to men's needs, and this is how His grace is communicated today. It is in the word of preaching that we meet the tender and compassionate Son of God Here is the trysting-place between heaven and earth, the place where the Divine Pity meets us, to cleanse us from our sins and heal all our woes and sorrows and shame, We may recall John Wesley's experience as he listened to readings from Luther's commentary on Galatians; "A strange warming of the heart, and an inner persuasion of God's love for me, and of the sufficiency of Christ's death for my sins...." Paul says, "It hath pleased God by the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe", and this explain why preaching is regarded as of paramount importance in the Reformed Church, It is one of the tragedies of our modern age that when the need for this Divine communication has been greatest this understanding of preaching should have been at such a discount. A Church that has neglected the one effective weapon God has placed in its hands is ill-equipped to fulfil its Divine calling, and must have a very uncertain future.

15) **2:1-12**

This fresh miracle is an expression of the grace and compassion of Christ, and particularly these qualities in their sovereign aspects. All the initiative was on Christ's side - the man uttered not a word, nor was any plea for help made. One of the striking things about the story is the word that Christ spoke to the man, It was his need that was brought to Jesus by his friends; but Jesus went beyond it to his sin, and pronounced forgiveness upon him, The significance of this is that what was of primary importance to Jesus was not the healing of the sick man, but the word of forgiveness. This is underlined also in 2, where we are told that "He preached the word unto them". This was His answer to the needs of the multitude - the miracles were meant simply to confirm the word of preaching. We should learn from this that we have not touched the deepest point of man's predicament until we recognise his primary need for forgiveness, and that the great duty and opportunity of the Church is to relate human need to human sin, to lead men in their thinking from the consciousness of frustration and the meaninglessness of life to the root cause - hearts alienated from God and in need of reconciliation. How could a man be other than frustrated when he is cut off from the true anchorage of life? How could he have peace of mind, if his heart is at war with God? That is the real problem, and to this the story in these verses bears witness.

16) 2:1-12

The attitude of the sick man's friends is worthy of special comment. As a pattern of Christian service, in bringing the needy to Christ, we could scarcely find anything in Scripture more telling and apposite. We read, "Jesus, seeing their faith, said unto the sick of the palsy...." Their faith stood for the sick man in the sight of the Lord. This principle of vicarious faith, faith on behalf of others, represents the full flower of the life of faith. It is a great encouragement, as well as a great challenge, to think that we may thus effectively help those who cannot or will not help themselves, to believe for men until they can have faith themselves, what greater service could we render? Not only so. The persistence of these men shows the quality of their faith. They would brook no hindrances or setbacks. It would have been easy, when they were confronted by an impassable crowd surrounding Christ, to have given up their quest and returned home. On the contrary, however, they took the setback in their stride and gained their objective. We do well to remember this, Sometimes we meet with discouragements in spiritual life and in Christian service, and are tempted to give in "without a stroke of battle", while God is all the time testing us, proving of what stuff our faith is made. The point of this story is that it is possible to break through every obstacle and hindrance. The kingdom of God suffereth violence, and the violent take it by force.

17) 2:13-17

We have already seen the claims of discipleship laid upon other men - Peter, Andrew James and John. But the value of these verses is that whereas the others were already devout men, disciples of John the Baptist, Levi (otherwise known as Matthew) was a social outcast, a member of a hated and despised class, a publican. This is what makes the gospel "good news". It comes to men just where they are, in their sin and shame, and gives them the mighty word of command that leads them out from where they are into newness of life. The implications of this tax-gatherer's conversion were very marked. Firstly, he made a great feast (Luke 5:29) and invited all his friends to meet the Lord who had saved him. He nailed his colours to the mast immediately. He let it be known that he was now a disciple of Christ. Moreover he realised that this was something that he could not keep to himself. He wanted to share the joy of his salvation with his friends. And he succeeded. They followed Him (15).

In the second place, he wrote a book, Matthew's Gospel. His talents, such as they were, were laid at the disposal of the Lord. And he, being dead, yet speaketh! We may never know what a high destiny of service awaits a man when he turns, in repentance and faith, to Christ. We should not miss the force of this. We may never write a book, or go down in history as a prominent figure, but of this we may be sure God has a plan for our lives, a destiny of grace which will be fulfilled only as we hear His command, Follow Me, and give ourselves unhesitatingly and utterly to Him.

18) 2:18-22

Three parabolic statements are made in these brief verses, requiring some little thought for a true understanding of their meaning and implication. They constitute our Lord's reply to the criticism levelled against Him by the Pharisees for attending Levi's feast. In 19 Jesus is in effect saying, "The reason why we are feasting and not fasting, is that this is in fact a marriage feast. We are celebrating the marriage of a soul with the Saviour. That is what has happened to Matthew." What He says in the following verses, in the parables of the cloth and the bottles, indicates the nature of the change that took place in the tax-gatherer. It was not a question of patching up his broken, disordered life, as old garments are patched with new cloth. Conversion is not a matter of improving a man's life here and there, correcting this habit, dealing with that problem. If any man be in Christ, he is a new creation, and it is a change of raiment he receives, and a new life, in which old things have passed away, and all things become new. Such is the meaning of our Lord's words in these verses.

19) 2:23-28

Our Lord's attitude to the Sabbath exemplifies the new wine bursting old bottles. The dynamic of the new thing that He brings is too great for the old legalism. He answers the Pharisees' criticism of His attitude to the Sabbath with a reference to king David's action in 1 Sam.21: 1-6. The comparison is not what David did on the Sabbath, but what he did when he was hungry, implying that it was hunger that made the disciples do what they did. It was a breaking of the letter of tradition but it was a trifling matter. David did a similar thing for the same reason in a big matter, and if it was right for David, it could not be wrong for the disciples. Christ's teaching here is that it cannot be wrong to meet real human need on the Sabbath. Hunger is as real on Sunday as on any other day! The law of the Sabbath was not made to restrict or encumber the fulfilment of the true needs of humanity, but only to restrict men's sinful propensities. The Sabbath was made for man, as a help, inspiration and blessing, not a bondage.

20) 2:23-28

Two opposite dangers face us today in relation to the Sabbath question, over-rigidity and over-laxity, It is certainly possible to become too legalistic in one's attitude to the Sabbath, but we believe that the other extreme is so prevalent that it needs the challenge of rigid observance to rebuke it roundly in the name of the Lord. The fourth commandment is in danger of being forgotten completely.

The real problem of Sabbath desecration is this the Sabbath has been forsaken because the God who gave it has been forsaken; Men do not like to retain God in their knowledge. Widespread desecration of the Lord's Day is a symptom of the drift of our nation from the things of God. It is not the disease itself, but merely a symptom of it. This does not mean, however, that it is insignificant. On the contrary, it is perhaps the most sinister of all symptoms, for it is the symptom of a revolt. It pinpoints not only what man thinks of God's laws, but what he thinks of God Himself. The Lord's Day is the day when He specially meets with His people to bless them and do them good. To desecrate it is to refuse fellowship with God, and refuse His blessing. The fact that many are content to do this is no justification either for ignoring the Sabbath, or for introducing measures legalising violation of the laws of God. He will not thus easily be bowed out of His world, His enactments are not recommendations, to be accepted or rejected as men think fit, but categorical imperatives, expressive of the Divine majesty, and broken at our peril.

21) 3:1-6

The point of our Lord's words in 4 is that at that very moment while Christ was, according to their views, breaking the letter of the law by healing the man with the withered hand, they were breaking the spirit of the law by plotting with murderous hatred to kill Him. Which of us, says Christ: is really keeping the Sabbath? The attitude of the Pharisees stands as a solemn reminder of the terrible dangers inherent in harsh and unfeeling legalism in religion, and of the dehumanising influences that this brings into men's lives. Well might Jesus warn His disciples, "Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees"?

As a parable of spiritual need, this story gives us a remarkable illustration of the operation of grace on the soul. We need only lay the passage alongside Ephesians 2 to see the parallel. The man was powerless to do anything towards his own recovery, but Christ's word of command, "Stretch forth thy hand", was a creative word, and virtue went forth with the word and communicated itself to the man. Christ's command is His enabling. It is this healing, saving word that meets us in the preaching of the gospel, challenging all manner of withered things -In our lives, whether the spiritual deadness which requires the initial gift of life and salvation, or the witheredness of a spiritual life that has lost its early love for the Saviour, and for the things of the kingdom of God. Still His word has power, for is He not the same yesterday, and today, and forever? Stretch forth that hand, withered one, and receive anew the gift of His grace:

22) 3:7-19

One cannot but be moved to read of the multitudes thronging our Lord, following the healing of the man with the withered hand, as if this fresh miracle touched off a new yearning and longing in their hearts. We should not miss the significance of the statement in 8, that it was when they heard what great things He did, that they came to Him. This is important in relation to the account that follows of the call of disciples (13-19), for they were sent forth to Him. "How shall they hear without a preacher?" asks Paul, indicating the primary function of Christ's "sent" ones, and the chief means of reaching the need of the world with the mercy and grace of the gospel. This is the nature of true service, and anything that does not in some way relate to this - telling of Jesus, the mighty to save - is not worthy of the name.

More important still however are the words, "that they should be with Him" (14). Service, to be fruitful and effectual, must flow from fellowship with Him. The need of the world, great and urgent as it is, is not a big enough motive for service. Love to Christ, not to men, is the great driving power that makes men mighty for God. It was the man who said, "To me to live is Christ" who blazed the trail of the gospel all over Asia and Europe. Nothing else is strong enough - nothing - to keep us steadfast and unmoveable amidst oppositions and discouragements in the Lord's work. Our sufficiency is of God!

23) 3:20-35

Two statements about our Lord, one made by His friends and the other by His enemies, give rise to the discussion of these verses. His friends said, "He is beside Himself", His enemies, "He hath a devil". The passage falls naturally into two parts, dealing with these attitudes in turn. In reply to the accusation of the scribes, Jesus gave a simple and conclusive answer. Satan would not work against himself; a house divided against itself cannot stand. It is impressive and encouraging to realise how formidable opposition can be effectively demolished by the devastating simplicity of spiritual penetration, and we should covet this simplicity in order to be able to set at nought the gainsaying of wicked men. It is one of the necessary implications of a total consecration to the will of God that we shall have the power to "see through" the works of the devil. Jesus teaches that if our eye be single, our whole body shall be full of light, and this is as true here as in other connections.

We note once again in passing the assertion Jesus makes of the reality of evil powers, that this world has been "invaded" by hostile spirits and brought into captivity to Satan. Today at last we are beginning to see, with the truly terrifying manifestation of evil in our 20th century civilisation, that the idea of personal demonic powers is not so fantastic as might once have been supposed! But the most important thing that the Scriptures teach about these dark powers is that Jesus has conquered them, and that He has made over the victory to us who believe on Him.

24) 3:20-35

The reply Jesus made to the statement of His friends, "He is beside Himself", is given in 33-35. He formally repudiates a "family" connection with friends or relatives who think He is beside himself and nominates as His brethren those who do the will of God. Indeed, what they were contemptuously dismissing as religious madness is precisely the holy enthusiasm which alone brings a man into the family of God. The Divine will demands of us a dedicated abandonment to its dictates, and it is a risk that true believers have always had to face, to be thought fanatical, and one they must be prepared to take gladly for Christ's sake, The men of Pentecost were accused of being intoxicated, so great was the yielding of their hearts to the fulness of the Spirit. What comfort and inspiration it is to know that the holy fire of zeal, that leads to ostracism by our fellows, brings us into an intimate "family" relationship with Christ. To be brother or sister to Christ means infinitely more even now than to have the approval of men, and it will certainly mean a hundredfold more hereafter, when to all eternity all that will matter is our relationship to Him. To be confessed by Him on that Day will be the ultimate beatitude, and to hear Him say, "Well done, good and faithful servant...." will more than eclipse all that shame and scorn we may have borne for His Name's sake.

25) 3:20-35

We cannot pass from these verses without some comment on the blasphemy against the Holy Ghost (29). This is a word that has caused endless distress and concern to sensitive and hesitant spirits, through misunderstanding of its meaning. We should note in the first place that Jesus is said to have spoken these warning words "because they said, He hath an evil spirit" (30). That is, they verged upon this blasphemy by attributing to an evil source the work of One Who was uniquely filled with the Holy Ghost. They called good evil. To be face to face with good incarnate, and not to recognise it, not to like it, not to want it, not to approve of it - this speaks of so close an identification with evil that Satan takes complete possession. This is obviously not a specific sin, but an attitude of soul, persisting in its refusal of the good until, in the terrible danger zone where sin and sinner become identified, the heart is hardened beyond remedy and repentance, and therefore forgiveness, becomes impossible.

Anyone therefore worried or haunted by the fear of having committed the unpardonable sin is extremely unlikely to have committed it. It should be remembered, for the comfort and encouragement of troubled believers, that many have passed through the distressing experience of having felt convinced they had committed the unpardonable sin, and have afterwards found complete release from their torment, and led into true peace and the knowledge and assurance of the forgiveness of God. It is something that needs to be talked about with a wise and sympathetic spiritual counsellor. To brood over it without confiding in someone is to magnify it beyond all proportion in the mind and heart, and cause endless spiritual and emotional disturbance. No life need be spoiled by this kind of torment. It is something from which there is complete deliverance.

26) 4:1-20

This famous parable was taught by Christ to indicate the supreme importance of hearing the Word of God aright. Although it is called the parable of the sower, it is clear that the soil in which the sower sows his seed is, for us, the critical factor. For Christ's words throw the burden of responsibility for the yield of the harvest upon those who hear. It is right hearing, and right reception, of the seed of the Word, that brings forth fruit unto the glory of God.

There are many lessons here. For one thing, it is clear that in three of the four instances mentioned here, the ultimate purpose of the sowing was not realised and fulfilled. Only the fourth part of the seed bore fruit. This teaches us a lesson we do well to remember. It is this: there is such a thing as failure in the work of the gospel. There are those that will not respond to the word of truth. There are those who refuse to be fashioned and disciplined by the sharp edge of Divine truth, and it is no evidence that a ministry has failed that there should be those who will not receive it. Some scholars think in fact that there is an autobiographical note in the parable, and that Christ is describing His own ministry in Galilee in these words. We recall that there were some places where it is said that He could do no mighty work because of their unbelief. F.W. Faber exhorts us in his hymn to "learn to lose with God". It is a hard lesson to learn, but a necessary one, if we are not to live in an unreal world of rosy sentimentality. Our calling is not to success, but to faithfulness. Crowns are promised to the latter, not the former.

27) 4:1-20

The seed that fell by the wayside fell upon ground that was hard and firm, made so by the tramping of many feet, so that no seed could ever penetrate it and bear fruit. Some human hearts, says our Lord, are like that wayside. As someone has put it, "Man has exposed his heart as a common road to every evil influence of the world, till it has become as hard as a pavement". This may be applied in a twofold way. It is true in the initial sowing of the gospel word - there are those that the grace of God seems to have been powerless to influence, hearts from which the evil one has ever snatched the living seed. In the parallel version of the parable in Matt 13:19, the words "understandeth it riot" are added, and this is very significant. Paul says that "if our gospel be hid, it is hid to them that are lost, in whom the god of this world hath blinded the minds of them that believe not". Satan's work is to deaden every receptive quality in the human heart. But it is true also in relation to believers. There is a receiving of the word unto sanctification and growth in grace, as well as unto justification. And with reference to the ever-deepening ministry of the word which builds character and produces the fruit of the Spirit in Christian life, it is sadly evident that some seed falls by the wayside, on Christian hearts that have become unresponsive and as hard as a pavement, and the evil one comes to remove seed which, if received, would have transformed life and character beyond recognition. There are some believers who are not prepared to be changed into different people. They have refused the word that would do this for them.

