



Johannes Vermeer, c.1654 Christ in the House of Martha and Mary



The Relational Master

Exploring Jesus' relationships through
ten encounters in Mark's gospel

Michael Schluter

 **Jubilee Centre**
BIBLICAL THINKING FOR PUBLIC LIFE

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Preface

The Christian interest in relationships derives from our understanding of God as trinity, three persons in perfect relationship. One God. Our relational God does not just focus attention inwards towards the other persons of the trinity, but reaches out in love to all those made in His image, and indeed to the whole of creation.

To help humanity understand what a relational society would be like, God chose Israel, and gave the Torah as instruction, or guidance, as to how to organise society, recognising the fallenness of humanity, in such a way as to provide stable and sustainable relationships. But there was still a gap. As humans seeking to follow Yahweh, we still had nobody to act as a model relational person – no example of what a perfect relational life would be like.

So God sent us Jesus. Of course Jesus' main role was to die to save humankind from their sins, but his perfect life was an essential prerequisite for his death to achieve our salvation. So we can study his words, his actions, his attitudes and sometimes even his thoughts, as laid out for us in the New Testament, and see for ourselves what a perfect relational person is like, how he behaves, what he prioritises, how he loves. And although Jesus' relationship with God is necessarily unique, that is been perfectly 'one' with God the Father (John 17: 11), yet he still points us towards what our relationship as humans could and should be with God the Father.

The purpose of these bible studies is to help the reader explore these themes. Although written originally as part of my personal daily reflections, and without the relational perspective at the front of my mind, I hope they will throw light on how Jesus demonstrates for us what it means to love God and to love our neighbour perfectly.

In writing these outlines, I have borrowed unashamedly from a group of writers whose commentaries fell readily to hand in my study at home. These include commentaries by Calvin, Carson, Hendriksen, Matthew Henry, J C Ryle, Robinson, Wessell and N T Wright. A list of the editions of the books I consulted is in Appendix A. Although I have not referenced every thought of theirs in my explanatory notes to each bible study, for I lost touch with where some thought of theirs influenced mine, I owe each of these writers a debt of gratitude for their reflections on these passages. Any hint of originality in my perceptions may well be traceable back to something they wrote.

My prayer is that these bible study notes and questions may stimulate the reader to think more deeply about Jesus, and the way he provides a pattern of our relationships both with God and with other people.

Michael Schluter
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1. The Role of Faith in a Person's Relationship with God

Mark 2: 1-12

¹A few days later, when Jesus again entered Capernaum, the people heard that he had come home. ²So many gathered that there was no room left, not even outside the door, and he preached the word to them. ³Some men came, bringing to him a paralytic, carried by four of them. ⁴Since they could not get him to Jesus because of the crowd, they made an opening in the roof above Jesus and, after digging through it, lowered the mat the paralysed man was lying on. ⁵When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, 'Son, your sins are forgiven.' ⁶Now some teachers of the law were sitting there, thinking to themselves, ⁷'Why does this fellow talk like that? He's blaspheming! Who can forgive sins but God alone?' ⁸Immediately Jesus knew in his spirit that this was what they were thinking in their hearts, and he said to them, 'Why are you thinking these things? ⁹Which is easier: to say to the paralytic, "Your sins are forgiven," or to say, "Get up, take your mat and walk"? ¹⁰But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins ...' He said to the paralytic, ¹¹'I tell you, get up, take your mat and go home.' ¹²He got up, took his mat and walked out in full view of them all. This amazed everyone and they praised God, saying, 'We have never seen anything like this!'

The writer of the book of Hebrews makes an extraordinary statement, 'without faith it is impossible to please God' (Hebrews 11: 6). So what is faith? In the same chapter, the writer to the Hebrews defines it as 'being sure of what we hope for, and certain of what we cannot see' (v1).

In relational terms, faith develops as we get to know a person. As we interact with a person over a period of time, watch what they do and say, watch their consistency of behaviour (or lack of it), we learn to trust or distrust them – or in biblical language, we learn to 'have faith' in them. Usually, building trust or faith is a slow process, because it involves the deepening of a relationship with that person. And relationships take time to develop.

In regard to faith in God, the same principles apply. Our faith in him grows as we get to know him. You may wonder how you can get to know someone you have never met. We do it, of course, all the time at the level of our tax inspector (possibly), or our bank manager probably by what they write to us. Such relationships, we hope, remain relatively distant. But there are stories of close and even intimate relationships developing in situations where two people have not even met. In one case in South America, I heard of a missionary getting engaged to a prayer supporter after a long correspondence. They had never met, although I cannot rule out the

possibility that they had exchanged photos of each other!

In this incident in Mark's gospel, probably all the actors had seen or heard Jesus on a previous occasion. He was getting quite a reputation. Some had faith; others were sceptical. You could not come to a definite conclusion just by using your eyesight; Jesus looked like any other poor peasant. You could only reach a conclusion about his true identity by reflecting on what he said and did. It was a matter of assessing his words and actions. It is the same today as it was then.

We may also consider how Jesus was reflecting on his own ministry at this point.

It seems from chapter 1, that Jesus at this point in his ministry had decided to focus on preaching the good news as the part of his mission statement to concentrate on. So we find Jesus going round Galilee preaching that the Kingdom of God is near and calling on people to repent and believe the gospel (1:15). Then after the first bout of miracles in Capernaum, Jesus tells his disciples that he must move on, again so that he can *preach* (1:39). Indeed, he says that is why he has come (1:38). Here, back in Capernaum with his home full of people, we find him again settled into preaching (2:2). So how does Jesus respond when he is interrupted as this paralytic is lowered through the roof in front of

him? And what does the way he handled this interruption teach us about how Jesus viewed both his purpose and his mission statement? What can we learn from this about setting goals and handling interruptions in our work today?

We shall look at this passage in two sections. First we will consider how Jesus responds to the paralytic and his friends (vv1-5), and then how he responds to the scepticism of the Scribes who were watching (vv6-12). In the final section we will return to the questions I have just set to consider what we can learn for our work today from the way Jesus handled this interruption to his preaching.

How Jesus responds to faith (vv1-5)

So Jesus is back in Capernaum where probably it was some weeks earlier that he had healed those who had gathered in the evening outside Simon Peter's house. This time it is not a Sabbath, nor a synagogue, but we find Jesus preaching to a packed audience (v2). Those present include not just those wishing to be disciples, but the curious and also, as will become clear, the top theological brass from Jerusalem and around the country who had come to check Jesus out. The main point to note here is that there was a crush. Mark comments there was no room left, even *outside* the door (v2).

Into this situation come four men carrying a paralysed man. We may note in passing - in this age of gender debate - that this is a *male* initiative. We don't know whose idea it was, but it is a man who is carried, and he is carried by four men. Jesus has a very special concern for the status and welfare of *women*, as is often noted; he also responds here to an initiative taken by *men*. We may also note the extent of this paralytic's disability. He cannot reach Jesus on his own. He cannot reach Jesus with just 1 or 2 others to support him. He cannot walk at all and relies totally on his friends to carry him.

When the four men and the paralytic reach the house where Jesus is preaching, they seem to confront an insurmountable problem. There is no way to reach Jesus, or even to get near him. So the obvious decision was to turn round and go home. They could try and catch Jesus another day. Or they might have waited till the end of the preaching, although Jesus would not necessarily leave the house in the evening as Mark hints that the house was, for the time being at least, Jesus' home (v1, cf. Matthew 8:20). However, these men will not be put off. They are determined that their paralytic friend should come face to face with Jesus. Here was real faith: not just the belief that Jesus could and would do something to help an extremely disabled person but the determination that at all costs they should create the situation where such a healing could take place. And it is faith which drove them to find new

and creative ways to tackle apparently terminal difficulties in getting the attention of Jesus.

So these four friends take the paralytic onto the roof. Mark then describes exactly how they went about it, 'they made an opening in the roof above Jesus, and after digging through it, lowered the mat the paralytic was lying on (v4). The roof would have been flat - hard to do this in Britain in case you were thinking of trying! It would probably have consisted of beams with transverse rafters, overlaid with brushwood and tree branches on top of which would be poured a thick blanket of mud or clay mixed with chopped straw. It must have taken a little time to achieve a hole large enough. We may just hope that as this was Jesus' house, at least temporarily, the friends stayed around afterwards to help put it all back together again! Mark continues his narrative with the words, "when Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, 'Son, your sins are forgiven you'" (v5).

There are two surprising elements to verse 5. The first is that what Jesus says and does for the paralytic is a response not to the paralytic's faith but to his friends' faith. Mark is quite clear about it. He says "when Jesus saw *their* faith, he said to the paralytic....". We may assume the paralytic also had faith, for Jesus addresses him as 'Son'. He does not call people his children lightly, although there is at least one other example - this time of a very sick *woman* - whom Jesus addresses as 'daughter' (Mark 5:34). However, it is the faith of the friends, not primarily that of the paralytic, which Jesus is responding to here.

This raises the more general question of how far a person may derive advantage from the faith of others. There are clearly some examples in Scripture of where this is the case. As Calvin comments on this verse (v5), the faith of Abraham was an advantage to his posterity; and we might add the faith of the prophets was a potential advantage, if not an actual advantage, to all those in their generation. However, as Calvin argues, regarding adults who have no faith of their own, the faith of others can have no more than an indirect influence in promoting the eternal salvation of their souls. Our prayers for such people must have some influence, but it is not clear how much. However, the verse here should encourage us to continue earnestly in prayer for our friends who do not know Christ. There is an example here for Jesus to reach out and help someone on the basis of the mutual agreement in faith of a group of friends.