28) 4:1-20

The seed falling on stony ground likewise bears a double application. 16 and 17 speak of an experience that does not last, because it has never found root. Despite many seeming evidences of reality, it proves lacking under testing, and fades into oblivion. This is often in evidence, indeed inevitably so, in evangelism of the type which merely stirs the emotions without challenging and conquering the will. We should learn from this warning that only when the word of God touches the will is the work deep enough. Anything less produces rootless growth. Likewise it is the hidden life of the Christian that is the basis of firmness and dependability. When the word is not allowed to go deep down to affect the roots of our being, all is in vain. The coming of the disciplines of life exposes a man's experience for what it really is. Mere awakened emotions rarely stand the test of hardness and opposition; nothing but a will bent to the will of God can hope to endure to the end and be saved. Better by far to receive the heart-bruising challenge of the word of the Cross, devastating and agonising as it so often is, and know its deepening and enriching ministry, than live in the realm of superficialities where nothing is calculated to offend, but only stimulate our jaded emotions, and become stunted, withered caricatures of sainthood!

29) 4:1-20

The thorns that choke the word are well exemplified in the case of the rich young ruler, and we may gather from his story how earnestly a man may want eternal life and still be lost. It is the dread competition of "other things" that can damn the soul, by ousting Christ and His word from human life. This is the real crux of the gospel challenge. It is not that men are not attracted to its message; many would gladly embrace it. But it is when they see that it is going to interfere with the whole framework of their lives that their reaction is decisive, and their real loyalties become clear and plain. They love the life of sin more than the life of God.

This reaction is often just as true in the life of the believer. Unfruitfulness in a believer's testimony can surely stem from a preoccupation with the cares of the world, the deceitfulness of riches and the lusts of other things, and we must keep short accounts with God on these matters if we would be bearing fruit for His glory. Conditions in the soul must be favourable if a harvest is to come; we must be as intent as any modern farmer to keep the thorns down, so that the precious seed may have unhindered growth and fructify in our lives.

30) 4:1-20

The "good ground" refers to those who "hear the word and receive it". The operative word is "receive", To receive the word is not only to acknowledge in our hearts its "rightness", and its authority, but also submit to that authority, and to allow its sharp cutting edge to do its gracious work in us, however painful it may be. Someone has well put this in the following words: "Christianity means a life which we expose our whole existence at every point to the cutting edge, the trenchant judgment, the drastic operation of God's Word to us in Christ, a Word which as "living" is incompatible with stagnation and death, and as "active" gets things done." This could never be a comfortable way to live, and' doubtless explains why there are so few candidates for discipleship. "Narrow is the way," said Jesus "that leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it". It is too costly a discovery for many. But it is also, costly though it be to live such a life, too costly by far not to live, when eternal issues, eternal destinies, and eternal rewards or loss are involved. He that hath ears to hear let him hear!

31) 4:10-21

We cannot pass from the parable of the sower without some comment on what are acknowledged to be very difficult verses. The words, based upon Isaiah 6: 9,10, seem at first sight to contradict the central purpose of the gospel as a revelation of God's love and grace to men, But this is not so; they enshrine a very important spiritual truth which we all have to reckon with. The fact is, these parables had a twofold purpose - to reveal truth to the disciples, and to conceal it from unbelievers, and this bears witness to the two-edged action of the living word of God as s saviour of life to some and of death to others. The reason why some did not understand was that they had already set their hearts against Christ and so refused God's light. This hardened their hearts and blinded them the more. There is a point at which men do understand the implications of His challenge, and say No to Him. That is the danger point; there blindness begins, Refusal of truth leads to withdrawal of truth. (Paul expounds this frightening truth very fully in the second half of Romans 1). Men thus shut themselves out from the possibility of conversion and forgiveness. Refusal to "know" the things that belong to their peace leads in the end to their "being hid" from their eyes (Luke 19:42). Well might Jesus say to His disciples, "Take heed how ye hear"!

32) 4:21-25

The picture now changes and receiving the word of God is next likened to a candle or lamp being lit. The point of course about a lamp being lit is that it should give light to others. As one of the old divines put it: "The responsibility of every Christian is first to be enlightened and then to shine," What we receive, we must pass on to others. One can see the significance of this in relation to the attitude of the Jews as a whole to the extending of the privileges of the covenant to those outside and indeed to that of the early Church in its slowness to realise that the Gentiles were to be fellow-heirs with them in the blessings of the gospel. One could well imagine Paul quoting this word of the Lord to those who were suspicious of his labours among the Gentiles to whom he claimed to have been sent by Christ. The truth is, as Christ points out here, it is neither natural to hide the light - for if it is the true light, we owe it to all men to show it forth as something on which the world's salvation depends -nor possible, for it is a living thing, and must out if it remain alight at all. The light of grace that dawns in a man's soul is not something that he can control; it controls him and shines through him.

33) 4:26-29

The parable of the seed growing secretly admits of several applications. It speaks of the growth and progress of the work of the Kingdom, and this may be taken with reference either to the over-all work or to that in the life of the individual. While it is true that we could take from this the idea of inevitable growth - as the life in the seed steadily asserts itself and pushes upwards against all resistance, so does the seed of the gospel and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it - but the real point of the parable is the gradual, and indeed imperceptible, growth. This is more significant in relation to the parable of the sower than we might at first realise, for not only does it stand in contrast to the striking and immediate growth of the seed that fell on stony ground (4:16, 17), but it also advises us against any false expectation of quick version is to be held suspect, for this is well attested in the New Testament itself. But conversion and spectacular success in the work of the gospel. We do not mean by this that the idea of sudden conversion is only the beginning of God's good work in the soul, and the continuing work, which is the building of character, gradual and imperceptible, and takes time. Nor is there any "short-cut" to its accomplishment. Taking the two parables together, we are instructed that he who would engage in the service of the Lord must be prepared both for obstacles and setbacks on the one hand, and to have much patience on the other, before he sees his heart's desire in harvest.

34) 4:30-34

The third parable, that of the mustard seed follows naturally upon the other two. Its message to those who are prepared both for the difficulties and disappointments and for the exercising of long patience in the work of God, is that the seed, after all, is a living thing, and, small and insignificant though it may seem, it has within itself the virtue and power to issue in a blessed and extensive fruitfulness. The point about the mustard seed is not the size of the tree that emerges, but the greatness of the contrast between the smallness of the seed and what issues from it. In this it illustrates the fundamental method of God's working in the gospel, which is summed up in Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 1 - "God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the mighty". This is seen in the first instance in the Incarnation. It is staggering and almost ludicrous to realise that God's answer to the vastness of the world's need, its tragedy, its darkness and contradictions is a Babe. Small wonder the Bible speaks of the weakness of God! But the weakness of God is stronger than men, and the Babe of Bethlehem is the seed cast into the soil of this pitiless world which grows into the great power which breaks down empires and leads men into captivity to the obedience of Christ.

35) 4:30-34

We pause at the mustard seed a little longer to ponder the principle mentioned in yesterday's reading. For it is demonstrated even more decisively in Christ's atoning death, He Himself spoke of that death as the falling of a corn of wheat into the ground to die, and here we have the supreme evidence of the weakness of God, He was crucified in weakness But that Cross, the object of shame and reproach and contempt to the world - foolishness to the Greek, stumbling-block to the Jews - is the real throne of the world. Christ reigns from the Tree and the Word of the Cross is the power of God.

The same principle is seen also in the method which the Lord commissioned His disciples to use in the spreading of the gospel - preaching The word of preaching is, like the mustard seed, the smallest and most significant of contributions towards an answer to the world's need, despised and rejected of men as irrelevant to the human situation, but the promise of God is sure concerning its outcome - "My Word shall not return unto Me void, but shall accomplish that which I please, and it shall prosper in the thing whereto I sent it" (Isa. 55:11). It has pleased God "by the foolishness of preaching to save". We should remember the parable of the mustard seed when we are tempted to discouragement in the work of - the Lord:

36) 4:35-41

This is perhaps one of the most fruitful of all devotional studies in our Lord's life. It is so obvious to apply it to the storms of life and to draw encouragement and help from it when we are passing through the waters, But although this is a legitimate application of the miracle, we should not forget that it is true only because something else is true - the fact of the lordship and kingship of Christ Here our Lord manifests His authority over nature, and surely no picture could more gloriously manifest His royal status, as He exercised control over the elements He created, rebuking them when they became disordered. The first lesson therefore of the story is that it was the credential of His lordship, and withal a token of what He will one day do on a cosmic scale when He returns to reign, when the whole creation, disordered and broken by the Fall will be delivered from the bondage or corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God. The same voice that quietened the disorder on the sea of Galilee will in the end cause the trees of the field to clap their hands and the desert blossom and flourish as the rose. It is because that is true that we can safely apply the message of the story to any other storms in human life.

37) 4:35-41

There is another lesson however in this story, which we should be careful not to miss. Christ rebuked the disciples for their lack of faith. The implication here is surely that the miracle was a concession to their weakness. He stilled the storm not because they were strong in faith, and as an answer to that faith, but because they were weak. They thought that everything was about to come to an end, the work of the kingdom, all that was dear to them, hence their distress and fear, But Jesus wanted to teach them that no storm can wreck the purposes of God when He is there in the midst. It is a great thing when storms are stilled, but it is still greater when they are not stilled and they become the means of teaching us deeper faith and trust in His grace. We should learn from this to be sure of ourselves before we ask Him to still some of the storms we encounter. What if He should want to teach us something in the storm, something we cannot learn without it? What if there should have been such a lesson for these disciples in the light of some of the storms they were to encounter in the Acts of the Apostles? In our (natural, hut not spiritual) concern for smooth and easy times do we not sometimes forget that God chooses His men in the furnace of affliction?

38) 5:1-20

There is a certain fitness in the fact that this moving story follows the account of the stilling of the storm, for here is a supreme example of our Lord's power to rebuke the raging tempests of the human heart and subdue them to His will, The man with the legion of devils presents one of the most heartbreaking pictures in the whole New Testament. Here is a man in torment, in a restless agony, dehumanized by the power of evil spirits. We have already indicated our conviction that demon-possession is a grim reality which cannot be explained away merely in terms of mental disorder (see notes on 1:23-28, Wednesday, 21st January), and we assume that the statements here are meant to be taken literally. It is certainly no accident, nor is it without significance, that it was during the ministry of Christ that the manifestation of this phenomenon was so marked and widespread. His presence seemed to act like a magnet upon them and draw them out into the open. Hence the cry here (7), "Torment me not". Nor is it otherwise today. If it is asked, "Where are such cases to be found today?" the simple answer is, "Where there is a living ministry where the gospel is preached in the power of the Spirit." Where He is exalted, and proclaimed as Saviour and Lord people with deep and agonising problems are sure to be drawn, as if by some invisible power, around that ministry, to be helped and healed and restored. This is the ultimate hopefulness of true gospel preaching. He who proclaims the apostolic word with unction from on high will not lack for hearers. The poor and needy, the weary and the heavy-laden, the bruised and the broken - it is they who recognize that their hour has come.

39) 5:1-20

The symptoms of demon possession are terribly evident in this story and serve as marks of identification for discerning present-day manifestations. The man was living in a lonely isolation, gripped by a restless agony "always, night and day". It is the disintegrating effect upon personality that is so marked; the alternation of the pronouns "I" and "We" "He" and "Them" show how his true personality had been "invaded" and "taken over" by the dark spirits, and "de-humanised", not in the sense of making him a beast so much as a devil. The terrifying reports of communist "brain-washing", with its depersonalising of human beings should make us realise how closely the dark and sinister forces at work in the world today resemble the Biblical pattern.

Christ's dealings with the man are significant in this respect. "What is thy name?", He asked. What our Lord was doing was to recall him to personality, to wholeness. One can almost see the "man" emerging between the outbursts of the demon. "My name is...." - and in the middle of the sentence the foreign personality "took over". But the demon was obliged to obey the voice of the Lord, and the man's healing was complete. His fellow-citizens found him "seated, and clothed, and in his right mind."

40) 5:1-20

One of the most striking things in this whole incident is the reaction of the townspeople to Christ after He had cast out the devils. In 17 we read, "They began to pray Him to depart out of their coasts.¹ There is no evidence to suppose that these people were especially depraved or irreligious; they may well have shared the common religious background of their time. But it is one thing to have a conventional religious background and upbringing, one thing always to have been religious in a vague, general, and comforting way, but quite another for the unseen and the powers of the world to come to break in suddenly upon their experience, confronting them in such a devastating way. It was much too uncomfortable, much too embarrassing for them. This is something that many are liable to experience when the living gospel comes to them. Hitherto they have always assumed, as a matter of course that they were on the side of "the good", but now, when it comes to them as an undeniable reality, they are no longer sure that they like it, it embarrasses them. They discover that they do not want this sort of power let loose in their lives. And so with uneasiness and fear they thrust away what could bring them unimagined peace and felicity. Such is the perversity of the human heart.

But Christ's patience is greater than we realise. His response to their rejection of Him was to send the healed man back among them. "Go home to thy friends and tell them how great things the Lord hath done for thee and hath had compassion on thee" (19). May we not hope that his witness brought a new heart and spirit to at least some of those who bade Jesus depart? And may this not encourage us in face of the oppositions we face in the work of the gospel to go back with renewed hope with the message of Christ's compassion?

41) 5:21-43

The stories of the woman with the issue of blood and Jairus' daughter are interlocked in the gospels like a diamond set in gold, and have a bearing on each other for this reason, although we must necessarily study them separately. One link, not quite obvious in Mark, but explicit in Luke, is that Jairus' daughter was twelve years old and the woman's illness had lasted for the same time. Jairus had had a home of happiness and joy while the poor woman had languished in sorrow and increasing weakness. The juxtaposition is significant. The Spirit is teaching us here that one half of the world does not know how the other half lives, and says, in effect, "When you are carefree and happy, when your cup is full and running over, spare a thought and say a prayer for those whose circumstances are very different". It is sadly true that those whose lives fall in pleasant places can be selfishly insensitive to others' needs, and heedless of their sorrows and woes, sometimes fatally so, from the spiritual point of view. We should not forget, in this connection, the story of Dives and Lazarus in Luke 16 - it was callousness and unthinking neglect that brought eternal loss upon the rich man. Jesus said, "Inasmuch as ye did it not unto the least of these my brethren, ye did it not unto Me".

42) 5:21-43

Here is a poor woman, in the depths of despair, sick and helpless, beyond the help of man, and at an end of herself. And she was gloriously healed by the Saviour. What a picture it presents to us! - the milling crowds, and the drawing power of the Saviour drawing this helpless, hapless figure to Himself for healing and restoration. How did it come about? The simple answer is, she heard of Jesus (27). These are words full of significance. Think of what has already taken place in the story - the man in the synagogue with an unclean spirit; Simon's wife's mother; the leper; the man sick of the palsy; Matthew; the man with the withered hand; the stilling of the storm; the man with the legion of devils - she had heard of Jesus in truth, and faith was born in her heart. She said, "If I may touch but His clothes, I shall be whole". Faith cometh by hearing! What a lesson this has to teach us! This is real Christian witness, to tell men of Jesus. It is not a question of pressing people to decisions they do not want to make, but of speaking well of the Saviour, magnifying His Name before them, This was the apostolic practice, as we see in Acts 10:36-44 - the life, death, resurrection of Christ was proclaimed, and forgiveness through His Name -and while they yet spake, the Holy Ghost fell on all them that heard their words. This is one meaning also of our Lord's own words, "I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men unto Me." The world is waiting to hear of that glorious all-sufficient Name,

43) 5:21-43

There is much else in the woman's story that is of value for the Christian life. For one thing, her attitude shows how necessary an ingredient in true faith perseverance is, She was determined to get through to Jesus, weak and emaciated though she was. We should learn from this that it is not wanting the blessing of the Lord but wanting it eagerly enough not to be prepared to let anything stand in our way that is rewarded. Ask, seek, knock, said Jesus, indicating that it is the importunate desire that God fulfils, For another thing, we should note that faith can be real even though it is mixed with gross superstition. There was no power in Christ's garment to heal the woman. The virtue went out of Him to cure her ailment. Yet, superstitious though her faith was, there was reality in it, and He answered it. And one reason why Jesus drew her out into the open when she was healed was to correct her faith and ground it on the proper object, Himself. But this also brought her to open confession, and it was then that she received the seal of the Lord upon her life, as He said, "Daughter...go in peace".

Finally, we see Christ's sensitiveness to faith. A multitude thronged Him, curious, eager, interested, but she touched Him, and amidst the great crowd He discerned the difference. This should encourage us. We may be sure that, however insignificant we may sometimes feel among men, the real faith in our hearts will be seen, and rewarded, by our faithful Lord.

44) 5:21-43

Now we turn to Jairus. It is not difficult to realise how impatient, even resentful, he must have been at the interruption which delayed Christ when his daughter was at the point of death. Yet it was needful for him, to test his faith, to bring indeed real faith to birth in his heart. And faith was tested to the uttermost. It was one thing to believe Jesus could do something for her while she was dying, another when she was dead. There is a tremendous drama in 35, 36. It was the darkest hour in the man's life, and over against it, Christ gave the man a simple word, and called for faith. "Be not afraid, only believe." And Jairus was held and sustained by the bare word of Christ. And yet not entirely the bare word, for had he not witnessed the miracle of the woman's healing, and heard the word of power spoken to her, "Thy faith hath made thee whole". There seems almost to be a design in the very structure of the story at this point, for the news of the child's death (35) is enclosed, so to speak, between the two mighty statements of Christ, the one to the woman, sealing and ratifying her blessing, the other promising blessing to Jairus. Death could not hope to prove victorious in such surroundings. Nor did it. Christ gave it its marching orders:

45) 5:21-43

What is the precise significance of Christ's raising this little girl from the dead? It is more than a mere display of Divine power, it completes, so to speak, Mark's picture of Jesus as Lord of all. Nature, disease, demons, all alike have owned His sway, and now death the king of terrors bows before Him. His kingdom is at hand, it has touched this mortal life and the miracles of restoration of life are tokens - nothing more - that one day that Kingdom will come in fulness and there shall be no more death. The last enemy, and the final blasphemy against God's good creation, will be removed. (See note on 1:23-28, Jan. 19th). It is the "token-ness" of the miracle that we should particularly remember. There were other children that Jesus did not raise from the dead, and the three instances of restoration recorded in the Gospels - Jairus' daughter, the widow of Nain's son, and Lazarus - were temporary, in the sense that they must all have died eventually. They were not resurrections, only shadows of it, pointing forward to the great Day.

This aspect and interpretation of the miracles of Christ should help us to hold in true perspective the whole question of divine healing today. It is a mistake to think that healing should be widespread in the life of the Church, and to elevate it into a position of major and even primary importance is to distort the true Biblical emphasis. The time for healing is not yet - not yet.

46) 6:1-6

It is a sombre picture that meets us in this passage. In face of the mighty works recorded in the previous chapter, the testimony of the Saviour is rejected. In 3 we read, "They were offended at Him". For thirty years He had lived in Nazareth, His own country, without sin, living a perfect life, and yet now they refused to own Him. That is the blunt, stark fact that confronts us. What does this extraordinary thing teach? Just this. A living proclamation of the gospel will not necessarily make men open their hearts and become responsive to Christ. Rather it will sift the hearts of men, and the more powerful the message the more marked will be the opposition and resentment; to some a savour of life, to others a savour of death. The gospel is a divider of men.

We learn also from these verses that unbelief is a great deterrent to the work of God. Even Christ could do no mighty work there because of their unbelief. This is not an unfortunate failing, but a sin to be repented of. The Bible speaks of an evil heart of unbelief, and this indicates that it is a moral, not an intellectual problem. Men do not believe because they do not want to believe, since to believe involves a surrender which they are not prepared to make. To believe in Christ would cost them a revolution in their lives, their homes, their work, their families and their friends, and they cannot face this. The cost is too great.

47) **6:7-13**

The mission of the Twelve follows immediately upon the verses which record the unbelief of Nazareth. It was because of the unresponsiveness of the people that He sent out these men. Their unbelief was a challenge, and this is how the challenge was met. The parallel account in Matthew's Gospel (9:36-38) shows that their commission was also grounded in compassion of Christ. The people were as sheep not having a shepherd, and this drew Christ's compassion and prompted His sending them out. It is also significant that in this connection He said, "The harvest truly is plenteous, but the labourers are few", looking on, and marvelling at, their unbelief. It ought to be a distinct encouragement to those whose work and witness are in hard places to realise that that is precisely where Christ thinks of great harvests. We are reminded of Paul's experience in Corinth (Acts 18:10) when, in the midst of militant opposition to the gospel Christ appeared to him reassuring him "I have much people in this city".

Thus over against persistent unbelief there is set the compassion of Christ and the power of His Word in the preaching of His disciples. These are the primary realities in Christian work and we may always depend on them. Moreover, since this is so, Those that are sent out are instruments and expressions of His compassion and channels and vehicles of His power to men. This is how we ought to regard it when the Lord begins to establish a ministry of grace in our land. One of the hopeful signs of our time is that amid the moral and spiritual bankruptcy that we have lived through for so long God is raising up men to proclaim His Word, to expound the Scriptures, to establish a Biblical ministry. It is an evidence of the compassion of Christ and an earnest of His power to save,

48) 6:7-13

What is the significance of the instructions given in 8 ff? The keynote in them is simplicity and there we gather the intention. We are reminded of Paul's picture of the Christian as an athlete. The athlete in the race is characterised by two qualities: there is a sense of urgency about him and he is stripped of anything that might hinder him from attaining his final objective. These are the two notes that ring out in the Scriptures - urgency and simplicity. If we have a message to proclaim on which the world's salvation depends, then all must be subservient to this one grand aim of getting the message across, and anything that might prove an encumbrance to that message must be cast away. We must lay aside every weight. The apostles were characterised by the simplicity that is in Christ. And the Church has always been most effective in the world when she has been content to be simple in this sense. It is when many encumbrances have obscured her real purpose and task that she has lost ground and lost influence with men. Great movements of spiritual awakening have always been preceded by the reducing of the Church's message and methods to Biblical simplicities. Not otherwise can renewal come, either in the Church or in the life of the individual.

49) **6:14-29**

The story of Herod makes solemn reading, especially in the light of our Lord's warning in 11, for here is a man who refused the word of grace and hardened his heart against God. The circumstances recorded here are all the more striking when we remember that there was a time when Herod was gripped and challenged by the Baptist's ministry. John's fiery, searching word ploughed into Herod's soul and stirred and awakened his conscience. The measure of this disturbance may be seen in 20, which should be rendered, with the New English Bible, "He liked listening to him, although the listening left him greatly perplexed". This is so true to human psychology. People generally react in this contradictory way when confronted with the gospel, being pulled in two opposite directions.

But to be awakened is one thing, to be saved another, and Bunyan reminds us that there is a road to hell from the gates of heaven. The terrible warning that the story of Herod gives is that a crisis comes upon a man when he hears the Word of the Lord, and dependent upon his response he will either be drawn to God or be driven irrevocably from Him. Herod was disturbed, but not enough; the challenge of the world to come was offset by the appeal and allurements of sensual appetites. With such a divided heart it was natural for him to wish to compromise, and this he attempted to do by imprisoning John, to safeguard him from the venom of Herodias as much as anything else. He was unwilling to put him to death. But such a compromise is always doomed to fail, for sooner or later a situation is bound to arise which will force a decision. And this the passage records dramatically and tragically. In a drunken, sordid orgy, with mind befuddled and will paralysed, he found himself incapable of resisting the devilish stratagem of Herodias and Salome. Having prevaricated for so long, and halted between two opinions, he was at last confirmed in his criminal folly, and given over to a reprobate mind. He chose wrongly, fatally, and murdered the Lord's anointed. Sin, when it is finished, bringeth forth death!

50) **6:30-44**

Our Lord saw the spiritually hungry and seeking multitudes as sheep without a shepherd and His compassion went out to them. We should note the direction and the expression of that compassion - He taught them many things (34). There is a great significance in this - He taught them the things that belonged to their peace, and His word was the bread of life to their souls. There is a recognition here that a man's deepest need is to hear the word of God, and that in hearing it he may no longer remain lost and strayed, but be gathered into the fold and family of God.

It is a measure of our preoccupation with the spectacular in religion that we tend to regard the miracle of the feeding of the multitude as of greater significance than the teaching of Jesus at this point. But the fact is that greater miracles than the feeding of five thousand were taking place in the crowd, moral and spiritual transformations were being accomplished by His ministry among them, and the miracle in the natural realm was, we have good reason to believe from the conclusions of the scholars, a parable so to speak, of the work of grace, an illustration of His power in the spiritual realm to give eternal life to men. This is not to diminish the force of the miracle - only by making the false assumption that the physical is more important than the spiritual could anyone think so. "Which is greater", Christ might well ask, "the changing of five loaves and two small fishes into food for a multitude, to satisfy them for an hour or two, or the fashioning anew of human lives, re-created in the image of God by the power of the living Word to live eternally?" Well, which, to you, is really more important?

51) **6:45-56**

The significant point to notice in the story of Christ walking on the sea is that it was He Who sent the disciples into the storm, and it was obedience to His command that brought them into jeopardy. There are two kinds of storms in the Christian life, those of our own making that arise through our disobedience, and those which overtake us through having committed ourselves to obedience to His will. It is the latter that this story illustrates, and it has important teaching for us, that should encourage us when we find ourselves in such a situation. In the first place, we read that "He saw them toiling in rowing". The eyes of the Saviour are ever upon His own, and the night is never so dark, but His all-seeing eye can pierce the gloom. He sees! And it is no evidence of His lack of concern if He sometimes seems to remain inactive in face of our straits. He delayed His coming to the disciples until the fourth watch of the night not because He cared little about them but because He was intent upon testing their faith. We have already seen in the other "sea-story" (Mark 4:35-41) that He may well have wanted to teach them something in that storm. May it not be so here also? Was the delay meant to teach them endurance? "Why doesn't God do something?" we sometimes cry in our agonies. One of the great teachers of the Church has said of this in relation to suffering in general, "He is strong enough to resist pity until grief has done its gracious work in our lives". This is awesome to realise, bringing to our wondering minds and hearts a new dimension of understanding in the mysteries of life. And He comes at last (48) with His "Be of good cheer: it is I; he not afraid". He is never late, and no storm will ever keep Him from us. Wait for Him, tempest-tossed soul, even now His eyes are upon you!

52) **7:1-23**

This long passage has some very trenchant lessons to teach us in the warning given by our Lord against the dangers of Pharisaism. The Pharisees were originally a "protest" movement, brought into being in a time of barrenness as a reaction against the spiritual deadness of the time. This is something that repeatedly happens in the history of the Church. God does not leave Himself without a witness even in the darkest periods of declension. The Reformation was such a movement of protest, on a very much larger scale, of course, in the 16th century, as was Puritanism in the 17th, Methodism in the 18th, and the Brethren movement in the 19th. All these in turn separated themselves as a protest against worldliness and error in the Church and sought to recover the living Word. And so it was with Pharisaism. But the great danger is lest, once the initial spiritual impetus spends itself, the movement should slow down and stop, degenerating in the process into something far removed from the original inspiration. This happened in Pharisaism; it began as a movement, it ended as a disease, and we see its fearful ravages in the record of the Gospels. Deeply religious in its forms and ceremonial as it was, it received our Lord's severest and most unsparing strictures. We should learn from this that when inspiration is once lost even the noblest ideals will become corrupt and an offence to God. When the Spirit removes, a glory departs from human experience. Well might we pray with David, "Take not Thy Holy Spirit from me".

53) **7:1-23**

The words in 2, "They found fault" are significant, for they provide an apt commentary on the Pharisaic spirit. It is a gloomy, forbidding thing, cold and unattractive, critical and censorious to a degree. The particular characteristic here is their Fixing on trifles that do not matter, while neglecting the weightier matters of the law. Recent press reports of the absurd lengths to which certain sects are going in pursuit of an un-Biblical ideal of separation should warn us that this is not a dead issue but one that can still bring reproach on Living religion today. It is disturbing to think that an originally worthy desire to make plain the meaning of the Law of God (which was the real origin of the traditions of the elders) should in the end make the Word of God of none effect (13), and that outward conformity to that Law should eventually become so much more important than inner reality that seeming to be holy (to be seen of men) was to them more desirable and important than being holy. That this is an extremely dangerous state to be in goes without saying, how dangerous may be gauged by one of its results expressed in 11, 12 - inhumanity. This is the ultimate condemnation of Pharisaism, in any age - it dehumanises men. Paul lists this -"without natural affection" - in the terrible catalogue of sin in Romans 1 when he described what it means to be given over by God to a reprobate mind, A terrible, fearful disaster has taken place when a man's religion robs him of humanity. True salvation is the recovery of real humanity - nothing more or less than that, rightly understood; real holiness should draw men, not repel them. God save us from the dehumanising, repellent effects of false religion. Well might Jesus warn us, "Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees"!

54) 7:24-30

To pass from yesterday's reading to this story is like passing from the musty, dry-as-dust atmosphere of a museum into the cool clear air of a spring day. For here, in contrast to the other, is an evidence of real, living faith. There is a staining link between this story and what immediately precedes it. Christ has been speaking of the things that defile a man, revealing the uncleanness of the human heart; and now, as it were, he demonstrates His power to deal with that uncleanness, by casting out the unclean spirit from the daughter of the Syrophenician. We may learn therefore from this how and when that cleansing may be expected, and bestowed.

On the face of it, it is a strange incident. A woman comes in great importunity and need, and the Son of God seems to rebuff her. Her appeal for mercy is met with a seemingly chilling attitude (27) decidedly at variance with all that we know of our Lord's compassion towards those in need. The explanation is that our Lord was testing her faith. He wanted to see how real and genuine it was, indeed more, He was bringing real faith to the birth in her, awakening it, quickening it, challenging it to rise to the occasion, That is the thrilling part of this encounter. It was a challenge to faith, and very desperation stormed the heights of discouragement and rebuff and won the day. There was a real abandonment in her faith. She gave herself - and only this is faith real and prevailing. This is the lesson we are meant to learn - faith is born in desperation and it is there that answer comes.

55) 7:24-30

Yesterday's reading reveals a principle of wide application. It is relevant in the first place to conversion itself. There is a faith in Christ that does not save (see John 2:24) because though sincere it is not real, nor is it earnest enough- To want salvation, but not want it enough is a sadly common phenomenon among men. Too many are like the Rich Young Ruler who, desirous of eternal life though he was, went away sorrowful. He failed in earnestness, In the second place the principle applies to the battle for Christian character in the lives of believers. Character is not won overnight. We need not be surprised if our Rome is not built in a day. We need not be surprised if we do not seem to gain much day by day in advancement. God is strong enough to remain silent in face of pitiful cries till the disciplines of disappointment and long silences have done their gracious work in our souls. The same principle is particularly and supremely true in relation to Christian service, and it exemplifies the kind of faith that alone will prevail in the work of the gospel. The great question is: How eager are we for the answer to the prayers we make for spiritual awakening, and how earnestly do we want it? This story reminds us that it is the faith that stops at nothing, that will not take No for an answer that moves the hand of God, a faith that will press on through seeming repulses and setbacks, through gigantic frustrations and disappointments. Such is the faith God delights to honour in His service.