The second surprising element in verse 5 is that Jesus does not immediately heal the paralytic, which is presumably what the sick man and his friends wanted and hoped for, but promises something he had not asked for nor indicated he

wanted - forgiveness of sins. Jesus' statement appears to be completely 'off the wall' at this point. Why first tackle the man's sin? One view, held especially by those writing before this century, is that Jesus is dealing with the *cause* or *origin* of the man's paralysis before he deals with the symptoms. This rests on the assumption that we should see sickness generally as chastisement by God for our sins so that we should give priority in our prayers to seeking forgiveness of our sins before we ask for healing of our bodies. The difficulty of this view is that while there is clearly a link between sickness and sin in many cases (e.g. Psalm 103:3, Isaiah 33:24, Psalm 51), a connection cannot and should not always be sought. The book of Job is strong testimony to the dangers of trying to make this connection when none exists. So it is possible that the cause of the paralytic's condition could be traced back to his spiritual state, but the text gives us no explicit warrant for making such a connection.

The exercise of faith may lead us to take new and creative initiatives to overcome the obstacles we face to the achievement of our purpose

An alternative way of explaining Jesus' primary focus on the man's spiritual condition rather than his physical condition is that Jesus regarded this purely as a matter of priorities. It may be that for this individual his sins are a major cause of anxiety; he may well have been plagued by guilt. So the absolution Jesus gives may have been a special source of joy to the paralytic. But whether this is the case or not, Jesus is

sending a clear signal to all those present that he regards spiritual healing as being of greater significance than physical healing. At the same time Jesus is claiming the authority - that is both the right and the power - to heal not only the body but also the soul. Jesus is not speaking here *for* God, but *as* God.

We might ask ourselves two questions before moving on to the second half of this passage. Firstly, how much faith are we exercising in our own spiritual experience? Faith may be required in praying for the needs of family and friends, especially their spiritual needs, or it may be required to pursue a career, a project, a business venture. How do you respond when you run up against obstacles and delays? Is there the same determination and commitment to continue, to persevere? Paul speaks of his faith - his determination - in the context of enduring hardship

at the beginning of his second letter to the Corinthians. He writes,

'We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about the hardships we suffered in the province of Asia. We were under great pressure, far above our ability to endure, so that we despaired even of life... But this happened that we might rely not on ourselves but on God...' (2 Corinthians 1:8-9)

The exercise of faith may lead us to take new and creative initiatives to overcome the obstacles we face to the achievement of our purpose, as it did in the case of these four men carrying the paralytic, or it may lead us simply to 'hang in there' as in Paul's case. In either situation, it is the exercise of faith which is involved, and which God will reward, either in this age or in the next.

Secondly, do we have a clear focus on the spiritual dimension of life as the number one priority? Are we aware of the vastly greater importance of spiritual than physical needs? Would you be prepared to see Britain suffer economic ruin if it would help to bring about a revival? Would you be willing to see a friend get MS or Parkinson's if it was the only way to bring them to their spiritual senses? Would you be willing to be made redundant for several years if you knew it would deepen your faith? Of course, these are not - thank God - decisions we are asked to make. However, our response to them may help us assess where our priorities lie. And these may be precisely the options God has to face. We know that God often allows suffering so that it may turn us more deeply to God and strengthen our Christian character (James 1:2-4). So with a clear focus on the priority of our spiritual lives, of knowing God better, suffering takes on a different hue, and we can understand better why Jesus *first* addresses the paralytic's spiritual needs in this incident.

How Jesus Responds to Scepticism (vv6-12)

Let us return to Mark's record of what happened next. Verse 6 reads, 'Now some teachers of the law (scribes) were sitting there, thinking to themselves, 'Why does this fellow talk like that? He's blaspheming! Who can forgive sins but God alone?'. These scribes were amazed at Jesus' claim. And they were surely right in their doctrinal assessment. It is only God who can forgive sins. Remission of sins is indeed a divine prerogative. In the Old Testament it is God who claims to forgive (e.g. Exodus 34:6-7a, Psalm 103:12, Jeremiah 31:34). Because God made us and therefore He is the one to whom we owe a moral obligation, it is God who must forgive. So they

came to the right conclusion doctrinally; only God can forgive sins.

So far so good. But now the scribes came to a fork in the road in their thinking. Either Jesus is indeed God as he is implicitly claiming to be, or Jesus is blaspheming, in the sense that he unjustly claims the attributes and prerogatives of deity. Can we blame the scribes for choosing the latter option? Jesus looked like any other Jewish peasant of his day; he had no distinguishing physical characteristics to attract people to him (cf. Isaiah 53:2). It was his teaching, which they were listening to, and his miracles, which they were about to witness, but about which they must have heard, which should have raised questions in their minds. As Jesus' miracles were without precedent, unique (see v12), could Jesus' identity be unique as well?

Jesus knows what these scribes are thinking. Note that Mark says the scribes were thinking these things not in their minds but in their 'hearts' (v8). Theirs is not primarily an intellectual response to Jesus, but a response of the will and of the emotions. Elsewhere New Testament writers indicate that our minds are often, perhaps always, driven by our wills (e.g. Colossians 1:21). These teachers of the law decided in their hearts what they think about Jesus, probably determined by envy and the threat he represents to their privileged position in society, and then use their minds to rationalise the position they have adopted. Aldous Huxley admits to doing the same thing in the last century: as a student deciding he did not like Christian sexual ethics, he rationalised his position by arguing against the truth of Christianity. We all do it to a greater or lesser extent. Rare, though real, is the genuine intellectual doubt.

'Jesus knew in his spirit that this was what they were thinking' (v8). Notice again that Jesus' discernment was not an *intellectual* exercise but a *spiritual* process. He knew what they were thinking in or by his *Spirit*. God always knows what we are all thinking (Psalm 139). This itself is proof of his deity, so that in exposing to them their own thoughts they should have been willing to reconsider their assessment of his claims. But having discerned their thoughts rightly, Jesus does not leave it there. He does not check the confrontation but goes after them. 'Why are you thinking these things?', he says. Ask yourselves a question. What makes you so hostile to me? What's driving your hostility?

Next Jesus asks them a question which appears to have a double answer. The question is, "Which is easier: to say to the paralytic, 'Your sins are forgiven', or to say, 'Get up, take your mat and walk?' Well, which is it easier to say? These scribes are reasoning that it is easier for Jesus to say 'your

sins are forgiven' because no one is able to prove whether in heaven his sins have been forgiven. On the other hand, these scribes argue to themselves, if Jesus were to tell the man to get up and walk, and then nothing happened, everybody present would witness his embarrassment. However, Jesus knows that to heal a man physically is less demanding than to heal him spiritually; before *God* it is easier to say 'Get up and walk' than to say 'Your sins are forgiven'. For the scribes, fellow Jews are the key audience; for Jesus God is the key audience.

Jesus then proceeds to demonstrate that he is able to do what the scribes regard as the more difficult of the two alternatives – that is, to make this paralytic walk. And Jesus makes it clear that he is doing this miracle as a means of demonstrating that 'the Son of Man', as he calls himself, has 'authority on earth to forgive sins'. Jesus is coming as close as its possible to come to a claim to be the Jewish Messiah without saying it in so many words. The 'Son of Man' language comes from Daniel 7:13-14 which is a clear reference in Jewish apocalyptic literature to the Messiah. The passage, which the scribes will have known as one of the key Messianic prophecies, is worth quoting in full,

'In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all peoples, nations and man of every language worshipped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one which will never be destroyed.' (Daniel 7: 13-14).

Clearly from the passage this 'Son of Man' is not just a 'son of man' – a mere human being – but also has a supernatural role and supernatural power, for 'his kingdom is one which will never be destroyed'. He is given authority and sovereign power over all peoples and nations.

Jesus challenges the scribes with this vision of himself. Again, they must have been bewildered. How could this peasant possibly have such supernatural status and power? How could all peoples and nations worship him? And yet where does this incredible healing power come from, such healings as have never been seen on the earth

We need to learn to show similar faith in God our Father when confronted by events or situations not of our choosing

before (v12)? What do such miracles signify about the person doing them?

Jesus claims to have 'authority on earth to forgive sins' (v10). The word authority is significant. It picks up on the prophecy in Daniel as we have seen, for that prophecy speaks of the 'authority' given to the son of man. Also, we may note the difference in the use of word 'authority' and the word 'kingdom' in the gospels. The kingdom is used to refer to the rule of Jesus where that rule is acknowledged. Specifically, it refers to the community of those who acknowledge Jesus as Lord. The kingdom is primarily a community – the Church – in and through whom Jesus rules.

The word 'authority', in contrast, is used to affirm the lordship of Jesus over the universe. It refers to the fact that whether people acknowledge Jesus' rule over them or not, he is king now over them all. He is in some sense Lord of the whole world in a more direct way than God was king of the world in, say, the Old Testament psalms. This is a stronger statement than saying that God is providentially in control of the world, whether the Gentile nations know it or not. So the word 'authority', I believe, points towards the universal context in which the New Testament sets Christ's death and his rule. And indeed, here in verse 10 Jesus is claiming authority to forgive sins not just among God's people the Jews but 'on earth', that is throughout human society across the world.

So to finish the story. Jesus tells the paralytic to 'get up, take up your mat and go home' (v11). The man does exactly that. He did not just get off his bed but showed that instantly he had enough strength to lift it and carry it off. That moment must have been mind-bending! And I cannot help thinking of his friends on the roof watching. What did they think and feel at that moment? Their faith vindicated! How they must have celebrated. The 'glory' of the Son of Man, referred to in Daniel's vision, has been 'put on the table' for people to see and reflect on. No wonder the crowd was "amazed and praised God", saying, "we have never seen anything like this" (v12).