56) 7:31-37

We take two simple thoughts from this story of the healing of the deaf-mute. This is one of the two or three occasions when variations in the usual manner of healing took place, and although we are not told why Christ did what He did, surely it is not difficult to understand the sign language and its significance. The man was deaf, so that he would not have heard Jesus say, "Be healed". He was dumb and there was no possibility of his answering the question "Wilt thou be made whole?" But he had eyes and the signs appealed to his sense of sight, and he could feel, and Christ touched his ears and tongue with His hands, And in looking up to heaven He directed his attention to the source of all blessing and grace, thus creating in him an expectation of help and faith in God's power to give it.

Secondly, the word used to describe our Lord's sign is a very telling and revealing one. It literally means "to groan", and it draws back the veil, so to speak, from the very heart of the Eternal and reveals the yearning of the God of love for a broken and disordered creation. The burden of a world's woe was on Him then, all the deaf and dumb, all the lame and blind, all the weary and heavy-laden, and all the broken hearted. Nor is it too much to suggest that he was feeling also what is the ultimate cause of all disorder, the world's sin. In that sigh He was anticipating the burden and agony of His Cross. Such was the price He paid for the healing of mankind.

57) **8:1-21**

As we have already discussed the miracle of the feeding of the five thousand (ch.6) our concern is not with the similar miracle recorded here, but with the circumstance which followed it - the questioning of the Pharisees and the warnings uttered by our Lord. We read in 11 that the Pharisees came asking for a sign, and in 15 Jesus said to His disciples "beware of the leaven of the Pharisees". If we take these two statements together we shall see the significance of the passage. It is this: in spite of the wonderful teaching, of which men said, "Never man spake like this Man", in spite of His demonstration of His Lordship, over disease, devils, death, nature and the elements, in spite of the transformations He had wrought in the lives of men, the Pharisees remained unconvinced, blind to the fact that all these were signs of His Messiahship, because they did not want to believe. And the effect this had upon them was to harden them in their unbelief. The opposition of their hearts to the gospel acted as leaven within them until they were rendered incapable of faith. It is this that Jesus was warning His disciples against and it is a warning that is always relevant wherever the gospel is preached, for men can still by their wilful resistance to the gospel bring upon themselves slowly, gradually, imperceptibly, a paralysing inability to believe, They are trapped in a bondage of their own making, The Epistle to the Hebrews speaks of "an evil heart of unbelief" and one can see the force of such a description in the light of our Lord's solemn warning here. There is nothing so deadly, or finally damning, as unbelief.

58) **8:22-26**

There are several interesting peculiarities in this miracle that are highly instructive. In the first place it is said that Jesus led the blind man out of Bethsaida. Why should this be? Matthew records (11:21ff) our Lord's prediction of woe upon that town for its unbelief; it had been abandoned to judgment, and He would now neither do any mighty work there nor permit any further witness to be borne to Him there. This illustrates well the point of yesterday's reading. There came a point in Bethsaida's life when Christ withdrew His presence and His mercy from that place. Opportunity had knocked at that town and opportunity had been neglected. The leaven of unbelief wrought its inevitable doom.

Secondly, the fact that Jesus restored the man's sight gradually rather than instantaneously calls for comment. Unquestionably He could have done as He did with Bartimaeus, when restoration was immediate. His purpose here was surely to teach something. May there not have been a lesson for His disciples in what He did? He had just said to them, "Having eyes, see ye not?" (18) Was He showing them, as it were a picture of themselves? They could see, and yet how partial was their understanding of spiritual realities. Like the blind man, they "saw men as trees walking". In the spiritual life, even when conversion is immediate, spiritual understanding is often very gradual and fitful. We frequently catch only the blurred outlines of God's truth, and we need the continuing ministry of His Word to enable us to see clearly. Happy is the man whose eyes are fully open to the realities of the spiritual world!

59) **8:27-38**

This passage brings us to a great climax-point in the ministry of Christ, and the questions He asked His disciples were full of critical importance. Their significance is best understood in this way. There are two distinct stages in our Lord's ministry. Broadly speaking, up to this point, His concern was to manifest Himself as the promised Messiah, and all that happened thus far in the record pointed in this direction. The events at the beginning of His public ministry, His Baptism, anointing by the Spirit, announced Him, to those who had eyes to see, as the Lord's anointed, From that point onwards, the steady and consistent development of His claim through the miracles, wonders and signs which He performed was in the nature of a presentation of evidence which the disciples were at this crisis-point called upon to adjudge. "Whom say ye that I am?" And when Peter, spokesman of the disciple-band, confessed, "Thou art the Messiah", our Lord could then proceed to the second stage of His ministry, which was to teach them that "the Son of man must suffer" (31). In point of fact we do see a new and deeper note in Christ's teaching from this time onwards - it is as if the shadow of the Cross had come down upon the path of the disciple band. It was a note that they could not grasp or understand, as we see from Peter's reaction in 32, 33, and we are given in this a graphic illustration of what Jesus was seeking to convey to His disciples in the healing of the blind man- Here, surely is a case of "seeing men as trees walking", Peter could not "see" the point of the Cross, it was an offence, a stumbling block to him, as it is to all whose eyes have not been opened properly by the Spirit of God, A man's attitude to the Cross is the best indication of his spiritual state.

60) 8:27-38

We should not miss the implications of our Lord's words to His disciples following His rebuke of Peter in 33. Peter was in effect opting for discipleship without a Cross and Jesus makes it very clear that to own Him as Messiah and rightful Lord of their lives is to be, like Himself, "obedient unto death, even the death of the Cross" (34). To recognise Him thus as Lord and not bow the knee to Him is to place oneself under the power of the devil, as Peter did, and run the risk of loss, and sometimes eternal loss. Our Lord seems to suggest that it is the claims of the world (36) that compete with Him for the allegiance of men's souls and it is certainly true that many an unbeliever has been kept from the kingdom of God because of the attractions of the world, and many a believer from full consecration in a life of discipleship because they have secretly wanted an easier way than that expressed in 35. Ghandhi once said, "I am unable to put Christ on a solitary throne". That, briefly is the issue here. That is what discipleship involves, no less. If Jesus is not Lord of all, He is not Lord at all.

61) 9:1-13

This is one of the most mysterious and awe-inspiring scenes in the whole Bible, and a source of increasingly fruitful meditation. One simple way of gathering something of its message is to think of it as it affects and concerns in turn the various figures, Christ, Moses and Elijah, and the disciples.

First, and most important, it is a vision of Christ the King of glory. We have consistently interpreted Mark's Gospel as setting forth the authority, the Lordship, of Christ. Here, as it were, we see how truly Lord He is. All through the Gospel thus far His glory had been gleaming through in the mighty works He performed, and now it burst forth in its fulness upon the astonished gaze of the disciples. For a moment the veil was drawn aside that disguised Him and hid His glory from men. Speaking of this unforgettable experience much later, John said, "We beheld His glory"; and Peter, "We were eye-witnesses of His majesty". Nor is it without significance that this unveiling took place immediately following Peter's confession. It was God's seal and imprimatur on what he had said and seen in that moment of illumination, "Thou art the Christ" (8:29). It was as if God was intent upon honouring his faith, fitful and partial though it was. He is never slow to respond to real faith in His Son. This should be an encouragement to us to believe that even a faltering faith if real will be answered by a gracious God.

62) 9:1-13

This story has also something to say about the fellowship that exists between the Father and the Son. It is as if we are admitted into the sacred place to gaze upon unutterable beauties. For Christ wanted above all things to give pleasure to the Father by perfectly fulfilling His will. With Christ this was a burning, passionate desire, and on the Mount it became so intense, so burning, that it became incandescent, and blazed forth in glory, the body no longer able to contain it. What the disciples saw was holy fire, moral glory, breaking forth in a grand oblation to the Father of lights. What joy this must have been to the Father's heart as He said, "This is My beloved Son, in Whom I am well-pleased", G. Campbell Morgan comments characteristically that the lonely hillsides of Judea may often have witnessed such a blaze of glory and majesty as the Son held secret fellowship with the Father. Be this as it may, the disciples saw it then and the record is ours to meditate upon with growing wonder and awe.

63) 9:1-13

Moses and Elijah, the representatives of the Law and the Prophets, figure prominently in the scene. Luke tells us in his account that they spoke with Jesus "concerning His decease which He should accomplish at Jerusalem". The significance of this is that they were by their presence reminding Jesus that all who had died in the old economy not having received the promises were depending for their final salvation upon something He alone could accomplish. The Law and the Prophets had in fact constantly borne witness to this necessity - they had, to use Peter's words, testified beforehand the sufferings of Christ and the glory that should follow. In this sense they "anticipated" the Cross, that is to say, salvation was granted them on the strength of the death Jesus should die in the fulness of the time and they received it "on trust" against the future discharge of the debt by Christ. Viewed in this light it is clear that everything depended on Jesus dying this death, and this applies equally to the representatives of the new economy there present, Peter, James and John. Their title to heaven and glory was the atonement He was to make on the Cross. Furthermore, the Church triumphant and the Church militant will both equally share His glory. Of this the wonderful vision on Mt. Hermon is both pledge and foretaste.

64) 9:1-13

But what of the disciples? It is said in 2 that Jesus was transfigured before them, that is to say, the vision was for their benefit, and that in several ways. In the first place, it came to nerve them for the future. Christ had just spoken of the certainty of suffering for all who would be His disciples. The memory of His glory, and the share in it that was to be theirs, would nerve them to bear all that might come upon them. In the second place it was meant to teach them the way of discipleship. The Cross, not the glory, is the real centre of this scene, and Moses and Elijah in glory were in fact pointing to this as the way both for Christ and for His disciples. Not only so; the voice from the cloud said "Hear Him" and the last recorded word from His lips had been one of taking up the Cross. There is however, in the third place, a word of great encouragement to all who would follow Christ in the way of the Cross. Moses and Elijah referred to His death as an "exodus" (this is the Greek for "decease") - a way out. The life of the Cross is not a forbidding, cramping thing, laying impossible restrictions on all who take it up, but an emancipation, and a way to power. Even Jesus felt Himself straitened until He underwent the fiery baptism of His Cross (Luke 12:50). It was after His Cross that He could say, "All power is given unto Me," Nor is it different with those who follow Him. We die to live, we suffer to reign, and in weakness we are made strong.

65) 9:14-29

It would be difficult to find a more complete contrast than that between the previous passage and this. There it was -the majesty and grandeur of Christ in His glory, here it is the misery and tragedy of man. in a fallen world. Now the Holy Spirit intends to teach us in this, for the contrast really presents to us the story of the gospel in miniature. What in fact we see here is a Saviour resplendent in glory, shining and sparkling in splendour, clad in the royal robes of light, and He comes down - down from the heights, from His proper place into the world of woe, into the valley of demons, the place of dark shadows and terrifying enigmas, of broken hearts and tearful eyes, to the place where Satan had wrought such havoc in a poor helpless mortal. He came down - that is the gospel. As Paul says, "Ye know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich yet for your sakes He became poor, that ye through His poverty might be rich" (2 Cor 8:9); and "He was in the form of God and thought it not robbery to be equal with God, but made Himself of no reputation, and took upon Him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men; and being found in fashion as a man, He humbled Himself..." All this is beautifully symbolised in His coming down from the mount of Transfiguration into the demon-possessed valley below. Few things could illustrate more graphically the wonder and mystery of His Incarnation and supremely the fact that, in His Incarnation, He came down to where we were, to the place where help was needed. Thank God for such a gospel and for such a compassionate Saviour!

66) 9:14-29

The picture presented here is one repeated many times in the New Testament, that of human need, human anguish and desperation. It is also a picture of our world, where day by day we brush shoulders with men and women with just as great and urgent problems as this. What strikes us so forcibly is the inability of the disciples to help the man, "I spake to Thy disciples that they should cast him out: and they could not". (18) Is this a reflection of our situation too? An ineffective witness? An impotent disciple in face of men's crying needs?

Over against this the desperate father's attitude stands the more clearly. For he in fact succeeded where the disciples failed. He said to Jesus, "If Thou canst do anything, have compassion on us and help us", to which the Lord replied, "If thou canst believe..," throwing the onus of the boy's healing on to the father. The latter's reaction was very human, and deeply significant, "Lord I believe, help thou mine unbelief". The fact is, true faith and unbelief frequently stand together in the believer's heart. There is always a dark side in his life, where unbelief dwells and the whole battle of Christian life consists in keeping that dark side down and encouraging the true life of faith to grow. And this man in his desperation somehow managed to win the battle, and there is therefore a real sense in which it was his faith that was instrumental in casting the demon out.

67) 9:14-29

The disciples asked in 28, "Why could not we cast him out?", and we may safely deduce from what Jesus said to the man that it was a failure of faith, "If thou canst believe" was His word to the man, and this must surely have been applicable to them also. We find explicit confirmation of this in Matthew's account of the incident, where Jesus is recorded to have said to them, "Because of your unbelief" (17:20). The question that naturally arises is, How are we to come by the kind of faith that is effectual in such a situation? Our Lord's words in 29 provide the answer - by prayer and fasting. We must learn to pray. And only when prayer undergirds service will it ever be effectual. A great deal of Christian service today is abortive and impotent. It is sadly true that if a great deal of it were dropped tomorrow it would make very little difference to the welfare of the Kingdom of God. There is a great barrenness abroad, and the one simple reason is that there is so little true prayer for the work of God. It would pay us to stop many of our multifarious evangelical activities and get down to prayer, for the battle is in our own hearts against unbelief, and it must be fought there first. But not prayer alone; fasting also. We should get behind this to the abiding principle involved. It is not merely doing without food, but the adoption of the principle of self-denial as the basis of Christian living. On the Mount of Transfiguration Christ turned His back upon glory and came down. That is fasting in the truest sense of the term, and it was this that gave His word such power in healing the boy. Prayer by itself will not suffice without this; indeed, such is the deceitfulness of the human heart, it is sometimes made a substitute for the discipline of daily crucifixion, and it is this that exposes much of the pious insincerities of evangelical life. Nothing that by-passes the Cross, be it prayer or any other spiritual exercise will carry the seal and blessing of God.

68) 9:30-37

From this point onwards, our Lord's teaching to His disciples consists mainly of the new emphasis on the cost of discipleship, and the theme in the remaining verses of the chapter is that of taking up the cross. This is a phrase that has been considerably misunderstood. Taking up the cross does not mean the experience of passing through some great misfortune or personal tragedy. No-one denies that such trials, which come from time to time and are laid permanently on some, are painful and grievous to bear, but to say of them "That is a heavy cross for him to bear" is to use the phrase very differently from the Scriptural use of it. This is not what Christ meant by it, as a little reflection will make very plain. For all disciples are to take up the cross, but not all disciples necessarily pass through special tragedy or sorrow. Not only so, many who do pass through trials have never walked the way of discipleship.

The real meaning of the phrase is very different, and has to do with sin and our attitude to it. It means dying to sin. It means to allow the cross to make its mark upon every aspect of our life, and only thus can we be true disciples. It is to be crucified with Christ, it is to adopt a certain attitude to sin as the constant and abiding principle of one's life. And that may have very little to do with outward misfortune and the like, for it is essentially an inward reality.

69) 9:30-37

One sees only too clearly what a needed challenge this was for the disciples. It is startling to realise that in spite of our Lord's words to them, which were surely calculated to elevate their minds and hearts to the great centralities of His Cross and sufferings, they had been wrangling with one another all along the road through Galilee as to who should be greatest among them. In face of His approaching Passion they were occupied with their own vaunting ambitions and worldly values, jockeying for position, in the disciple band. This is the real setting of cross-bearing; it is here that the sharp cutting edge of the Cross has to slash at every evidence of self and sin in the lives of those who follow Christ. The unholy spirit of ambition that was rampant among them, giving rise to sullen jealousy and bitterness, had to be purged before the real purpose of the Lord with their lives could be fulfilled. In the previous passage, Jesus upbraided the disciples for their unbelief. But how could a true and living faith flourish in hearts riddled with ambition and pride and jealousy? This is the point of the purging, and no man who refuses that discipline can hope to be His disciple. The axe of the Cross must be laid at the root of every forbidden and unhallowed thing in our hearts if we would at last bear fruit for the Kingdom. In the Christian life, says Jesus, the way up is down (35) and uses the un-self-conscious lowliness and utter dependence of a little child to illustrate the principle He enunciates. To become as little children means to "unlearn" our sinful, self-centred ways, to die to them, and be born anew into a deferent order of existence where the first is last, and the last first, and the greatest is servant of all. Such is the force of our Lord's words.

70) 9:38-41

That there is a terrific challenge in the above words is plain, and it might be said that it presents a very narrow view of the Christian life. Well the Christian life is a narrow life. Christ said, "Narrow is the way that leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it". But there is narrowness and narrowness. The true stringency of Christian discipleship has a paradox in it - it leads to spaciousness in the spiritual life. It was because the lives of the disciples were not narrow with the narrowness of the Cross that they could not heal the demon-possessed boy. The true narrowness leads to fruitfulness and breadth. Death always leads to life in the spiritual realm.

But there is a wrong narrowness which Christ will not own, and it is evidenced in these verses in which He rebuked the spirit of bigotry in His disciples. There is always a danger in Christian work of such an attitude developing. At the heart of every schismatic body there is a spirit of this nature that refuses others the right to serve the Lord because they do not subscribe to their own particular shibboleths. But no man may presume to confine working for Christ to any particular group to the exclusion of others, and the spirit that has all too often prompted men to withdraw from a church to form an exclusive little body because of some real or imagined defect in the larger is not the Spirit of Christ but another and darker one. The discipline of the Cross applied to a man's deepest heart and spirit will never lead him into this false and unattractive bigotry but rather enlarge his heart and spiritual discernment and enable him to see things in their proper perspective. This is just as true of another spirit closely allied to it, the critical spirit, which has slain its tens of thousands among evangelical believers and done immense harm to the cause of the Kingdom. A critical spirit is the sign of an uncrucified heart and the man who indulges it and gives it reign has refused the discipline of the Cross that alone can make him Christ-like.

71) 9:42-47

In these verses our Lord applies the principle of the Cross to all that offends in spiritual life, and urges the need of giving up anything that stands between us and the salvation of our souls. The words are of wide application and set in true perspective the "negative" element in Christian experience. Sometimes well-meaning preachers go to considerable lengths to assure their hearers that Christianity is not a religion of "don't do this or that", but something entirely positive, but this is in fact to falsify our Lord's own teaching. There are many things to be cut off or plucked out and it is a dangerous over-simplification of the gospel message to conceal this undoubted fact. Christ never hid the cost of discipleship from his hearers. The truth is, the positive, dynamic aspects of true Christian experience come on the other side of the Cross, after the hand or foot has been cut off or the eye plucked out, and it is impossible to know them without this drastic soul-surgery. Just as when an offending growth that is hindering and endangering health is cut from the body, new life comes, so it is in spiritual life. The way to life is always through death in Christian experience.

72) 9:48-49

These verses are difficult but the meaning seems to be as follows: The "for" in 49 links the words with what has gone before. That means that we have here the reason why it is better to enter life maimed.... We may read it thus, "Everyone shall be salted with fire just as every sacrifice is salted with salt". The reference is to the O.T. sacrifices (cf Lev.2:13) There, the salt was added to the sacrifice preparatory to its being devoted to God and indeed to make it acceptable to God, for salt was a symbol of purification and preservation. The "fire" referred to here is like salt added to the sacrifice, and it speaks of the discipline of the Cross to which Jesus has already referred, and this "fire" must touch every part of the disciple's life, purifying and cleansing it, checking corruption in order to make it a "living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God" which is our reasonable service. The "salt" or the "fire" is the application of the principle of the Cross, that which renders it sometimes necessary for a hand or foot to be cut off, or an eye plucked out when they hinder discipleship and consecration of life.

This in turn illuminates 50. When we are "salted" (in the sense of 49) we become "salt" in the world. Our duty is to act as a preservative in society, and the whole metaphor speaks of effective Christian service. Just as salt is useless when it loses its distinctive powers, so also when Christians are not "salted" by the fire of the Cross their witness is ineffective. "Why could we not cast him out?" asked the disciples. "Because ye have not been salted with fire", replies Christ.

The last word, "Have salt in your selves and have peace one with another" refers to the spirit of dissension and disputing within the disciple band. The answer to such disunity is the salt or fire of the Cross. Not otherwise can the peace of God reign in the fellowship of believers.

73) 10:1-12

These verses bring us to a part of Christ's teaching which has great topical relevance for modern society. The subject of marriage - and divorce - urgently needs to be understood in the light of basic Scriptural principles.

There are three introductory points to note. The discussion arose out of a question posed by the Pharisees in order to trap Christ. There were two conflicting schools of thought among the Jewish rabbis in their interpretation of the Mosaic Law concerning divorce (See Deut.24), the liberal school willing to grant divorce even on comparatively trivial grounds, the conservative school allowing it only on the grounds of unchastity. The Pharisees' question was aimed at forcing Jesus to take sides, thus causing controversy. Secondly, we note that in answering them He spoke more about the institution of marriage than about divorce. This is significant. A true understanding of marriage as an institution ordained by God will do much to clarify the issues on the question of divorce and indicate what ought to be the proper attitude to it. In the third place it is important to realise that our Lord did not pronounce any new teaching on the subject, but referred the Pharisees to the Scriptures. The Scriptures are our only rule of faith and life, and therefore they are sufficient for our guidance and instruction. We may say quite categorically since this is so, that every problem or breakdown in marriage, or in any other sphere of human relations will be found to involve the transgression or violation of a Biblical principle. To live by the Word of God is the healthiest and safest way of living!

74) 10:1-12

What then is the teaching to which Jesus refers? There are several points to note in the primary institution of marriage at the beginning of creation. In the first place, marriage is clearly the gift of God to man. God gave Adam his wife. Since this is so, we should recognize that it is something which He may withhold if He pleases, and is not a right to which we are necessarily entitled. Secondly, Adam was given his wife as a help-meet for him, that is to say, someone to help him to realise and fulfil his spiritual destiny. The word "help-meet" literally means "someone over against him", a "confronter", to remind him of God, and of his spiritual destiny and so draw him nearer to God. Not only should this be taken as a basis for relationships of this nature - "Is it helping me spiritually, or hindering me?" -and as a deterrent to unwise associations with people who are incompatible not only in spiritual but also in emotional and intellectual senses, but it should also define the purpose and the limitations of marriage for us all. It is not, and was not meant to be, an end in itself, but a means to an end, a help towards that end, namely deeper and fuller fellowship and communion with God. This is why Christ taught that there would be no marriage in heaven, for there it will be superfluous - no help will be needed there to bring us closer to God, for we shall see His face. This has one extremely important practical consequence. Far too many young people set marriage before them as the chief end of their lives, the summit of all happiness and fulfilment. But the hunger for fulfilment in the human heart is deeper than can be met by marriage, for it is a hunger for God Himself, and can be met only by Him, and that not here, but hereafter. God has set eternity in our hearts, and no merely human relationship, however exalted or intimate, can ever satisfy the Divine hunger that wells up within us. To understand this would go a long way to save many fine young people from cynical disillusionment and lasting regret.

75) 10:1-12

The rule as to divorce given in Deuteronomy by Moses was introduced because of the hardness and cruelty of men's hearts, and was therefore meant to be a protection for a wife who might otherwise be subjected to unmerciful ill-treatment, It was in fact a provision of mercy, not a convenient way of becoming free from an irksome bond Christ's teaching however in 11, 12, is quite inexorable, He does not admit the possibility of re-marriage after divorce. Separation is permitted in Scripture (cf 1 Cor 7:10,11) and indeed may on occasion be necessary as the only solution in a domestic tragedy, but re-marriage is another matter, and, in the eyes of Christ constitutes adultery, so long as the other partner is alive. The reason for this unflinching attitude is the permanence of the marriage bond in the sight of God. "Whom God hath joined together, let not man put asunder". It is a grievous and dangerous thing to attempt to disrupt something that Almighty God has sealed and ratified in heaven, as well as being in the highest degree unnatural.

This much is clear; our Lord leaves no kind of loophole in His teaching. For Him marriage is a permanent institution, in which there is the forging of an indissoluble bond, and the formation of a new thing, a "family unit", which is inviolable in God's sight, and in which the new relationship which is created takes precedence over every other consideration.

76) 10:13-16

It is significant that immediately following our Lord's teaching about marriage and divorce comes this word about young children, and it would seem as if the Holy Spirit were saying to us in relation to the tragic problems involved in marriage breakdown, "Remember the children". It is true in any department of life that no-one lives unto himself, and it is particularly true in those areas of life where relations are close and intimate, and supremely so in family life. Here, the repercussions can be truly devastating. Some of the most intractable problems in young people, and some of the most serious and tragic complications in young lives have their origins in a history of family dissension and discord, with the inevitable lack of care and love that these involve. It is not for nothing that the marriage service of our Church stresses that marriage is not to be entered upon lightly or unadvisedly, but thoughtfully, reverently, and in the fear of God.

77) 10:13-16

Our Lord's words in 14 are quoted in the service of Infant Baptism as a warrant for practising the rite. It has been questioned whether this is justified, especially since baptism is not even mentioned in the passage. But while this is true, the implications of Christ's words are very decisive and warrant our use of them.

The objection made against the baptism of infants is that baptism is a sacrament which requires faith as a prior condition of its being administered. "There must be confession of faith first before baptism, and since an infant cannot have conscious faith therefore it should not be baptized". Now this is simply one aspect of a larger question, namely, "Which comes first, faith or grace?" Can there be a blessing before faith, or without faith? It is in a consideration of this question that we find a true understanding of infant baptism, and the case for it.

We should note first, then, that the parents brought their children to the Lord for his blessing, and that presumably means that they believed on Him enough to want Him to bless their children, enough to believe that He could and would bless them. In the second place, notice the words used in 13 and 14. They "brought" the children: Jesus spoke of them as "coming" to Him. In other words, in being brought by their parents the children were regarded as having come themselves. That is, the faith of the parents in bringing them was counted to the children as faith on their own part: All this has an important bearing on the validity of infant baptism, as we shall see in tomorrow's note.

78) 10:13-16

We should note above all that it says in 16 that "He blessed them". Pause over the significance of these words. Is this simply a way of speaking, such as when we say in affection to someone, "Bless you!?" -an expression of good-will, and nothing more? Surely not. If the Scriptures say that Jesus blessed them, then we must recognize that something happened to them, these children were blessed, and lastingly. It is not too much to say that grace must have brooded over these children from that day and brought them in the fulness of time into the kingdom of God. But - and this is the whole issue - if this is so, it was without personal faith on their part. They were blessed before faith could possibly dawn. Indeed it was because they were blessed that faith could at last dawn in them. That is the true Biblical order, grace first, then faith, and if this be so, then Infant Baptism is established as valid, and as being founded on a truly Biblical principle, for the sacrament as administered to children is a standing witness to the priority of grace in the soul's salvation. God does not wait for faith on our part before He blesses us; He did not wait for faith before He sent His Son into the world to die for our sins. It was before we were even born that the work of redemption was completed. In that sense God blessed us before we were on the face of the earth, let alone before we had faith. These are the issues to which Infant Baptism bears witness. Rightly understood, it is thoroughly Biblical and a glorious and blessed - and effectual - means of grace.

79) 10:17-31

On any interpretation the story of the rich young ruler is a classic, but it needs to be taken in its context for its full significance to be appreciated. Our Lord has been teaching His disciples about the Cross, and here is a man who, so to speak, offers himself for discipleship. It is as if the Spirit were saying, "Here is an illustration showing how the question of discipleship works in a concrete situation" This is the real point of the story; the ruler refused the challenge of discipleship.

There is much, for all that, in the story itself that calls for comment. We are reminded, for one thing, of how much a man may have in life and yet miss its whole meaning. There must have been few earthly doors to which his wealth and position did not give him the key. We are prompted to remark that the present-day preoccupation with things material may not wholly be greed and avarice. Deeper still is the craving for security and peace of mind - that is at the root of much of our modern lust for possessions. But Jesus teaches that a man's life consisteth not in the abundance of the things which he possesses. The rich young ruler may well have been the unconscious victim of the same fallacy which besets so many moderns. And he came to Christ conscious of an inner lack in his soul. It was an admission that material possessions could never meet the deepest needs within him.

80) 10:17-31

Jesus said to the ruler, "Why callest thou Me good?" There is more in this question than at first meets the eye. For those who have eyes to see, it is really an assertion of His Deity. In effect He was saying to him, "Do you realise that it is God the Son Who speaks to you and to Whom you come?" Either He is God or He is not good, for only God is good. If only he had seen that it was God, the Fount of life, that was speaking, "I am eternal life, man; follow Me. That alone will meet your need." Such was the challenge that met the ruler in his hour of destiny. But he was blind to the implications of the encounter, and when Jesus uncovered the secret idol in his life he was shattered by the inexorable demand made upon him in a way he would not have been if he had recognized his Divine Challenger to be the Source and Giver of life itself, And so, having come to the very gates of heaven, he went away sorrowful. And Jesus let him go! That is the striking thing. There was no pleading with him. Christ is not prepared to lower the price of discipleship for anyone. "I would thou wert either cold or hot" - such are His words to the Laodicean Church in Rev. 3. With Him it must be all or nothing. There is no intermediate position. The "half-way house" so dear to the natural heart has no place in His scheme of things.

81) 10:32-45

The theme of this passage is still the challenge of the Cross in discipleship, and we might well speak of it as "the fellowship of His sufferings". The amazement and fear of the disciples are recorded in 32. What made them afraid? Certainly a new foreboding had descended upon them as the shadow of the Cross had cast its chill spell upon their spirits, but it may well have been due in part to the terrific challenge Jesus had been issuing to them and to having seen someone "go away" from Him rather than pay the price of discipleship. Is not that something to chill us with dread, the more so when we know our own hearts and how easily they become deceitful and false in the matter of following Christ? "As they followed they were afraid" (32). There is something very fundamental about these words, expressive of the shrinking we feel within us when we face the challenge of the Cross. Now this passage does two things: it emphasises the ruthless challenge of the Cross, but it also serves to take away the fear of the Cross by what it teaches and demonstrates. We have only to remember how the apostles gloried in the Cross after it happened, counting all things loss for the privilege of sharing His sufferings to realise that there must be something else in the Cross that we must look for that more than offsets the fear and the dread of its total challenge? This we deal with in tomorrow's reading,

82) 10:32-45

The misunderstanding of the disciples lay in the fact that they looked on the Cross as an unparalleled disaster facing Jesus. But Jesus was not a martyr; He did not lose His life; He gave it, His death was not something He suffered but something He accomplished, by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God, Thus He could speak of it as a cup He had to drink, and as a baptism He had to receive. Thus also He could speak of giving Himself as a ransom for many (45). The root meaning of "ransom" is "to set free by the payment of a price", That was what His Cross was - not a misfortune but a Divine offensive against the power of sin And above all, (34) that death was related to His resurrection. "The third day He shall rise again". Life, not death, is the goal of sacrifice. And so it is also for His disciples. The purpose of the "cup" and the "baptism" for them is that they might become fruitful. This is what they afterwards discovered to their amazement and joy, that death "worked" in them to bring forth life in others, and that the fellowship of His sufferings led to a glorious fruitfulness in His service. Small wonder that they gloried in the Cross of Christ! Have we learned this secret?