Final Thoughts

Returning now to where we started our study of these verses, let us consider again this incident from Jesus' perspective – from the perspective of an unexpected and unlooked for interruption to his preaching session in what seems to have been, for the time being at least, his own home.

Although his preaching is interrupted, we can see how Jesus uses the interruption to pursue his overarching goal in at least three ways. Remember that his primary goal was to establish the kingdom of God in human society, and that his 'mission

statement' (*how* he would achieve the goal) included recruiting individuals to become members of his kingdom, revealing his identity so that friend and foe alike could understand who he was and the purpose of his coming, and training a team of future leaders for the key kingdom institution – the church.

We can see Jesus here use the interruption firstly to meet the spiritual needs of the paralytic, and so recruit an individual to become a member of the kingdom. Perhaps the man was already a believer, as Jesus calls him 'Son' in which case the assurance of forgiveness may have served to deepen and strengthen the man's faith. At the same time his action may have served to recruit the paralytics four friends into the kingdom – into believing in Jesus – as Jesus responds to their faith. Secondly, Jesus uses the occasion to train his disciples by clearly demonstrating the priority of spiritual over material needs as he says to the paralytic 'Your sins be forgiven you' *before* he tackles his paralysis. Thirdly, Jesus uses the opportunity of the scribes' scepticism to challenge them, and everyone else present, to consider his true identity through both his claim to have the authority on earth to forgive sins, his reference to being the fulfilment of a key Messianic prophecy, and his ability to heal a severely paralysed man instantly and totally – in a way never seen on earth before.

Jesus adapts to the changed situation he faces rather than ploughing on with his prearranged programme. He has sufficient confidence in the Providence, the beneficent rule of God, to believe that 'all things work together for good' and therefore to seek the opportunity presented by the change in circumstances. So Jesus responds to the situation, moves with it, teaches from it, and attacks his enemies from the platform that it creates.

There is surely a lesson here for us. We need to learn to show similar faith in God our Father when confronted by events or situations not of our choosing, and learn to show similar flexibility in handling them. We need to learn to see interruptions not as nuisance but as God-given opportunities. We need to learn that we do not have to create every opening for ourselves but to recognise those windows of opportunity which God gives us, often in the most unexpected ways and at the most unexpected times. And we need to ask God for the wisdom and insight to handle what may at first appear simply as problems in such a way that, looking back at the situation, we and others may be amazed and praise God saying, 'we have never seen anything like this'.

Questions for Discussion

1. Jesus' primary goal at this stage in his ministry seems to have been to preach (see v2, and 1: 15, 21, 38). How did he cope with this interruption in his work programme? How do we cope when God allows interruptions in our plans? (vv1-2).
2. What options did the four friends have when they found such a crowd outside (and inside) Jesus' house? What factors do you think made them decide to take 'the roof option'? (vv3-4).
3. What can we learn from what Jesus says, and to whom he says it, when the paralysed man lands at his feet? Why do you think Jesus does not immediately heal him?
4. 'When Jesus saw their faith ...' (v5). Does God always respond to the faith of a third party in bringing about healing in body or salvation of heart?
5. In the light of the story so far, how would you describe what 'faith in Jesus' means?
6. In verses 6 and 7, do you think the question posed by the religious teachers was reasonable? What did they see as the implications of what Jesus had said to the paralytic in verse 5?
7. Jesus challenges the religious leaders as to whether physical or spiritual healing is 'easier' to bring about. He is perhaps also challenging them as to which they think is most important. Which is most important in our perceptions, and which is easiest to bring about?
8. Why should the religious leaders have recognised who Jesus really was? What prevented them from recognising him? Do the same factors operate today?
9. What is Jesus setting out to prove about his relationship with God by doing this miracle? (vv8-11).
10. This miracle must have been 'mind-bending'. No wonder Mark records their comments, 'We have never seen anything like this' (v12). Why doesn't everyone in the audience instantly 'have faith in Jesus' and become a believer when they see such an extraordinary miracle? What does this tell us about why or how people have faith?

2. How Jesus develops his relationships with his disciples through a crisis

Mark 4: 35-41

³⁵That day when evening came, he said to his disciples, "Let us go over the other side." ³⁶Leaving the crowd behind, they took him along, just as he was, in the boat. There were also other boats with him. ³⁷A furious squall came up, and the waves broke over the boat, so that it was nearly swamped. ³⁸Jesus was in the stern, sleeping on a cushion. The disciples woke him and said to him, "Teacher, don't you care if we drown?"

³⁹He got up, rebuked the wind and said to the waves, "Quiet! Be still!" Then the wind died down and it was completely calm.

⁴⁰He said to his disciples, "Why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith?"

⁴¹They were terrified and asked each other, "Who is this? Even the wind and the waves obey him!"

Training is a prominent theme in both Old and New Testaments. The main theme is of God training and teaching his children, as a parent trains a child. The writer of Hebrews refers to this training in terms of 'discipline' when he refers to a passage in Proverbs, and urges us to be encouraged as we are referred to there as 'sons'. But discipline, he points out, is never *pleasant*:

'My son, do not make light of the Lord's discipline and do not lose heart when he rebukes you because the Lord disciplines those he loves and he punishes everyone he accepts as a son' (Hebrews 12: 5-6, Proverbs 3: 11-12)

God's discipline, God's training on us, is often painful, but it is also essential. It is never without a purpose. God wants us to be conformed to the image of his Son (Romans 8:29) and that requires that we undergo a period of change, like a sculptor knocking off the edges of the stone to make the stone conform to the image of the soldier-hero which is to be a national monument. So God has to knock away much of our natural disposition if we are to be conformed to the image of his Son.

Perhaps you are conscious even today that God is 'working on you' in one area of your life or another. It may be in your relationships at home, or in your attitude to money as you have to decide about an expensive purchase, or in your trust in God's providential care as you face a crisis at work. You

may think to yourself that if God was going to train you, he might have chosen a better moment - not just after you had found out that your elderly mother had cancer, for example. But no time is ever convenient for such training. God may often choose a time when we feel we are at our busiest or at our lowest. To take us to the end of our tether, to take us to the outer limits of our own capacity to cope, God may often have to heap up one problem on another, or send us into a crisis situation when we are already exhausted on some other count. The writers of the psalms are often men or women who have reached the limit of their own capacity to cope (e.g. Psalm 46, 55).

There is one other aspect of God's way of training of us which is different from the approach of human organisations: that is, that you are never too old to undergo training. I was privileged to have close contact with Sir Norman Anderson, a leading lawyer and theologian, in the last few years of his life. He lost all three of his children in years gone by, and at the age of 82 lost the close companionship of his wife gradually as she developed Alzheimers. In those last 3 or 4 years of his life, he nursed her as a full-time job, with her being home for 3 weeks and then a week in a hospice to give him some respite. And in those last years I watched as God transformed him from the somewhat brusque and formidable intellectual which he had been into a person as gentle, humble and servant-like as anyone I have ever met. He may have been 82, but

God had not completed his training. I'm reminded of the bumper-sticker which reads, 'Be patient. God hasn't finished with me yet.'

It is against this background that we need to re-examine these familiar verses about the storm on the lake. I believe we can understand why this incident occurs in the way it does, and what God's purpose was in and through this sudden storm on the lake, if we see it as a part of the 'training programme' through which Jesus was putting his disciples. So let us now look at this passage specifically in terms of the methods and goals Jesus uses to train his disciples.

The Lord's Method of Training (vv35-38)

This storm on the lake happens on the same day, Mark tells us, as an extensive section of Jesus' teaching in parables to the crowds and to his disciples. This was the day, it seems, when Jesus had taught the parable of the sower, the parable of the growing seed and the parable of the mustard seed. And when Jesus was alone with his disciples he then 'explained everything' (v34). It was at the end of 'that day' (v35), when probably the disciples were physically tired, that Jesus says to his disciples, 'let us go over to the other side' (v35). After a period of intense teaching, the emphasis suddenly and dramatically shifts to learning by experience.

So the first lesson we can learn from this passage about the Lord's method of training is that it is based on a combination of verbal teaching, to change our intellectual understanding and perceptions, and practical experience. Training in discipleship is never to be based just on book knowledge. God wants us to learn to love Him with all our *minds*, but also wants us to love Him with all our *hearts*. Where the focus is exclusively on *head* knowledge, where the Bible is taught without application in everyday life, where we start to read the Bible and do not systematically seek to apply it in our daily lives, it will become quickly dry and sterile.

Secondly, note that this storm on the lake occurred at Jesus' direct initiative. It is Jesus who suggests 'let us go over to the other side'. However, it seems likely that Jesus Himself did not know that his Father was planning such a stormy passage across the lake; Mark tells us that 'they took him along, just as he was, in the boat' (v36). Jesus makes no preparation and we may wonder what prompted him to go. Was it, as Calvin suggests, that he knew there was important work to do on the other side of the lake and was anxious to get started on it? Or did the Holy Spirit prompt him that he should ask to go across the lake without further explanation? There

is clear evidence in the New Testament that God the Father did not reveal everything to his Son in advance (Matthew 24:36). It is possible Jesus knew ahead what would happen on the lake, but it is also possible Jesus acted in obedience to the Father, operating on the assumption that he need have no anxiety about any eventuality if acting in obedience to the Father's instructions. If Jesus was thus operating in faith, he would have been modelling for his disciples the precise lesson he then taught them through this experience.