83) 10:46-52

The story of blind Bartimaeus may be interpreted in the light of the foregoing. It was because Jesus set His face steadfastly to go to Jerusalem that He had power and authority to say to him, "What wilt thou that I should do unto thee?" This is undoubtedly one of the lessons the Holy Spirit means us to learn by placing this story at the end of our Lord's teaching about the life of the Cross. It is as if He were saying to us, "Look at the Bartimaeus's of this world, look at all the needs and woes of men, look at the agonies and conflicts of humanity, and learn to glory in the Cross!" We recall the earlier story of the demon-possessed boy at the foot of the mount of Transfiguration and the powerlessness of the disciples to help him (see note on 9:14,). They could not cast the demon out because they had not as yet embraced the discipline of the Cross in their inward lives. That power had not been committed to them because their fiery baptism was still to come. Acts 3 is the real parallel in the other direction. Confronted with dire human need, Peter and John were able to deal authoritatively with the lame man's plight because on that occasion and by that time they had known their baptism of fire and learned the blessed secret of Christ's Cross. And today, for those who have ears to hear, the Holy Spirit is saying, "This is the way, walk ye in it".

84) **11:1-11**

The significance of our Lord's triumphal entry into Jerusalem should be plain to all who know the Messianic prophecy in Zech. 9:9, which speaks of the coming Messiah riding upon a colt, the foal of an ass. Jesus was enacting the prophecy, deliberately, with the set purpose of declaring Himself to be that promised King. In the light of our consistent interpretation of Mark's Gospel this comes as a climax. We have seen Jesus proclaiming His kingdom, we have seen Him presenting the credentials of kingship in the miracles He performed, and now the King offers Himself to His people - and, in spite of the enthusiastic welcome He received here, they refused His kingship. He came to His own, and His own received Him not. Their response was unmistakable - "We will not have this Man to reign over us" - and within a week the voices that echoed "Hosanna" were crying out "Crucify Him".

But we must not interpret this as the failure of His ministry, It is true that His people refused Him: it is true that they killed Him: But it is far truer to say that at this precise point He was carrying the war into the enemy's camp. He set in motion the train of events that led to His arrest and subsequent crucifixion, and He did so deliberately. This was the "hour" in which He chose to die. The Divine enterprise of redemption was being fulfilled. That is the drama of the situation. Has its tremendous force gripped you?

85) **11:11-22**

There is a connection between the previous verses and those that follow. We have said that the Jews rejected their rightful King; the still deeper truth now emerges in the story of the cursing of the fig-tree that the King rejected them. In 11 we read that Jesus "looked round about upon all things". The King was surveying His House, as it is His sovereign right to do, and it was as if His all-seeing eye pierced the whole sorry history of that rebellious people, saw all their sin and shame and failure - "and now the eventide was come", the eventide of the long day of grace that had been given to the chosen people, and with it, the time of reckoning. In this respect the purging of the Temple was a symbolic act of judgment upon the sins of the chosen people as the earlier act of cleansing at the outset of His ministry had been one of solemn and earnest warning. This is a solemn picture indeed, but that it is the correct interpretation will be seen from a more detailed study of the incident of the cursing of the fig-tree, to which we turn in tomorrow's reading. The thought that should occupy us today is that the Lord may often be instituting a time of reckoning and passing judgment when we are little conscious of it. Well might the apostle Peter urge us to "pass the time of our sojourning here in fear"!

86) **11:11-22**

Many find the cursing of the barren fig-tree difficult. It seems to them out of harmony with all that we know of Christ in the Gospels. The simple answer is that it constitutes a parable of judgment, and it requires to be understood in that light. Israel as a nation is symbolised by the fig-tree, and God is the Husbandman who expects fruit from the tree that He has so carefully tended. Now, in 13, we read that Jesus saw afar off a fig-tree having leaves. The words "afar off" are important. The whole district was a fig-growing area (Bethphage (1) means "house of figs"). Reference books tell us that fig trees put forth their fruit before their leaves. That is important to remember. Now it was not the season for figs as yet (13). But at that particular place there was one fig-tree that was well in advance of the others, and prematurely covered with foliage. It was so conspicuous that Christ could see it afar off. Now if it were so far advanced as to have leaves, it could only mean that it must be already bearing fruit, for fruit came first then leaves. The presence of leaves argued the existence of fruit and it was reasonable that anyone seeing the foliage should conclude that there was fruit there. But when Jesus came to it, He found that the tree was in fact untrue to its nature. It promised much, but belied its promise. It professed much, but performed nothing. It was barren. Now see the dramatic symbolism of the incident. He had come to another fig-tree, Israel, the tree which He Himself had planted and cared for with such love. The other nations were still in darkness - the time of fruit had not yet come for them. But here was one that had been "brought on" specially, full of light, knowledge, privilege and profession, and seeing these leaves, He had come expecting fruit, but when He looked around (11) He saw nothing but barrenness and fruitlessness, And in cursing the fig-tree, Jesus was pronouncing judgment upon barren, unbelieving Israel.

The lessons for us in this solemn story are surely obvious. What does the Lord see as He looks round His Church in Scotland, in face of all the privileges it has enjoyed? What does He see in our own congregational life? What does He see in the temple which is our body?

87) **11:11-22**

We must stay yet another day at this important passage, for there is much yet to be brought out. When Peter marvelled at the fulfilment of the curse on the barren fig-tree, Jesus replied, "Have faith in God". This is deeply significant in the light of what we have already seen, for it tells us that judgment had been pronounced on Israel because in face of all the grace and goodness of God she had made no real response of faith. This was why there was no fruit on the fig-tree that was Israel. They were fruitless because they were faithless. To them pertained the adoption and the glory and the covenants, and the giving of the law and the service of God and the promises (Rom, 9:4, 5). They were a uniquely privileged people. To them had finally been sent the Messiah. And there was no response of faith from them, in face of such grace and privilege. This was their condemnation, Now the frightening thing is that there was no lack of religion in Israel; there was an impressive superstructure of forms and ceremonies; there was the Temple and its sacrifices, there were the scribes and the Pharisees and the rulers of the synagogues - and yet, in spite of all, there was no living faith. The story of Nicodemus gives this fatal lack perhaps its acutest expression. He was devout, sincere, deeply religious but he could not see, he was blind to the real meaning of faith. The mystery of the new birth was beyond his understanding or experience. That is the ultimate tragedy of a religion that has lost its real meaning. Well might Jesus say to His disciples, "Have faith in God":

88) 11:23-33

We now see, in those verses, and by way of contrast, what should have been, and what could have been in the life of Israel. Jesus speaks here of the activity and reward of true faith, and the real outcome and fulfilment of His words are found in the history of the early Church. There are two points which we must note in particular. The first concerns the prayer of faith (24). "When ye pray, believe...and ye shall have." There is more in this than meets the eye. This is not a warrant for either presumption or credulity, as if "believing we have it" were a kind of magic charm for getting what we want. Jesus' words bring us to the very heart of the mystery of prayer. We have before noted that there are two "strands" of teaching in the Scriptures about prayer, one in which these words are included - which stresses "simple asking", and the other which emphasises the travail and agony of prayer. The paradox involved in this is explained by the realisation that the one is involved in the other. It is through the battle and agony of prayer that we win through to the place where we can ask simply and know that our prayers will be heard. This is significant in the passage here, in relation to what Jesus has been teaching His disciples about the cost of discipleship. It is when a man takes up the Cross, submitting himself to its costly disciplines that he learns the secret of prayer, for it is in the experience of the Cross that the agony and travail is experienced that bring him to the place of power and prevailing, It is crucified men that move the hand of God.

89) 11:23-33

The second point to be noted here is the idea of authority which runs through the passage. Not only did the Pharisees recognize a Divine authority in what Jesus said and did, He Himself invited His disciples to use that authority in. His Name- Speaking of prayer in relation to faith (23) He said "Whosoever shall say unto this mountain...." Say, not Pray! It is a word of authority, not of asking or beseeching, From which we may gather that there' [s a place of faith and power to which the believer can come, where he can command, and it is done. This is well illustrated by the story of the centurion in Luke 7:1-10 - "I say to this may Go, and he goeth". Under authority he had received authority from his superiors. And that is the great secret, and the heart of all Jesus has been teaching His disciples in these chapters, Obedience and submission to the will of God, in the discipline of self-denial and cross-bearing - that is the road to spiritual authority. There is a price to be paid -and what wrestling and battling is involved in paying it - for power with God. This ultimately is what we must understand by, and read into, the seemingly simple words of Jesus, "Have faith in God".

90) 12:1-12

Jesus had refused to tell the Pharisees by what authority He had acted (11:28-33) and yet in another sense He did answer them, by showing why He had done these things. That is the background of the parable of the vineyard and the husbandmen. For in this parable Jesus showed them their whole history in an unmistakeable way - in 12 it says "They knew that He had spoken the parable against them". The vineyard represents the kingdom of God. To the Jews, the husbandmen, was given the privilege of bringing in the Kingdom. But all along they failed, as we have already seen in chapter 11 and their failure ultimately involved the forfeiture of all their privileges and advantages, and the transfer of these to others. The entire history of Israel is therefore covered by the parable, from their coming to the Promised Land down to the time of John the Baptist and our Lord Himself. The servants in the parable represent the prophets from Samuel to John. One and all, their ministry was rejected, as Jesus made plain. From 6 onwards He then proceeded to prophesy, and revealed what was about to happen. It must have been a devastating experience for these wicked men to hear our Lord so calmly and deliberately reading their inmost thoughts and exposing their wicked designs - even then they were immersed in their plot to kill Him: In 9 the judicial sentence passed on the Jews and referred to already in chapter 11 is reiterated - they were to be rejected and the kingdom was to pass to others.

This, then, is Old Testament history in miniature and it gives some indication how we ought to approach the study of the Scriptures and understand their meaning.

91) 12:1.3-17

The rest of this chapter is taken up with the record of several encounters which Jesus had with His enemies, in which they tried to "catch Him in His words" (13). The first of these, about the tribute money, shows a devilish subtlety and ingenuity. It was a question that was seemingly impossible to answer without peril; an affirmative answer would have enabled the Pharisees to accuse Him as a traitor against the Jewish people; a negative answer would have enabled the Herodians to accuse Him before Pilate as one who taught rebellion against Rome. Either way, they considered Him trapped. But our Lord turned the tables on them with marvellous wisdom and consummate skill with His words: "Render unto Caesar the ' - things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's" (17). It is the complete mastery of an impossible and extremely dangerous situation that stands out here. The effortless, the ease, with which He confounds His enemies, demonstrates His Lordship in an unmistakable way. He didn't have to stretch Himself to win this victory. A brief pointed question about the coin and then this mighty word, stark in its simplicity and so elementally right, came crashing at them. We should learn from this to beware the temptation to pit our puny wits against the sovereign Lord of heaven and earth - we are no match for Him, and we do so at our cost.

92) 12:13-1.7

We might well entitle this episode "The Incomparable Christ" for it displays the truly admirable quality of His teaching and of His dealings with men. He was not content to parry His enemies' attack, but carried the war into their camp and laid before them a terrific challenge. They had said "Shall we give or not?" Jesus said "Render" There is a whole philosophy underlying that word. The fact is the Jews bitterly resented having to pay tribute to Rome, and would have evaded it if possible. But Christ indicates in this word that it was a duty. Tribute is not a matter of giving but of owing; it is a debt we owe to government. The teaching of Scripture is clear here - the powers that be are ordained of God, and it is a duty to be law-abiding.

But there is an even greater challenge here. "Whose is this image and superscription?" He asked, looking at the coin- The coin of the realm, bearing the image of the emperor was the symbol of the authority that was over them, and they therefore owed him homage. Now apply this to the other half of the statement. By implication our Lord turns to these lawless and rebellious men and says "Whose is the image you bear, what image and superscription is stamped upon your souls?" (See Genesis 1:26, 27). And having reminded them of their Divine origin He said: "Render unto God the things that are God's". There is no greater or more absolute challenge in the entire Scriptures than these tremendous words. If Caesar demands unquestioning submission as your rightful overlord, how much more does the living God demand the entire devotion and homage of your souls? This puts the challenge of the gospel in its proper setting. The claims of Christ are royal claims and it is the crown rights of the Redeemer that are involved in the preaching of the Word. The call to repentance and consecration is a call to give Him His rightful due, to render to Him what is His by sovereign right. And he who has: not realised that this is what the gospel means has misunderstood it altogether.

93) 12:18-27

The next encounter was with the Sadducees and what was said previously about the matchless supremacy of Christ is equally applicable here. He dealt with their questioning with effortless mastery.

The Sadducees were the rationalists of their day, believing in neither angel, spirit, nor resurrection. It is obvious therefore, that their intention here was to bring the whole doctrine of resurrection into contempt, and the manner in which they sought to do it - by means of a frivolous and irreverent concoction - reveals only too clearly what a deadly paralysis of the spirit had come upon them. In looking at these men we are looking at the end-product of rationalism and the denial of the supernatural. Well might Jesus warn, "Beware of the leaven of the Sadducees," for it does something to a man, it finally kills everything real and noble and deep in his soul, leaving nothing but an empty shell. When you exclude the supernatural from your religion, you wake up one day to find you have no religion at all.

Our Lord's answer to them is full of significance. He penetrated to the root of their error in pointing out their ignorance of the Scriptures and of the power of God. It is not too much to say that these words are applicable to most of what is of final importance in life. The teaching of the Scriptures is our only rule of faith and life, for they are the one authoritative revelation from God of the things of the spirit. The words "It is written" are for Christ conclusive. The Scriptures bear witness to the reality of the resurrection. And that is sufficient.

94) 12:18-27

Referring to the supposedly impossible situation represented in the Sadducees' story, Jesus says they have no real conception of the power of God. Did they suppose that God would find that a difficulty? The God Who calls new worlds into being by the word of His power, would not be unduly perturbed by such a situation, for He is able to create an entirely new order of life and will do. That is the point of 25. Not that marriage, as such, is to be abolished so much as superseded. This need not disturb happily married people. The reason it sometimes does is that they look at it from the wrong point of view. Suppose marriage, at its sweetest and highest and best, were simply a pointer, a shadow, a slight token of something infinitely more grand and glorious, beyond all our imagining, and almost beyond belief, a relationship with God which is unspeakable in its intensity and splendour and rapture? A child will not be able to appreciate the wonder of marriage, however much one tries to describe it to him; pleasure for him is very much on the physical level at that time, and he prefers the tangible pleasures of sweets and ice-cream, to the intangible, and for him dubious, pleasures being described to him. But perhaps, one day, he will change, will he not, and appreciate the possibilities? And suppose, further up still, there was a new genus of pleasures and joys, the glory and wonder of which would quite overshadow and eclipse those of marriage? The trouble is, we are often far too easily pleased. We are content with shadows and tokens, when God is offering us infinities!