A third aspect of the method Jesus uses is that he puts the disciples under pressure, and indeed takes them to the furthest and outer limits of their own experience. Jesus is training, amongst others, a group of fishermen who had spent not just weeks but probably years of their lives out on the water. They know its weather patterns and the dangers as well as anyone alive at the time. This was the place of their experience and expertise. They knew far more about the lake than Jesus the carpenter, or they thought they did. It was precisely on the lake, through a freak set of weather conditions, that Jesus chose to train his disciples. It was in the area where they had the greatest knowledge and self-confidence that God trains them and He does not just put them under pressure, but takes them to the point of blind panic. The disciples have to learn that their own skills, their own experience, their own competence counts for nothing in the presence of Christ. Only one thing matters: do they know and trust Jesus.

So look at what happens once they get out on the lake. Mark describes it very graphically, 'A furious squall came up, and the waves broke over the boat, so that it was nearly swamped, Jesus was in the stern, sleeping on a cushion' (vv37-38a). Jesus goes to sleep. He does not wake up again even when the ship is on the point of sinking. Despite the fact that the waves are breaking over the side of the ship, and surely must have been at least splashing him a bit, he sleeps on. Surely here, too, is the hand of God. There is no suggestion here that Jesus is pretending to sleep. Rather it seems that God was keeping him asleep, at a deeper level than we would normally regard as 'natural' even though he was probably tired at the end of a busy day of teaching. This was so that he could pile up the pressure on the disciples. As the storm got worse, so the level of anxiety mounted. God wanted the disciples to reach their physical and emotional limits, to have nowhere else to go, no alternative plan or possibility, but to turn to Jesus for help. The NIV uses the term 'swamped' in translation to describe the condition of the boat; and by analogy God allows us today often to feel 'swamped' by our situation as a means of making us turn to Him, and of taking us to the end of ourselves.

When the disciples reach breaking point, they finally go and wake him up. He is still asleep, at the stern of the boat. The disciples say to him, "Teacher, don't you care if we drown?", or literally, 'does it not matter to you that we are perishing?' By this point the disciples clearly are desperate. One wonders why they had not woken him earlier to ask for help. Was it out of respect for him that they did not want to disturb him until they had exhausted all other possibilities? Or was it because they thought that as fishermen they knew much better than he did how to handle a crisis at sea? Whatever the reason, when they do finally wake him their question to him has a sharp edge to it.

It is not just that they refer to Jesus as 'teacher'. Their view of him at that moment was surprisingly

If God ever allows us to be taken to the limits of ourselves, or engineers a situation where that is the case, we may be sure he is not indifferent to what we are going through.

contemporary. They saw him as a great prophet, who spoke the very words of God, but as no more than that. Part of the purpose of this whole episode, as we shall see, was to lift their understanding of who Jesus was to a new plane. The cutting edge was in the words, 'does it not matter to you that we perish?' These words may mean 'don't you mind dying?' and be simply a jibe at his apparent ignorance of the extent of the danger they were in. However, most translations and

commentators have taken it with a greater emphasis on the 'we' so that the question becomes, 'don't you care that we are drowning?' The issue now is not whether they are about to drown but on whether Jesus cares or minds about their collective predicament. They assume that because Jesus is asleep he has ceased to be concerned for their welfare. Because Jesus is silent, absent in effect from the crisis, despite his bodily presence, they doubt his providential care for them in their hour of greatest danger. For someone who loved and cared for people so much, whose whole life in coming from heaven to be on earth with them was an expression of that caring which they question, such a question must have cut with greater sharpness than a sword.

Before we move on to see how Jesus sorts out the crisis, it is appropriate that we pause to consider whether we ever find ourselves in a similar situation to that faced by the disciples. God gives us his inspired word to instruct us about Himself, his

way of training us, the means He uses to mould and shape our characters. If God used a crisis like this as a means of deepening the faith of the apostles, He may well use the same types of situation today. So it is worth spending a few moments to reflect on how we might find ourselves at such a crisis point.

The disciples were literally 'swamped', and as the situation became increasingly out of control, they came face to face with death itself. Crises can come upon slowly, or suddenly like this squall. They can come from any one of many directions. We may suddenly lose our job and face unemployment. We may be told that we are seriously ill, and that we shall be incapacitated for a long period; we may be told we have only weeks to live. We may lose a close relative, someone we love deeply, in a road accident. It may be mounting financial worries which bring us to the point of feeling that we cannot cope with another day of life. It may be worries over a child who is desperately unhappy at school and you feel powerless to help. It may be just the pressures on your time and energy so that you wonder how you will ever manage another day. It may be a constant, recurring feeling of inadequacy, or a daily temptation which you cannot seem to avoid.

In such a crisis you may feel like the disciples. Why is Jesus asleep? Why doesn't he *do* something? You may echo the words of the disciples, "Teacher don't you care that we are drowning?" We shall see in a moment how Jesus dealt with the situation, but for the moment we should remember one point only. God never sleeps (Psalm 121:3-4), and is never unaware of the pressures and strains we are under (Psalm 139:1-12). In this story, Jesus may have been asleep, but his heavenly Father certainly was not. If God ever allows us to be taken to the limits of ourselves, or engineers a situation where that is the case, we may be sure he is not indifferent to what we are going through. For no one could ever accuse God of indifference in the light of the cross.

Jesus' Goals in Training (vv39-41)

So Jesus wakes up at last. Ignoring the jibe from the disciples he quickly deals with the crisis. 'He got up, rebuked the wind and said to the waves, 'Quiet! Be still!' Then the wind died down and it was completely calm (v39). Jesus shows the same power over the elements as we find attributed to God in creation. A word from Jesus was enough to reduce a heaving sea back to being a mill pond more or less instantaneously. What was one moment a cause of blind panic and seems to threaten life itself, even to these experienced fishermen, the next moment is as harmless as a dove. To a group of men, many of whom had spent years of their lives out on the lake, this miracle must have had an impact which was overwhelming. Jesus demonstrates complete

control of a situation they had thought was beyond hope.

Jesus then challenges his disciples with two questions, each of which gives us some clue as to what his goals were in this whole incident. The first question was, 'why are you so afraid?' (v40). Calvin argues that Jesus is not asking them why they are afraid, for fear in such a situation is a natural human response, and in many situations the flow of adrenaline caused by fear is an essential factor motivating and enabling us to take measures to protect ourselves from danger. Rather, Jesus is asking his disciples why they are *so* afraid. Their alarm goes beyond proper bounds. Jesus contrasts fear and faith (v40). It is not every kind of fear which is opposed to faith. If we fear nothing, it is all too easy for a false sense of security to dull our spiritual senses so that we cease to remember God in our daily lives and even cease to pray. So, Calvin would argue, fear awakens faith in normal life and is not wrong until it oversteps bounds to disturb and weaken our faith.

Why, then, were the disciples so afraid? Or perhaps we should put the question the other way round, in a situation of such extreme danger why should the disciples *not* have been so afraid? Jesus implies by his next question, 'do you still have no faith?', that the reason they should not have been so afraid ought to have been their faith. What does he mean? Does God guarantee us that we will not die in boating accidents or under sudden and unexpected circumstances? No such guarantee has ever existed for God's people. Does God promise to his people that because he loves them everything will always work out fine? Clearly not. So how should the faith of the disciples have helped them overcome their fear in this situation?

I believe the key to understanding the concept of 'faith' is to realise it is a term referring not to a cerebral belief but to a dimension of relationship. Faith would often better be translated 'trust', so that Jesus is saying to his disciples that such a level of fear and anxiety demonstrates that they do not trust him. There are two possible reasons for this lack of trust. Either they did not believe in Jesus' control, or in God's control for that matter, over the physical elements, or over the decision to cross the lake in the first place which put them in this situation. They may have doubted God's power. Or alternatively they doubted his goodness, that whether in life or death God would look after them and would allow nothing to happen to them which was outside his providence and purpose. It is because Jesus has total confidence in God the Father, confidence in both his power and his goodness, that he can live in such peace even in the face of such apparent danger.

Let us look, then, at Jesus' second question more carefully. 'Do you *still* have no faith?' or literally from the Greek, '*how* do you not have faith?' Jesus expected them by this point in his ministry to have developed a greater degree of trust and confidence than they were showing in this situation. Jesus' appeal was basically to their experience of him. What had the disciples seen so far of Jesus. They had seen a huge number of miracles, including those outside Peter's house, the instantaneous healing of a leper, the paralytic who gets up off his bed and walks, and the healing of the man with the shrivelled hand. Although they had never seen Jesus sort out problems with the weather, they had seen extraordinary demonstrations of divine power. So was it unreasonable for Jesus to expect his disciples to realise that he has total control over nature? And as to the providential love and goodness of God, they had seen Jesus demonstrate his love already over and over again in his ministry, not just in his healing miracles but in the call of Levi; for Jesus spent his time with the social outcasts of his day when he could have been with the rich and influential (Mark 2: 15-17). On the basis of their experience of Jesus, the disciples could have been expected to trust in the power and love of God to look after them and provide for them even in such an extreme crisis, whether in this life or beyond.

Here surely is the lesson for us today. We have much more to go on as the basis for trust in Jesus than the disciples had. First we have the whole record of what Jesus did, the way he controlled situations and loved his disciples, in the New Testament. We have the supreme act of love and commitment to us on the cross. We have also the supreme act of power and authority over the natural world in the resurrection. As Christians we can look back on all this and know that God the Father and Jesus the Son went through all that for me, as if I was the only sinner in the world. On top of all that, we have our own personal experience of God, as he has answered prayers and revealed himself to us in our lives so far – all those demonstrations of his power and love that we can look back on in our experience. How much more, then, would Jesus say to us today if we show fright or panic in a difficult or dangerous situation, 'do you *still* have no faith?'

However, probably the most important lesson for the disciples was the realisation that Jesus was

I believe the key to understanding the concept of 'faith' is to realise it is a term referring not to a cerebral belief but to a dimension of relationship.

more than just a 'teacher', which was the term they had used to address him at the height of the storm (v38). As the wind responds immediately to his command, so that suddenly the squall ceases and the sails hang limp, and as the sea is transformed from a threatening, heaving mass into the calmness of a mill-pond, their fear too is transformed. No longer are they afraid of the lake and its ability to drown them, but they are afraid of a man who has such power over the elements. So we find them asking each other in terror, 'Who is this? Even the wind and the waves obey him?'

The disciples had realised Jesus was a great teacher. They had heard his sermons by now on numerous occasions. They had also seen countless miracles of individuals being healed from a variety of diseases, and even shrivelled limbs being restored. But the full implications of this wisdom and healing power which they had experienced had not yet dawned on them. To take their understanding a step further, to make them think about Jesus in a new way – or rather to expand the possibilities in their minds of who Jesus might be – God had to provide a set of circumstances where both the disciples were taken to the end of their own ability to cope and Jesus could intervene, but without compelling belief among non-believers. So God chose the middle of the lake as the venue, and the occasion of this sudden and great storm late as night as the opportunity, to compel Jesus' disciples to think again about who Jesus really might be. And His plan worked, as it always does. Once the disciples come to realise who Jesus is, it changes everything.

Final Thoughts

As God trained the disciples in his lifetime on earth, so he also trains us as his disciples today. As God does not change, He is the same yesterday, today and forever, his training techniques are unlikely to change either. We have seen in this story two features of Jesus' method. The first is that Jesus uses our experiences in life, as well as instruction from His word, as a means of teaching us. God plans our experiences. Our problems may come as a surprise to us, but not to Him. He may bring them upon us directly, or in the case of suffering allow Satan to bring them upon us (cf. Job chapter 1). And secondly, Jesus will on occasion allow us to be taken to the very edges or limits of our capacity to cope in order to force us to think again about our faith, to take a leap forward in our understanding of who Jesus is, and to reflect again on the implications of his identity. We should be encouraged that the terrifying storm is followed by a period of great calm. God does not put us under permanent pressure, although at the time of crisis it may seem to be without end.

As God's methods do not change, nor do his goals for our training. Jesus wants to teach his disciples today, as he did then, to examine their fears, and to ask themselves why they are so afraid, whatever that fear might be. A useful exercise would be to write down all your fears on a piece of paper and ask yourself, before God, of each one 'why am I so afraid?' The second goal of Jesus as he trains us is to make us reflect on our knowledge and past experience of God in our lives: we need to think about all God has done for us in Christ and what that means for the way He will act towards us today. We also need to think back over our lives and recognise his past guidance and care. And lastly, God intends that we should recognise who Jesus really is. As we allow the implications of those events to sink into our consciousness, as we realise the extent of Jesus power and control over the universe, it will radically transform our confidence in his ability to handle whatever problem or fear we may be grappling with today.

Questions for Discussion

1. Why does this crisis occur? Whose idea was it to cross the lake? What preparation does Jesus make for the journey? Does it make any difference in relational terms how a crisis builds up? (vv35-36)
2. 'That day when evening came ...' (v35). What else had happened 'that day'? Is there any reason why God might have chosen 'that day' to let this crisis occur?
3. As the storm builds up and the crisis deepens, Jesus sleeps on (vv37-38a). Why do you think Jesus does not wake up sooner? What does this tell us about the way God often handles his relationship with us?
4. When the disciples eventually wake Jesus up, they are desperate (v38b). When we face a crisis, why do we often wait till the situation is desperate before turning to God in prayer? Why did they not turn to God sooner?
5. Do you think the implication of the disciple's question to Jesus is that he doesn't care (v38b). If so, was it fair? How do you think Jesus would have felt about it (see v40)? What made the disciples forget so quickly the nature of Jesus' relationship with them since they had first met him? What can we learn from this?
6. What kinds of crises do we face in our lives? Which ones come slowly, which ones come suddenly (like the one in this story)? In a crisis why is it so difficult to remember God never sleeps (Psalm 121: 3-4), and is fully aware of our situation (Psalm 139: 1-12)?
7. What kind of relationship does Jesus have with the environment? (v39). What sort of 'relationship' should we have as Jesus' disciples?
8. It was not wrong surely for the disciples to be afraid. It is a normal, and often healthy and necessary human response, to be afraid. But why were they so afraid? To put it differently, why should they not have been so afraid? (v30). What exactly should they have expected from Jesus in this situation if they had faith? (v40).
9. What had the disciples seen so far of Jesus' power in his ministry (see for example Mark 1: 29-32, 40-41; 2: 1-8)? After those experiences, why didn't the disciples believe Jesus could sort out a violent storm on a lake? Do we have the same problem as the disciples when we face 'new situations' where we have no experience of going through it with Jesus? (v41).
10. What experiences have you had in your own life which have demonstrated to you God's loving care and protection? And what evidence of God's care and love can you cite from your knowledge of the Bible? What do you conclude about the nature of Christian 'trust' in daily life?

3. How Jesus draws out a woman's fragile relationship with God

Mark 5: 21-34

²¹When Jesus had again crossed over by boat to the other side of the lake, a large crowd gathered round him while he was by the lake. ²²Then one of the synagogue rulers, named Jairus, came there. Seeing Jesus, he fell at his feet ²³and pleaded earnestly with him, "My little daughter is dying. Please come and put your hands on her so that she will be healed and live." ²⁴So Jesus went with him.

A large crowd followed and pressed around him. ²⁵And a woman was there who had been subject to bleeding for twelve years. ²⁶She had suffered a great deal under the care of many doctors and had spent all she had, yet instead of getting better she grew worse. ²⁷When she heard about Jesus, she came up behind him in the crowd and touched his cloak, ²⁸because she thought, "If I just touch his clothes, I will be healed." ²⁹Immediately her bleeding stopped and she felt in her body that she was freed from her suffering.

³⁰At once Jesus realised that power had gone out from him. He turned around in the crowd and asked, "Who touched my clothes?"

³¹"You see the people crowding against you," his disciples answered, "and yet you can ask, 'Who touched me?'"

³²But Jesus kept looking around to see who had done it. ³³Then the woman, knowing what had happened to her, came and fell at his feet and trembling with fear, told him the whole truth. ³⁴He said to her, "Daughter, your faith has healed you. Go in peace and be freed from your suffering."

Some people have a robust faith. Perhaps it has been taught by their parents. Perhaps they went to Sunday School as children. They have always believed. They follow a regular pattern of church going, bible reading and prayer. For others, there is little in their backgrounds to encourage faith; religious belief has always been a struggle. Their relationship with God 'hangs by a thread' and too easily can be crushed. When they approach God, they do so tentatively, anxiously, expecting to be turned away. How does God deal with such people? The promise of the Old Testament was that the servant Messiah, when he came, would not break a bruised reed, or snuff out a smouldering wick (Isaiah 42: 3). He was to be gentle in his relationships with us as fragile human beings, fragile in health and fragile in faith.

The Woman's Situation (vv25-29)

Let us examine, then, the woman's situation as described here by Mark. Her particular illness was 'that she had been subject to bleeding for 12 years'

(v25). We may assume this is external bleeding, some form of haemorrhaging, although we are not told from which part of her body there was this slow seeping of blood. This would make her unclean in Jewish society, someone who would be regarded as something of a social outcast by those who knew of her condition, rather as people treat an Aids sufferer today. It would have been difficult, perhaps impossible, for her to come and talk openly with Jesus about her condition, and even after healing the encounter with Jesus terrifies her as we shall see below.

This woman had suffered with this medical condition for twelve long years. Mark refers three times to her suffering in these verses (vv26,29,34), and says 'she had suffered a great deal' (v26). The suffering probably included both physical pain and the loneliness of social ostracism. Perhaps the hopelessness of her case had also led her into depression sometimes, although she is a woman of great determination. This woman had known suffering more than most of us.

At the time she comes to Jesus, her case was absolutely hopeless. She had tested the medical profession to the limit. Mark tells us that she had been under the care of many doctors, and spent all that she had, yet instead of getting better she grew worse (v26). Human skill to find a cure was no longer an option. She had also used up all her savings so there was no money left to explore further possibilities. Then, as now, seeking expert medical advice was an expensive business; without financial resources she could not look any further even if she had wanted to. By this point she had looked everywhere, tried everything, but instead of getting better she grew worse. It is astonishing that in the face of such discouragement she does not curl up in a corner and die.

But this woman has something left – something which now serves to transform her situation and save her life. What she has is not a financial asset, not a strong and supportive family (at least, this is not mentioned), not powerful connections, but simply ‘faith’. She believes that Jesus can heal her, despite all her negative experiences with doctors over all those years. More than that, unlike Jairus who believes Jesus can heal his daughter if he comes and visits his house and touches his daughter, this woman believes that without even meeting Jesus, let alone touching him, she can be healed. We know exactly what she was thinking that day in the pushing and shoving crowd, presumably because she told Jesus when discovered a little later. She thought, ‘if I just touch his clothes, I will be healed’ (v28).

While this woman lacked money and social status, she did not lack spiritual perception. Presumably, she had heard of Jesus’ healings in the Galilee region over the previous six to nine months during which Jesus had been at work (I’m guessing the period but it was probably still less than a year from the start of his ministry). In the villages of Galilee, Jesus’ healings would have caused an immense sensation. In addition, she would almost certainly have heard of his powerful and distinctive teaching; she may even have been present in the crowds herself on more than one occasion. All of this has convinced her that Jesus is no ordinary human being. He is more than even an ordinary prophet, for what Old Testament prophet had shown such power as she expected would emanate from Jesus. She had an extraordinarily high view of the person and power of Jesus, and it was this faith which drives her to fight her way through the crowds to get close enough to touch Jesus’ clothes, and which leads on to her healing.