95) 12:28-34

The atmosphere surrounding the question put by the Scribe is rather different from that of the two previous encounters, for it was a real question, which involved some fundamental issues: It has sometimes been thought that our Lord's emphasis on the Law here and in the story of the rich young ruler (10:17) contradicts what is taught elsewhere in the New Testament about salvation by faith in Himself. But the contradiction is only an apparent one; the "connecting link" is found in Paul's words in Rom. 8:3, 4 "...that the righteousness of the law might be fulfilled in us", Viewed in the absolute, the commandments as the expression of the Divine will, and indeed the Divine character reveal the ultimate requirement of God for His creatures, and the gospel enables that requirement to be met. To say otherwise is to misunderstand the gospel altogether. In this sense, faith in Christ and obedience to the law converges, faith indeed is obedience, and salvation is nothing less than a return to a new obedience to God, just as sin is disobedience. The great, the final aim of the gospel is to bring men into obedience to the will of God.

But notice Christ's final word to the Scribe. The man knew these things; but to know them is not to be "in" the kingdom, but only to be "not far" from it. Light in the mind is not the same as life in the soul. To have the mind enlightened is the all-important preliminary, the next step is a moral surrender to what the mind has grasped and understood. On the day of Pentecost, Peter's hearers, when they grasped the significance of his words, said "what must we do?" That is the point at which men enter into the kingdom of God.

96) 12:35-44

The closing passage of this chapter continues the theme of the Lordship of Christ. Having dismissed His enemies' attempts to ensnare Him, He asks them a question which baffles them, and indeed exposes them. There is only one answer to our Lord's question, it is that David must have discerned, through the spirit of prophecy the Deity of His Seed to come, and called Him Lord. The real point about our Lord's warning about the Scribes (38-40) is that although they taught the people about the Messiah, they were not prepared to own Him as Lord of their lives, nor did they submit to the Lordship of His Word, They were hearers, and readers, but not doers, of the Word. And when the implications of the Word are refused, substitutes begin to appear in place of the inward conformity that Christ's Lordship demands; outward forms of religion - the long clothing, the salutation in the market place, the chief seats in the synagogues, the uppermost rooms at feasts, (38, 39) - soon take precedence, and in the end it becomes more important to appear holy than to be holy; and this is always accompanied by a moral declension (40).

In contrast with the scribes, the last few verses present us with the evidences of true worship. Here is a woman Who recognised that Lordship was a real and practical thing. This is the point of her offering all she had. For her it was a Lordship of life -all life and all things. If He is Lord of all, He is Lord of our substance also. Our giving should be a sacramental sign that we belong to Jesus Christ and have bowed the knee to Him, Well, does it?

97) 13:1-37

The occasion of Christ's teaching here was a comment made by a disciple about the magnificence of the Temple. Christ prophesied that it would be overthrown and destroyed, and His disciples asked Him when this would be. It took place in fact in A.D.70, when Jerusalem was sacked by the Roman armies, and this must be regarded as the immediate subject of the prophecy. But, later on in the chapter, it becomes clear that another, and greater, crisis is in our Lord's view - His own Second Coming - and the two overlap in the chapter, and sometimes it is not easy to distinguish them. Indeed, there are some statements made that are common to both events. How can this be? Simply that there are deep spiritual principles underlying all human history. The great crisis-points of history are all similar to one another, because, essentially, they are all expressions of the same thing. That is why we may not dismiss as fanatical error the claim that Christians have made in various ages about the appearance of anti-Christ. Nero was anti-Christ; Hitler was anti-Christ. These are true insights - they were not the anti-Christ, but only his servants - he himself will come at the last in all the terror of his blasphemous power. This is why "the abomination of desolation" in 14 can refer both to the "near" and the "far" fulfilment - to the events associated with the Roman siege and also to the darker shadows of the "end-time". This double type of interpretation must be grasped if true understanding of Biblical prophecy is to be possible.

98) 13:1-37

The warnings in 5-13 were spoken primarily to these first disciples, in relation to conditions leading up to A.D.70, but because of the spiritual principles underlying history, are applicable equally to disciples in any age. Three things are mentioned in particular - imposters in religion, wars and rumours of wars, pressure and persecution for the people of God. Now Jesus says it is not the sign of the end that these things should be (7), but simply part and parcel of the nature of sinful existence. We note in passing, that war and heresy often go together. It is generally in times of turmoil and conflict that heretical sects seem to flourish, as witness the resurgence of movements like Jehovah Witnesses, Christadelphians, Mormons and the like. It is the sense of crisis upon the people, and their conscious need for a sure word to help them, that gives such heresies their chance to deceive. Men's minds are receptive to spiritual influence at such a time.

The persecution mentioned in 9 reminds us that the role of the Christian Church in this age is one of suffering, and the gospel is to be preached in the midst of the travail. We do well to remember this. There are no ideal conditions for Christian work, and let no one think to wait for them before launching out in the Lord's Name! But in the midst of these pressures, our Lord gives three encouragements applicable to the early Church and fulfilled to them, and applicable to us also. They are these: (i) The gospel must be published among all nations. Nothing will stop its onward march. It is ordained of God that the work will go on. This is His promise and it cannot fail! (10). (ii) The Holy Ghost will be our helper. No crisis will find us unprepared or unsupported. As it was with the early Church, so it will be with us (11). (iii) Patient perseverance will result in final salvation (13). What an encouragement to hard-pressed believers! Claim the promises - today!

99) 13:1-37

The merging of the "near" and the "far" is seen particularly in 14-27. At first it is plain enough that it is the immediate fulfilment in A.D.70 that is indicated, but clearly 24 indicates something far more intense and devastating, cosmic disorder and disturbance, no less. The Biblical teaching that the fall of man involved the whole physical creation explains this. In the last days when evil men wax worse and worse, cosmic disorder will result. (This is not quite so fantastic to believe in the age of nuclear missiles and space flights as it was 50 years ago!) The general teaching of the passage is that while tribulation is likely to be a constant factor in the life of the Christian in any age, all the indications are that the tribulation will intensify enormously at the last, in this terrible way, culminating in the return of the Lord in glory.

No man, however, knows the day nor the hour of His return. All the more reason therefore, to watch and pray. And this, we may note, is the real challenge of prophecy - moral, not speculative. The force of the parable in 34 lies here - "to every man his work". This is "waiting time" and it is crucially important that we should not be wasting it, but using it in the service of the Lord, and fulfilling the function in His good and perfect will for which we were created and redeemed. God forbid that that day should come and find us neglectful of the work given us!

100) 13:1-37

The reference to the fig tree (28) gleams with light if we recall that in 11:13 we discovered that the fig tree is emblematic of Israel as a nation. The word "generation" in 31 has the meaning of "a race or family of people" and may legitimately be taken to refer to the Jews as a whole. This is, in fact, the extraordinary 'truth about the Jews - amid the disappearance of empires and dynasties they have persisted as a race, even when untold sufferings and persecutions have befallen them. And, according to Jesus, they will be there until the end. Why? Because God chose them as His peculiar people, and even when they refused their election, God did not let them go. Even in their rejection of Him they are made to bear witness to His purposes for them, albeit in a negative way. They are still God's "signposts" in world history, Look at Israel today! After nineteen centuries they have returned to Palestine as a nation. What is this but the budding of the fig tree? The "movements" of the Jews in history have always been fraught with significance, even from earliest times. Their coming into Canaan out of Egypt was the evidence of God's redemptive purposes beginning to be fulfilled, as was their return to Palestine from Babylon after the Exile - and both these foreshadowed the coming of Christ to Bethlehem, The coming of Jews from all over the world to Palestine at the Feast of Pentecost was associated with the coming of the Spirit And if "coming events cast their shadows before them" we may well see some deep significance in the return of the Jews to Palestine in our time - this time to foreshadow the great Second Advent of Christ in all His glory, and majesty, and power. Wherefore be ye also ready!

101) 14:1-9

Amidst the clouds of bitterness and hatred that surrounded our Lord at this time, this brief interlude must have been for Him a moment of supreme sweetness and consolation, for it was a sacrament of entire devotion on Mary's part, the outpouring of a loving heart. This is the importance of the story for us, for it brings us to the heart of everything in the Christian life. Where this devotion to Christ is lacking, all else is vain. There is no effective substitute for it. How glad the heart of Christ must have been at such an expression of love for Him. We have only to recall His later question to Peter - "Lovest thou me?" - to realise how much He desires a response of love from our hearts, answering to His own.

The indignation of the others (4) is very revealing, for it was a cover for the embarrassment they felt at her action. They were embarrassed because an abandonment of love shows up hearts that do not abandon themselves to Him. This in large measure explains how glad dedication and abandonment are often criticised or tolerantly smiled at, or frowned upon, by people who have never understood the real nature of discipleship, or, worse still, who once understood it and have since departed from it. Nothing condemns an unconsecrated or backslidden life so much as a wholehearted and unreserved love for Christ.

102) 14:10-11, 18-21, 43-45

The story of Judas Iscariot stands in the Scriptures as a dread warning about the awful possibilities and ultimate issues of sin. All the available evidence points to the fact that the tragedy of Judas was not a sudden unpremeditated disaster, but something which grew and developed gradually and imperceptibly over a period of time. As James says in his Epistle (1:13-15), "sin, when it is finished, bringeth forth death". But in the meantime, its slow, insidious growth, like a cancer, gradually undermines the soul, until the final crash comes. With Judas it developed over the three years during which he accompanied Jesus, and it was within the context of a life bright with promise that the hidden corruption took place, a life which heard Jesus speak as never man spake, and witnessed the works of power and grace performed by His mighty hand. The verdict of Scripture is that covetousness proved his undoing, and one sees, in this respect, our Lord's emphasis about the danger of riches, as personal warnings, almost, against the secret idolatry within him. Jesus saw its growth, even if he was unaware of it himself. Doubtless Judas didn't mean to let it go nearly as far as it did - no man does. But sin is deceitful, and invariably gets out of control in the long run, so that it cannot be contracted out of. The urgent lesson we are taught here is: Resist beginnings! Once the frontiers of the mind are crossed all may be lost. It was so with Judas Iscariot, and in the end he went out, and it was night.

103) 14:12-25

The association of the Lord's Supper with the Jewish Passover is highly instructive and significant, and throws much light on its meaning. Briefly, the meaning of the Passover is as follows: (i) It was a commemoration of Israel's great deliverance from Egypt; (ii) it spoke of the Covenant which God entered into with His people; (iii) it was, for Israel, a spiritual reality, the O.T. Sacrament of grace, and a shadow of things to come. Now, it was while eating of the one that Jesus established the other (22) -the elements of the Passover meal were used as symbols of His body and blood - and this fact should make it plain that He was saying in effect to His disciples in reference to the death He was about to die, "This is the truth about the Passover. It foreshadowed my death. It was God's "picture" or "illustration" of the meaning and purpose of the death I am to die". This means, that as the Passover signified and effected a shelter from the avenging angel, and deliverance from the bondage of Egypt - a redemption by blood and power - so Christ's death, symbolised by the bread and wine, signifies and effects a shelter from the wrath of God, and a deliverance from the bondage and tyranny of sin. And, as the Passover instituted the Old Covenant, so the Lord's Supper, and the death of which it speaks, inaugurates the New Covenant, long prophesied and waited for in the ages of the Old Testament. To "take" the cup, and the bread, by faith, is to receive the benefits of the New Covenant, and share in the fruits of Christ's passion and victory. There is much here for blessed meditation and solemn rejoicing!

104) 14:26-42

We leave the verses referring to Peter's denial until later, and think particularly of our Lord's agony in Gethsemane. It is clear that this was no ordinary experience of sorrow. There are mysteries here that are too profound for human minds to plumb. What can be the explanation of the sore amazement and heaviness in 33? It cannot be merely that He was shrinking from suffering which many of His followers have down the ages faced, not only without flinching, but also with calm joy. One key to the mystery lies in an understanding of the words "sore amazed and very heavy". They describe a cloud which had begun to come over our Saviour's spirit, G. Campbell Morgan interprets the latter phrase as meaning "away from home" and this penetratingly reveals the nature of that cloud as being one which made Him feel God-forsaken. It was in fact the beginning of the horror of great darkness that culminated in His Cross, in which God did turn away His holy face from Him Who became sin for us. It was not death, in other words, from which He was shrinking, but the death, death as the wages of sin, death that involved the outer darkness-The cup to which He referred was the cup of Divine wrath against sin, and this He finally drained to the bitter dregs. Nothing less than this is involved in His being called "a Man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief", Gethsemane and Calvary go together, and the one interprets the other. The garden scene was not only an anticipation of the Atonement, but also a participation in it, inasmuch as there He accepted in principle what He actually endured on the Cross.

105) 14:26-42

There is much more in the story of Gethsemane that we must note before passing on. It might be wondered why our Lord should have asked the Father to take away the cup, as if He was not sure that it was God's will, when it was for this that He had come into the world, but this is part of the "cloud" that had come upon Him, already obscuring the clarity of His spirit. His repeated return to the disciples in the midst of the agony is deeply moving. Why did He do this? He sought solace in His hour of woe from those whom He had called to be with Him. But in His time of need they failed Him. What pathos rings out in His words in 37! The words of Psalm 69:20 express this so fully - "I am full of heaviness: and I looked for some to take pity, but there was none; and for comforters, but I found none". And so in deep isolation, He fought the battle alone and entered into peace. That something decisive happened, that the conflict did not remain unresolved, is clear from His demeanour from this point onwards to His Cross. For a great calm seems to have possessed His soul, which none of the subsequent events associated with His trial and crucifixion seemed able to disturb. In acceptance of the Divine will for Him, even when it meant this nameless horror of darkness, He found rest and serenity, and victory. It has been suggested that considerable interval of time elapsed between the words "Sleep on now, and take your rest", and "It is enough, the hour is come" (42). Certainly the sense seems to demand it, and if this be so, we may picture our Lord sitting quietly watching over His sleeping disciples, waiting for His betrayer to come, waiting in quiet calm thinking thoughts of unutterable love for the world He was about to redeem. It is a picture that brings tears to the eyes, and feelings of wonder and awe, and humiliation and undying devotion, to our hearts!

106) 14:43-15:15

The trial of Jesus recorded in these verses has a significance all its own, and has an integral place in the understanding of the Atonement. It is clear that the trial was a twofold one, ecclesiastical and civil. First, Jesus was arraigned before the religious rulers and the charge against Him - a religious one - was blasphemy (61). Thus was His claim to be the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed, considered. Then He was also arraigned before the civil ruler, Pilate, but the charge levelled against Him there was not blasphemy but treason against Caesar. The reason for this is significant. The Jews desired the death of Jesus on religious grounds; but they had no power themselves, as a nation subject to Rome, to sentence anyone to death, and they realised it would be useless to prefer a charge of blasphemy against Him in the eyes of Rome, for to Rome that was a matter of indifference and not an indictable offence. So it had to be another charge, viz., treason against Caesar (15:2). It was His claim to be a King that they cunningly twisted to appear a treasonable offence and it was this that Pilate had to deal with -i.e. a political charge. Thus the twofold charge was religious and political - blasphemy and treason.

It is obvious that the trial was a sinful and shameful farce, without vestige of either justice or legality, It was hurried through in indecent haste; it was held at the wrong time; there was no attempt at hearing evidence; the Accused was not allowed to state a case. Everything about it that could possibly have been wrong was wrong. But it had to be a false and unjust trial, if they were to secure a conviction against Christ, the Sinless One. No true court of justice in the world could have had any option but to conclude there was no case against Him, The only way to secure a conviction against One of Whom it is said that "in Him was no sin" is to pervert justice,

107) 14:43-15:15

It is striking to realise that our Lord submitted to the indignity and injustice of this trial without protest. We cannot suppose He could not have out-argued them in pleading His case, But He did not. As a sheep before its shearers is dumb, so opened He not His mouth. The conclusion we are forced to is, that if He could have defended Himself but did not, He chose to be found guilty. Again, we see that in this great mystery He was not suffering defeat, but taking the initiative in some great work of His own planning.