Jesus Stops

As this woman struggles through the jostling crowds to get close to Jesus, what is Jesus himself

doing and thinking? He is himself struggling to find a way through the crowds; he is in a hurry. For when he had arrived back on the Jewish side of Lake Galilee, amidst the huge crowds a highly respected local leader, a ruler of the synagogue, arrived and fell at his feet. Mark tells us that he ‘pleaded earnestly’ with Jesus. ‘My little daughter is dying,’ he says. ‘Please come and put your hands on her so that she will be healed and live’ (v23). Through these words, we can hear the cry of a desperate man echo down the years. Here is a distraught father, deeply caring for the life and welfare of his little girl. He is desperate, desperate because she is dying and there is nothing he can do to save her. So he comes in his desperation to look for Jesus as his one last hope.

But time is short. The little girl is not just sick. She is dying. Time is of the essence. Somehow they must hurry. Jairus has in his mind’s eye how his daughter can be healed: ‘please come and put your hands on her so that she will be healed and live’ (v23). This requires that his little girl is alive and that Jesus is present in the room with her as essential preconditions for the healing. Jairus is desperate to get Jesus to his house before it is too late.

So Jairus and Jesus are in a hurry. But the situation is outside their control. The crowd presses around them so progress towards Jairus’ house is painfully slow. The minutes are ticking away. Jairus knows Jesus may well not make it in time. We may assume he is doing all he can to clear the way and hurry Jesus along. It is into this extremely pressurised situation that the woman with bleeding launches her own desperate and final initiative to find healing and life after her twelve years of suffering and struggle.

So the woman comes up behind Jesus in the crowd. She reaches out and touches his cloak, and immediately her bleeding stops and she feels in her body that she is freed from her suffering (v28-29). In a moment of time, her entire life is transformed. The years of suffering are over. She knows she is healed. But will Jesus have noticed anything? Surely he cannot possibly have felt someone touch his clothes in a situation where a huge crowd is pressing not just on his clothes but on his body? And even if he has by some extraordinary sense realised something has happened, will he stop to

How do we respond in a situation where we have set ourselves clear objectives for the day... and in the middle of the rush we are interrupted by a plea for help?

find out the details when there is so much pressure for him to reach Jairus' house before it is too late?

How tempting it must have been for Jesus to ignore this woman's touch. Nobody but he and the woman knew that anything had taken place. Jairus was an influential person in his local community; the people pressing round him were the local peasants. It really mattered that he got to Jairus' house, and that he got there fast. Why stop and have all the hassle of trying to find out who had touched his clothes, why they had done so, and why the power had gone out from him? It would all take up valuable time and would risk the very life of the little girl he wanted to heal. Jesus had a clear objective; this was just an irritating distraction, shifting his attention from his well-defined goal.

But Jesus does not ignore what has happened. He stops. He knows that if someone has touched his clothes, and if power has gone out from him, there must be a reason for it; there must be a person, probably a poor and insignificant and perhaps desperate person, who has reached out to him for help and healing. Despite the pressure and urgency of the situation, Jesus in his great love for every individual person will not proceed with his earlier programme of moving towards Jairus' house before he has sorted out who this person is and why they needed his help.

Here is a challenge to the way we live out our lives as disciples of Jesus. How do we respond in a situation where we have set ourselves clear objectives for the day, when we are in a hurry to meet a deadline, or to complete an important task we have been set, or even to help a friend or neighbour in distress, and in the middle of the rush we are interrupted by a plea for help? Perhaps the plea is loud and strident, or perhaps – as here – the plea is faint, subtle, easily missed and yet profound. The unwanted telephone call as we are rushing out of the office to a meeting. The unexpected demand from an elderly relative. The interruption to a favourite television programme from a child who wants help with her homework. How do we respond?

The test is whether you stop what you are doing to listen, to pay attention, to pay full attention, to the person who has interrupted you and disturbed your prearranged plans and goals. Are your plans more important than the person who has interrupted you? Are you thinking just of your own concerns, or can you at a moment's notice put those to the back of your mind and focus on someone else's agenda? When a woman touched the edge of Jesus' clothes in a huge crowd and in a highly pressured situation, he stopped to investigate the situation thoroughly before he moved on. That is the response of love. Here is a real challenge to us as to how we handle

relationships when there are sudden changes to what we had planned.

Jesus Searches

Somehow Jesus knows someone has touched his clothes even amidst all the pressure of the crowds who were pushing up against him (v31). There can be no doubt that this was supernatural knowledge, and yet it was limited knowledge. The woman touched him from behind so he cannot have seen her. As she only touched his clothes, he cannot have felt the touch, especially in the crush of so many people not just pressing on his clothes but on his person (v31). And it is hard to know exactly what Mark is referring to when he says 'Jesus realised that power had gone out from him' (v30), but it must surely refer to some revelation to him by God the Father. And yet it is only partial revelation, for it is not revealed to him who exactly had done it. So Jesus has to stop and search in order to find out.

Before seeing what happened next in the woman's story, let us consider for a moment the disciples' scepticism when Jesus asks who touched his clothes. Their response is perhaps understandable. 'You see the people crowding against you,' his disciples answered, 'and yet you can ask, 'Who touched me?'' Yet surely the disciples by this point in Jesus' ministry should have known better. They do not listen carefully to exactly what Jesus said, for they think he asked 'Who touched me?' whereas he actually asked, 'Who touched my clothes?' The way Mark expresses it makes it look as if the disciples were virtually mocking Jesus. What a ridiculous question, they say, to ask 'who touched me' in a situation where probably 30 or 40 different people have had some physical contact in the previous two or three minutes. In their human pride, they had not yet learned to listen humbly to every word that Jesus said (cf. Deuteronomy 8:3). They still had not realised fully who he was, and the implications of his identity for their attitudes and behaviour. A challenge is there for us today, too. Do we listen, and listen with humility, to every word Jesus said as recorded in the gospels? Or do we sometimes think we know better than Jesus? Do we take seriously his promises and his commands, or do we treat them rather casually?

Jesus brushes aside his disciples' scepticism. Rather, 'Jesus kept looking around to see who had done it' (v32). He does not answer their question but keeps searching. We can imagine him looking round from face to face in the crowd to see if anything would give away who had done it. I suspect there would have been a hush as he did so. At this point the woman realises the game is up. She knows she cannot hide herself in the crowd any longer and that at any moment Jesus is going to identify her. After all, with such power to heal her, he is sure to

find her. So she gives herself up, as it were. She comes and falls at his feet as a sign of reverence and awe. Mark tells us that 'trembling with fear, she told Jesus the whole truth' (v33).

Why such fear? There are both cultural reasons and personal factors which might have made her afraid. Taking the cultural first, as someone who was technically 'unclean' in Jewish law, she would have made Jesus technically unclean also, even by touching his clothes (Leviticus 15: 25-27). So she may well have been afraid that if the whole story came out, and particularly the fact of her bleeding, that Jesus would be angry with her. She would not have known Jesus' understanding of clean and unclean as internal rather than external realities (see Mark 7: 1-23). As a woman, too, she would probably have felt considerable embarrassment for it to be known she had reached out to touch a man's clothing. Jesus had no such inhibitions about actual physical contact with a woman, as he showed on other occasions (e.g. Luke 7: 36-50) but she would almost certainly not have known of this. It might even have been improper for her to speak out in public as a woman in the culture of the day; there are no other instances of Israelite women speaking to Jesus in public in the gospels. Over and above all these cultural factors was the most obvious of all concerns: would Jesus be angry with her as being presumptuous to seek healing from him without asking his consent? She might even have wondered whether Jesus would revoke the long-sought-after healing which she had finally found.

So 'the woman, knowing what had happened to her, came and fell at his feet and, trembling with fear, told him the whole truth' (v33). Found out? No, just found. Jesus knew this woman needed help. He absolutely refused to go on to the next engagement without finding her. Transferring this attitude as a lesson for us today, we may ask whether we show the same degree of concern and commitment in seeking out the real needs of an individual who crosses our path almost on a casual basis. In the rush of busy schedules, and many demands on our time, will we give priority not simply to stopping to take notice of a needy person but take the time and trouble to get to the root of their need so as to be able to respond to it effectively?

Jesus Restores

The woman who had suffered for those twelve years and who had touched Jesus' cloak in the crowd has been healed of the bleeding: 'she felt in her body that she was freed from her suffering' (v29). She can now go home and enjoy physical health for the first time in years. So the problem is over; the book is closed as far as the illness is concerned. Has she now got all she wanted or needed? Jesus realises that the physical healing is

meeting at most only half of her need; the other half is the need for inner peace. That peace can only be obtained from restored relationships, for 'health' or 'shalom' in biblical thinking is not primarily a matter of a correctly functioning physiology, but of a person living in harmony with both God and neighbour. Jesus wants to give her a blessing which goes way beyond physical healing. What Jesus actually says to the woman is this, 'Daughter, your faith has healed you. Go in peace and be freed from your sufferings' (v34).

First, Jesus establishes with her a very special relationship with Himself. Although she was almost certainly older than he was, he calls her 'daughter', a relationship which is permanent and unalterable. From this point on, she can think of Jesus as 'Father' and know that she is always welcome in his presence. If she had a low self-image, as may well have been the case, for we read of her setting her target as just touching Jesus' clothes, this should for ever be resolved as she reflects on her special status as far as Jesus is concerned. Jesus creates a bond between them which will last forever.

Jesus also assures her that it is her faith that has healed her (v34). Jesus praises her faith although all she did was to reach out to touch the edge of his cloak. We must understand that her faith was not the cause of her cure, but the channel by which her cure was accomplished. Without faith, she would not have been healed, for she would never have sought contact with Jesus with such determination. Faith is not the source of power, but faith provides the mechanism or instrument by which the power and love of Christ is released to flow into her life. Today, too, faith is vital if we are to see the power of God come into the situations and problems which are part of our own experience. Unless we trust that Christ is able to address our particular problem, and believe it sufficiently to take some action based on that belief, however small that action is in the first instance, we shall see little of the power and love of Christ transforming our lives. Faith is indeed the key which gives us access to so much that God longs to do for us and through us.

Jesus also says to the woman, 'Go in peace and be freed from your suffering' (v34). As well as establishing a relationship with Himself, Jesus restores her relationship with the local community. Bleeding as a form of uncleanness in Israel required that the sick person should go to the priest to be declared clean - to make it 'official' as far as the community is concerned (Leviticus 15: 28ff). This restored the person's social position as an accepted member of the community. Jesus by virtue of who He was, and in the eyes of the public as a recognised teacher and healer with 'authority' (cf. Mark 1: 27), was able to give her a 'clean bill of health' by

If we seek God with all our hearts, He will always look for us and find us – whoever we are, wherever we are and however much we want to hide.

announcing in public that she was completely better. Implicitly, Jesus was claiming to replace, in His person, the procedures of the Temple. No wonder those who made their living from people following those procedures felt threatened!

So Jesus restores to this woman 'shalom', the Old Testament word which means 'peace',

health', well-being', and 'wholeness' all rolled into one. Peace or health in biblical understanding depends on right relationships. By calling her daughter, and pronouncing her 'healed' in front of the crowd, Jesus has restored her spiritual and social relationships and thus provided a solid foundation for inner peace, peace with God and peace with herself. Further, by telling her to go in peace, and telling her to be freed from her suffering, he removes at a stroke the two things likely to have worried her when she went back home after this incident. Firstly, Jesus makes it clear she did not act wrongly or presumptuously by touching him; he accepted it as an act of faith. Secondly, Jesus assures her that the problem will not recur; the long years of suffering are really over.

Final Thoughts

If Jesus had not stopped and searched for this woman in that huge crowd, how different her life would have been, and how much of the blessing from this healing would have been lost. Yes, her body would have been restored, but she would not have had the assurance of healing and the 'peace' which Jesus was able to give her through establishing direct, face to face contact with her. Let us thank God, as I am sure this woman would have done, for the depths of his love and concern for even a lonely and socially outcast individual, and for the true and lasting peace which only he can give.

Notice, too, that the incident begins with the woman desperately seeking for healing, and struggling to get close enough to Jesus just to touch his clothes. The situation is then turned on its head. Jesus starts to seek the woman, like looking for a needle in a haystack, unwilling to move on until he has identified her and spoken with her face to face. That's how it always is with God. If we seek God with all our hearts, He will always look for us and find us – whoever we are, wherever we are and however much we want to hide.

Questions for Discussion

1. What do you think was the woman's relationship with her relatives, her local community and herself in the light of her particular illness? What would be the modern equivalent?
2. What was in this woman's mind when the pushing crowd gathered that day by the Sea of Galilee? (especially v25-26 and 28). Where did her ideas about Jesus come from? Where do our ideas about Jesus come from?
3. Jesus is under pressure to get to Jairus' house. Jairus was an important local person. There was a real danger that Jesus would arrive too late and Jairus' daughter would die. So, in terms of the relationships involved, why does Jesus insist on identifying the woman who touched him? It would have been so easy to ignore the incident and move on. When there is a hint of a cry for help from someone near us and we are in a hurry, are we willing to 'be late' in order to help?
4. What does v31 tell us about the relationship between Jesus and his disciples at this point in his ministry? Look back at other events in their time together. Are you surprised at the disciples' attitude? Does Jesus ever say anything to us which we find surprising, through the word or the Spirit? If he does, what is our reaction?
5. 'She told him the whole truth (v33).' Can we have a real and deep relationship without people telling each other the whole truth? Should we tell each other 'the whole truth' about ourselves? Are we telling God the whole truth?
6. Why was the woman's relationship with Jesus characterised by fear when she met him? (v32). Why was it a mistake to feel like that? Do we ever feel fear in front of Jesus? If so, why? If not, why not?
7. 'Your faith has saved you' (v34). What is 'faith', what does 'saved' mean, and why was her faith so important for her being 'saved'?
8. Jesus knows that the physical healing is dealing with only half the woman's need. How does Jesus heal her emotionally, in her relationship with him, with her neighbours and with herself?

4. How Jesus helps a distraught father develop a deeper relationship with God

Mark 5: 21-43

²¹When Jesus had again crossed over by boat to the other side of the lake, a large crowd gathered round him while he was by the lake. ²²Then one of the synagogue rulers, named Jairus, came there. Seeing Jesus, he fell at his feet ²³and pleaded earnestly with him, “My little daughter is dying. Please come and put your hands on her so that she will be healed and live.” ²⁴So Jesus went with him.

A large crowd followed and pressed around him. ²⁵And a woman was there who had been subject to bleeding for twelve years. ²⁶She had suffered a great deal under the care of many doctors and had spent all she had, yet instead of getting better she grew worse. ²⁷When she heard about Jesus, she came up behind him in the crowd and touched his cloak, ²⁸because she thought, “If I just touch his clothes, I will be healed.” ²⁹Immediately her bleeding stopped and she felt in her body that she was freed from her suffering.

³⁰At once Jesus realised that power had gone out from him. He turned around in the crowd and asked, “Who touched my clothes?”

³¹“You see the people crowding against you,” his disciples answered, “and yet you can ask, ‘Who touched me?’”

³²But Jesus kept looking around to see who had done it. ³³Then the woman, knowing what had happened to her, came and fell at his feet and trembling with fear, told him the whole truth. ³⁴He said to her, “Daughter, your faith has healed you. Go in peace and be freed from your suffering.”

³⁵While Jesus was still speaking, some men came from the house of Jairus, the synagogue ruler. “Your daughter is dead,” they said. “Why bother the teacher any more?”

³⁶Ignoring what they said, Jesus told the synagogue ruler, “Don’t be afraid; just believe.”

³⁷He did not let anyone follow him except Peter, James and John the brother of James. ³⁸When they came to the home of the synagogue ruler, Jesus saw a commotion, with people crying and wailing loudly. ³⁹He went in and said to them, “Why all this commotion and wailing? The child is not dead but asleep.”

⁴⁰But they laughed at him.

After he put them all out, he took the child’s father and mother and the disciples who were with him, and went in where the child was. ⁴¹He took her by the hand and said to her, “*Talitha kum!*” (which means, “Little girl, I say to you, get up!”).

⁴²Immediately the girl stood up and walked around (she was twelve years old). At this they were completely astonished.

⁴³He gave strict orders not to let anyone know about this, and told them to give her something to eat.

It is often said in the sporting world that the secret is in the timing. Imagine a brilliant stroke by a

world-class golfer teeing off from the eighteenth. One informed onlooker says to another, “of course,

it's all in the timing". As a non-golfer myself, I have always found the expression curious. He is not referring, it seems, to whether contact was made between golf club and ball; no one ever expected this top golfer to miss the ball! Nor is this discussion of timing to do with whether he is playing before or after lunch when perhaps a beer or two might have influenced his accuracy in hitting the ball. Presumably, it is something to do with the exact moment *in the swing* when the club makes contact with the ball.

In a business context, too, timing is the essence of survival and success. Most businesses which fail are fundamentally profitable. But it does not matter how many orders you can get for your product in three months' time if you cannot raise sufficient capital to pay this month's salary bill. There are some situations in small companies where £5,000 today is worth £50,000 next month.

The same principle is seen with even greater clarity when it comes to issues of life and death. A friend of mine moved from Cambridge to Clapham in South London and continued to use his bicycle as his mode of transport for getting to work. One day on his way home, in the middle of the rush-hour traffic, he had a serious accident, being knocked off his bike by a car. His life hung in the balance as he lay by the roadside. There was no way an ambulance could reach him in time owing to the traffic at that time of day. All his brilliant academic qualifications and career potential were useless to him at that moment. Fortunately, one of the London hospitals had a helicopter ambulance service which was able to reach him by coming down over the traffic directly onto Clapham Common to pick him up. Once collected, all the life support systems could be applied, and today he is alive and well, continuing his career as before.

In the details of our daily lives we can have complete assurance that the timing of every event which happens lies within God's purpose and plan.

After this incident my friend David must surely recognise the overwhelming importance of timing. However brilliant the surgeon, or capable the emergency services, if help had arrived an hour later it would have been useless. All that mattered for him in that moment of supreme crisis was that help arrived *in time*. That is often the story in situations of life and death, whether it is General Gordon waiting for British

troops to arrive to save him from the Mahdi in

Khartoum or whether it is a heart transplant patient waiting for a donor's organ to be made available before time runs out.

However much we may worry about timing in particular situations, we should never fall into the trap of thinking that God does not know or care about time because He is outside time. Because God views time differently from us, for to God "a thousand years are like a day that has gone by" (Psalm 90: 4), it does not follow that he is unconcerned about issues of timing, nor that they lie outside his complete and sovereign control. In the broad sweep of history God planned just the right time to send His Son to enter the human race as a baby so to procure human salvation (Acts 2: 23). So, too, in the details of our daily lives we can have complete assurance that the timing of every event which happens lies within his purpose and plan.