But why trial at all? Would a death without a trial have been the same? - an assassination perhaps or a secret poisoning? No. It had to be just this kind of arraignment. There had to be a trial, and there had to be these particular charges against Him, For He was standing in for us, as our Substitute, in all He did, and this includes His trial. It also was for us, as part of the great substitutionary atonement He made for men. In the truest sense, it was our trial He endured - the trial of sinful man at the bar of God (See Rev, 20: 11-15), and the charges He bore - blasphemy and treason - were the charges against man as sinner, for sin is firstly blasphemy against God (See Genesis 3 -"Ye shall be as gods"), it is man's claim to be his own God; and secondly, it is revolt against the Divine authority, a treasonable attitude against the true and living God. This is why He was tried; this is why He was silent. It was an admission of guilt -not His own but ours!

108) 14:43-15:15

Three outstanding matters remain for discussion in this long passage, The first is Peter's denial (14:53-72), a sad, sad story. It was a terrible thing for him to do. After three years of constant companionship with Christ, with the teaching, the miracles, the personal love and care, and virtual leadership of the disciple band - this! It is easy to try to excuse. Peter's sin as the irrational impulse of a moment, but this will not do, for he did it three times. It was surely from a dark, black heart that this denial came. In craven, cowardly fashion, and because of the jeers of a servant maid, he denied his Lord. But do not let us confine this to an historical picture. Let us remember that every sin we commit proclaims to high heaven that we "know not the Man". Every sin we commit means that for that particular moment we have chosen to part company with the Saviour Whose Name we bear - at that particular we are finding it an embarrassment to know Him.

Nevertheless we recognise that this was a big crash, and big crashes do not come "out of the blue". Each one has a history. That particular situation merely provided the occasion of the fall; the reason for it may be seen at several points further back where it became evident that Peter had consistently refused the discipline of the Cross in his life. And the Cross is the only power that can deal with the innate treachery of the human heart. Peter had to learn the hard way!

109) 15:1-15

The story of Barabbas (15:7-15) unwittingly provides a perfect, and we may say, literal illustration of Christ's substitutionary work for us. He was an insurrectionist, a violent rebel leader who had once led a revolt against Rome, and was imprisoned for his crimes and was awaiting execution. It seems likely that already three crosses had been prepared by the authorities' one for each of the two thieves and one for Barabbas. At all events, Pilate's attempt to bargain with the crowd and the priests made it inevitable that either Barabbas or Jesus should be released. Barabbas knew, as the thief knew, that he deserved to die, but when Pilate's offer of clemency to one or the other was made and the crowd indicated their choice of Barabbas, then in a very literal sense Jesus took Barabbas' place and went to the cross prepared for the penalty of Barabbas' sins. Is it farfetched to imagine a rough figure standing on the edge of the crowd gathered at Calvary muttering to himself: "I cannot understand this I am released and He has taken my place. That is my cross He is hanging on, prepared for me, for my sins. It was His release I got; He should have been set free, but I was instead, and because of this He is dying in my place, for me," Yes, Barabbas, you stand in this story as a representative man - man the sinner - and Jesus takes your place.

110) 15:1-15

Another figure stands out in this story of the trial -Pontius Pilate, If ever a man was placed on the horns of a dilemma, he was. He saw through the treachery and duplicity of the Jews, he saw that this was indeed a unique Figure before him- He wanted to release Him, He would have given anything to be rid of this agonising choice that faced him - this was why he sent Him, as Luke records, to Herod, in the hope that the responsibility of dealing with Him might pass from his shoulders, But he could not rid himself of it - not even by "washing his hands" of the matter. In this Pilate also stands as a representative man. Indeed he is the pattern for all men, for this is every man's dilemma when faced with the gospel message and the inescapable fact of Christ. The question, what we are to do with Christ, is one that thrusts itself upon our hearts and wills, even when we desperately want to avoid it and shelve it, for, in this narrow, enclosed area of human decision only two attitudes are possible - for or against. There can be no neutrality. It is all or nothing, acceptance or rejection, loyalty or denial, submission or betrayal. Pilate wanted to release Him, but other considerations weighed more heavily with him - his position, his prospects in the government service, - and admiration and respect, sympathy and fellow-feeling, were not great enough to outweigh these considerations, And so he made his fateful decision and delivered Jesus to be crucified. And down the ages echo the words: "What shall it profit a man if he gain the whole world and lose his own soul?"

11) 15:16-32

One almost hesitates to make comment here, for the place where we tread is holy ground, And yet we must needs try to grasp something of the significance of our Lord' atoning sufferings, remembering that, so far as the apostolic teaching is concerned, it is the interpretation of them that constitutes the gospel. Today we think particularly of the mocking words of the onlookers in 29-32. "Himself He cannot save" - this phrase has a deeper significance than is at first evident, or than they knew. The truth is He could have come down! Even then the legions of angels were at His command. But He would not come down. He chose not to, because He was fulfilling the Father's plan and purpose for Him. This is the meaning of Paul's great word in Phil 2:8 - "He was obedient unto death", His death was an act of obedience to the Father's will, and it was an act undertaken voluntarily in conformity to the Divine purpose of redemption, In the last analysis it was not the cruel nails driven by the Roman legionaries, but obedience to the will of God that kept Him on the Cross during these hours of agony. In the words "The Son of Man must suffer", that "must" is one of Divine necessity, not human ordination. It was "by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God" that He was taken and slain. And "by the obedience of One" many are made righteous (Rom 5:19).

112) 15:33-39

In our studies on Gethsemane we pointed out the distinction between death as we know it and death as Jesus endured it. Here we see it supremely. The death that He tasted was death in all its horror as the wages of sin. Anyone reading this story with an unprejudiced eye can easily see it was no ordinary death. Everything about it was unusual, and above all the supernatural darkness that came down (33) and the terrible cry that came forth from it, "My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?" In that extremity of horror He tasted death for every man (Heb 2:9), drinking the bitter cup to the dregs for our sakes, It was a scene of judgment, and a holy God turned away His face from His Son, when He bore in His body the sins of the world. Sin separates -that is the teaching of the Scripture, and when the Son of God was made sin for us, He bore the consequences of sin too and endured the separation from God that it entailed. The darkness itself was symbolic of the blackness of darkness that is separation from God, and the nameless horrors of eternal loss were all crowded into these hours on the Cross, Few words could express this more movingly or truthfully than these in the hymn "The Ninety and Nine".

But none of the ransomed ever knew
How deep were the waters crossed,
Nor how dark was the night that the
 Lord passed through,
Ere He found His sheep that was lost.

113) 15:40-47

The final movement of this awesome chapter described the burial of our Lord. There is a great tenderness about it, as broken-hearted love tended the broken and tortured body of the crucified Saviour. Music lovers will recall the inexpressibly moving words of the final chorus of Bach's St. Matthew Passion - "In tears of grief, dear Lord, we leave Thee". We have often thought that it was an unfortunate lapse of theology that Bach should end his great masterpiece on this note, when, in fact, our Lord's death was not the end of the story, Resurrection followed and made the story a gospel. But Bach certainly captures the pathos and the tender, loving grief that breathes through these verses, and surely interprets the feelings of those who ministered to Him in that dark hour.

We do not know whether Joseph of Arimathea had previously declared his allegiance to Christ or not, but certainly his "experience" of the Cross drew him out into the open as a confessed disciple, (as was the case also with Nicodemus, see John 19:39), and we should not miss the significance of the fact that these, along with others like the centurion (39) and the dying thief, (and, dare we surmise, Barabbas?) were the first fruits of His passion. Had He not said "I, if I be lifted up from the earth will draw all men unto Me"? Even thus early we see the drawing power of the Cross doing its gracious work in men's lives!

114) 16:1-8

"He is risen!" (6) This is the glorious reality that made the gospel into a gospel, into a message of hope and power and salvation. Everything, literally everything was changed for the disciples by His rising again, The Resurrection was, and is, the great motivating and energising power of true Christian experience.

What then is its significance? Look at it this way. Jesus was raised from the dead. This is what constitutes the gospel. But Lazarus was also raised from the dead, as were Jairus' daughter and the widow of Nain's son, But their rising from the dead did not constitute a gospel. The difference between theirs and His is an absolute one; it is that the death they died was essentially different from the death Jesus died. For death overtook them as death overtakes us. They were the victims of death. But death did not overtake Jesus, He died because He chose to die. It would be far truer to say that Jesus overtook death -indeed, He invaded death, entered into enemy territory, penetrated far into the heart of the kingdom of darkness and grappled once for all with the king of terrors himself and laid him low, Death was the great enemy to be dealt with - the sacrament and ultimate expression of sin - and. how else could it be dealt with than by Jesus "entering into it" and destroying it from the inside? This is where Mark's presentation of Christ in his Gospel story as Lord of all is really seen in. its deepest significance. Christ, Lord of nature, disease, devils, angels and men - this Lord entered into death for our sakes, as our Champion!

How could death hold such a prey? "It was not possible that He should be holden of death" says Peter in Acts 2:24. But - and this is the point - this was something that needed to be demonstrated, and the Resurrection of Jesus demonstrates that in fact death did not hold Him. The Resurrection was necessary to prove that the victory had really been won, and that death, the great enemy, had really been vanquished.

115) 16:1-8

We have by no means exhausted the significance of the Resurrection, however, in the thought of Christ's victory over death. For the death of Christ was not only a conflict with death and the devil, it was an atoning sacrifice, He had offered Himself without spot to God. But how are we to know that that offering was acceptable to Him? Suppose it was not great enough for all sin? What if it were not sufficient to make complete atonement? And even if it were, how are we to know? Only God Himself could make this known, and He did so, emphatically and unmistakably in raising Jesus from the dead, The Resurrection is God's imprimatur upon. Christ's atoning sacrifice, it is God confirming that what Jesus accomplished on the Cross was a sufficient atonement for sin, and provides an entirely satisfactory basis on which He can forgive sin, for Christ's sake.

The implications of this are truly tremendous. It means that forgiveness of sins through His name could now be proclaimed, and this in fact became the gospel of the early Church (see Acts 10:36-43). It was not that His Resurrection was exalted at the expense of the death that He died, rather it confirmed and sealed the death, interpreted and illumined it as the thing of glory that it was, and established it as a gospel of grace and power, Rightly understood, the Scriptures never "fragmentize" the work of Christ - it is His incarnation, life, death, resurrection, ascension and glorification, that constitute the good news of God concerning His Son. And what God hath joined together, let not man put asunder

116) 16:1-8

An-outstanding example of the difference that the Resurrection makes is seen in 7. The angel said "Go tell His disciples and Peter...." It is impossible to overestimate what this must have meant to the desolate disciple. It not difficult to imagine the state of his heart from the moment the Lord turned and looked upon him in the Judgment Hall until the morning of the Resurrection. The dead weight of shame and horror at what he had done, and the terrible darkness upon his spirit at the realisation that he could have no opportunity to make amends, must have been a continuing agony for him, in addition to the natural sorrow and grief that he shared with the others It was a time of black despair for Simon Peter. But Oh! the difference this message made! "Go tell the disciples and Peter...!" A special message from beyond the grave to the broken-hearted Peter, about a love that reaches deeper than the depths of self-despair, a love that lifts, and restores, and reinstate that gives a new beginning to those who have failed! That is the meaning of the Resurrection. Is it any wonder that Peter was transformed?

117) 16:9-14

There is so much to say yet about the significance of the Resurrection! These verses take us from the doctrinal issues to the practical and experimental, and reveal one of the most wonderful realities in Christian life. What, in fact, had happened, was that He was back from the dead to be with them forever. He was there, in the midst, incontrovertibly so, blessedly so - not indeed quite as He had been before His death, but in a more significant way. His risen Presence and power were to be unseen, and this is the point of His appealing, disappearing from their sight, then reappearing again and again - as if to train them to realise His Presence with them, even when He was not visible to their eyes. In 12 the reference is surely to the walk to Emmaus recorded fully in Luke 24, and no story could more fitly illustrate the reality of the transforming friendship of Christ, when He made their hearts to burn as He talked with them by the way. For what He was to those two disciples on the Emmaus road, He undertakes to be to all who believe on Him. We are saved unto, and into, fellowship with a risen Lord, who undertakes never to leave us nor forsake us. "Lo, I am with you always", He says, "even unto the end of the world".

118) 16:15-20

The last half of the chapter is considerably condensed in form, but it has much of importance for us. In 19 our Lord's Ascension is mentioned and this completes the picture that Mark gives of our Lord's life and work. But what is the doctrinal significance of the Ascension? It will help us to a true understanding of it if we think of Christ in this respect as our great High Priest. There were three things in particular that the high priest did in Old Testament times, First, he offered sacrifice; he entered into "the holiest" to make atonement for the sins of the people, This Christ did, when He entered into heaven for us, to present the merits of His atoning sacrifice. In the second place, he made intercession for the people, and this our Lord does, appearing before God on our behalf, (Heb.9:24) as our great Advocate, and it is this that guarantees our uttermost salvation (Heb. 7:25), In this respect, the Ascension was not merely a going back to heaven, but an elevation to an official position, a position of power at God's right hand. In the third place, the high priest blessed the people (cf. the Aaronic blessing - "The Lord bless thee and keep thee...."). And so it is with Christ. As Paul says: "When He ascended up on high, He led captivity captive, and gave gifts unto men" (Eph.4:8). Such is His blessing, such was the gift of the Spirit at Pentecost. Thus, it is only on the basis of the Ascension that the gift of gifts - salvation - is offered to men. But it is thus offered, and offered from the throne of heaven and of God, and could come from no higher plane. That is what guarantees its authority and validity.

119) 16:15-20

Forgiveness and newness of life offered in His Name! Yes, but it is of the essence of an offer that you either receive or refuse it. There is the response of the heart to the message of the gospel, and this is what Mark refers to in the words "he that believeth" (16). The whole point of his account of Christ's life and work is that it demands a verdict, and we do not understand it aright if we have not realised that it is asking for a committal. When the gospel message grips the soul, when its greatness and wonder come home to the heart, it becomes indeed clear that this is the only adequate response we can make. As Paul puts it, "I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service" (Rom 12:1). This is faith and we should not allow ourselves the luxury of thinking that such a consecration belongs to a further experience. It is the initial response, and the true response, that real faith makes to the challenge and claim of the gospel, and we should realise that anything less falls short of what the New Testament means by saving faith. It is one of the evidences of our modern misinterpretation of the Scriptures that conversion and consecration should be so sharply distinguished and even contrasted in the experience of the believer. To hear the gospel, to be gripped by its message and mastered, and brought into subjection to Christ - this is faith, this is consecration, and the New Testament knows no other. Is your faith of this sort?

120) 16:15-20,

But there is one last word to be said. The gospel, we have seen, implies committal, but it also involves commission. Jesus says "Go ye into all the world and preach the gospel" (15). To "receive" Christ means and involves "going"; it means not only that sightless eyes are opened, but also that deafened ears are unstopped to hear the cry of the human soul as it cries out its need for Christ. We owe it, as forgiven sinner to tell forth the glad message of our salvation. We are debtors, and an obligation rests upon us. We dare not hold our peace. Our Lord's words here (15) do not in themselves constitute a missionary vocation, nor can any minister of the gospel press others to go forth. It is Christ's prerogative to send forth labourers into the harvest fields. The important thing here is to see the reality of the obligation and the debt, and to be prepared and willing to pay that debt and fulfil that obligation. That is involved in the commitment we make - to hold ourselves in readiness as the first priority in our lives. And, best of all, when we do His bidding, and go forth in His Name, we prove the reality of the words in 20 - "the Lord working with them, and confirming the word with signs following". Blessed privilege indeed to serve Him!