There are many other examples in the Bible of God's attention to issues of timing. Indeed, it is often not just the event itself but the time at which it happens which gives evidence of God's intervention. Thus in the Old Testament, the deliverance of Israel from the Syrian army siege is a case in point, where an army officer could not believe the timing of Elisha's prophecy about food availability (2 Kings 7:1-2). In the New Testament, the extraordinary large catch of fish which resulted from obedience to Jesus' command, after a night of catching nothing, was sufficiently remarkable in its timing for Peter to leave his fishing business to follow Jesus (Luke 5: 4-11).

Most frequently God, it seems, moves more *slowly* than we would like or expect. So in the parable of the Ten Virgins, "the bridegroom was a long time in coming" (Matthew 25: 5). This tendency for us as human beings to want God to move faster is one reason for the constant apostolic refrain to Christians to persevere (e.g. James 1: 4). Indeed, patience is one of the fruits of the Spirit (Galatians 5: 22). Of course there are occasions when God moves more quickly than anyone expects, as when Peter is released from prison in Jerusalem (Acts 12), and God may intervene before we even ask him to, as seems to have been the case when Paul is released from prison in Philippi (Acts 16).

In the events we shall be looking at in this passage, the issue of timing is of central importance in understanding what happened and why people reacted the way they did. It is also one of the clearest examples in the gospel of how Jesus uses critical issues of timing as a means of developing and stretching a person's faith, and bringing far more out of a situation than would otherwise have been possible. With this timing question in mind, let us turn then to look at this passage in detail.

Jesus has just returned from healing Legion on the other side of the lake. In a very short period of time, possibly just a 24-hour period, Jesus teaches the parables set out in chapter 4 of Mark's gospel, is almost drowned in a storm, comes face to face with a highly dangerous psychopath and lands again on the Jewish side of the lake to face an enormous crowd (verses 21 and 24 both stress it was a *large* crowd). What is remarkable is how Jesus survives all this stress and remains completely unflustered and in command of each situation he confronts!

There are two interlocking stories in this passage. Jesus has to deal with two different people at the same time. One a man, the other a woman. One rich probably, and influential certainly, the other penniless and a nobody. One very much OK in both religious and community terms, the other a social outcast. However, sickness and death are great levellers and both come to Jesus as suppliants. Of greater significance both are treated by Jesus as being of equal importance, and both their needs are handled with the same depth of compassion.

Response to a heart-felt prayer (vv21-23)

The first thing to notice in these verses is where Jairus is coming from - his starting point. We are told he is a synagogue-ruler, and though little is known about how local synagogues were organised in Jesus' day - apart from what we read in the gospels - we may assume from the intense religious feelings which are operating constantly behind the scenes of the gospel narrative that this was a position of considerable social standing. With a child of 12 he was probably in his thirties or possibly early forties. He would have been a leading member of the local community, somebody held in respect.

Against this background, it is not difficult to realise how distraught he must have been as we read of him seeing Jesus, falling at Jesus' feet and pleading earnestly with him (v22). Can you imagine the local vicar, or the local mayor, falling at the feet of a local visiting preacher? Such action shows he cares more about his daughter than his dignity, more about his family than his reputation. We know also from Luke's account that this little girl was his only daughter (Luke 8: 42). His coming to kneel at Jesus' feet also tells us something about his view of Jesus; he did not regard Jesus as an ordinary Rabbi.

The request which Jairus puts to Jesus shows us both the extent and the limits of Jairus' faith. Clearly, he believed Jesus could heal his daughter, even though she was very close to death. Indeed, it is not difficult to imagine the questions in Jairus' mind when he left home to go and look for Jesus. Would he be able to locate Jesus? Would he be able to persuade Jesus to come? Would Jesus arrive in

time? What if his daughter died while he was away looking? Would he miss a last chance to say goodbye to her? No wonder his emotions are in turmoil as he finds Jesus and falls at his feet. No wonder he "pleads earnestly" for Jesus to come and expresses the urgency in the words "my little daughter is dying". And there is real faith there for Jairus goes on to say, "please come and put your hands on her so that she will be healed and live" (v23).

There are limits, too, to Jairus' faith. His faith had not reached the point, it seems, where he could envisage Jesus staying where he was and just saying a word to heal his daughter, as the Roman centurion did (Matthew 8: 8). In Jairus' mind, the healing required that Jesus should be physically present and should lay his hands on the child. The fact that his faith appears to have wavered when his daughter died points to another implicit condition (and hardly a surprising one), which is that if his daughter was to be healed, she should still be alive when Jesus got there. Perhaps, there is also a hint that not all his household believed so strongly in Jesus in that he message they send when the girl dies refers to Jesus as "teacher", rather than "prophet", "rabbi" or "master" (v35). Jairus' faith may have had limitations, but it was his starting point, and it was on the basis of that faith that Jesus agrees to go with him.

So coming back to Jairus' cry for help, there can be no doubt it was sincere, from the heart, from a man who loved deeply. Yet notice that although Jesus starts to move off slowly in the direction of Jairus' house, there is to be a long delay before Jairus' prayer is answered. For Jairus things go from bad to worse as Jesus *seems* to be unaware of the urgency of the situation. So with our prayers, often. We rush to God in a crisis. We pray earnestly from our hearts and look for an immediate answer to resolve our crisis. We have a clear idea, as Jairus did, of exactly how the answer should come, and in what time frame. But God seems to move slowly. And when the answer comes, it comes in a very different form than the one we had anticipated.

Instructions in a Crisis (vv35-36)

As Jairus and Jesus struggle painfully slowly through the crowd, you can imagine what Jairus is thinking and feeling, "If only he would hurry. Will we be too late? Can't we go any faster? Is she still alive?" Then, from Jairus' point of view, there is a complete disaster; Jesus gets side-tracked from his crucial mission by a poor outcast woman in the crowd. Jesus does not seem to understand the urgency of Jairus' request, how every minute counts. Those precious minutes tick away as Jesus insists on searching out this person who had simply touched the edge of his cloak, and then insists on

hearing her whole life history. Given the Eastern way of life, it is hard to believe this whole incident was over in just 20 minutes! Finally Jesus pronounces the woman healed and is ready to move slowly on again. But while all of this was happening, it cannot have been easy for Jairus to remain calm, for every bit of delay diminished his daughter's chance of survival.

Then comes the news Jairus had so much dreaded. Some men arrive from Jairus' house with the news. "Your daughter is dead", they tell him, "why bother the teacher any more?" It's too late, too late. In that awful moment, what would Jairus have felt? Would there have been anger with Jesus for dawdling along the way, or just resignation that he had tried everything but failed. After all, Jairus might have reflected that he had no rights in the situation. He could not order Jesus to do what he wanted. At the same time, as an act of faith he had left his beloved daughter's bedside for those final hours to go out and search for Jesus so he had not been on hand with his family for those final moments when she slipped away. Perhaps more than anything Jairus might have thought to himself, "If only...". If only there had not been such a big crowd... If only the woman with bleeding had waited for another time... If only he could have found Jesus just a bit earlier...

From our position now we can see that all the factors Jairus thought were a disaster were all a part of God's plan and purpose. The delay was, one might say, deliberate. On another occasion when a person is dying in the gospels, Jesus delays and explains to his disciples that he deliberately did not rush to the bedside of his sick friend so that his friend would have time to die: the delay was for God's greater glory (John 11:1-6). So here we can see that Jesus in fact did understand the urgency, was aware of the timing issues but used the delay for God's greater glory. However, of course, this was not obvious at all to Jairus at the time!

Before Jairus' thoughts have time to settle into depression and despair, Jesus intervenes. 'Ignoring what the messengers said, Jesus told the synagogue ruler, "Don't be afraid; just believe"' (v36). Notice that Jesus does not tell Jairus what to believe. It is a command not for intellectual assent to some proposition about God, or about the situation he is confronting, but a command to put his trust in a person. As a friend once said to me, "Back the jockey, not the horse". So here Jairus is told to take his mind off the problem, and his seemingly tragic and irresolvable situation, and to put himself totally in the hands of Jesus to sort it out. Notice, too, that at this point Jesus does not tell Jairus how it will all turn out in the end. Jesus does not guarantee a happy ending.

Here is the secret of handling any severe crisis we may encounter in our own experience, and especially any crisis which threatens to overwhelm us. Jesus would say the same to us as he said to Jairus, "Don't be afraid, just believe". Take your eyes and mind off the situation which threatens you and causes you such distress. Focus your mind and heart on the person and on the love of Jesus. The solution is as simple, and in practice as difficult, as that.

Before moving on to what happens next to Jairus, notice that little addendum to the message which Jairus receives. The messengers come and say, "Your daughter is dead. *Why bother the teacher any more?*" Clearly, these messengers thought it was all over. Their faith did not stretch to Jesus having any power in a situation where someone was already dead. And where there is no faith, there is always going to be this attitude of "Why bother? Why make an effort?" So today we may find ourselves asking, Why bother with continuing with a difficult job, or with continuing week after week to teach in Sunday school? Why bother to go on running a Christian Union group? Why make the effort to keep in touch with someone who never answers your letters? Why bother yourself... and why bother other people? The question "Why bother...?" almost always has lying beneath it a very different issue, "Do you still believe?"

A New Way to Look at Death (vv37-40a)

Now Jesus focuses entirely on Jairus' problem. This is not to say that while he was dealing with the woman with bleeding he was not acutely conscious of Jairus' situation: only that from this point in the story no other people are allowed to cause any further delay or distraction. "A bit late", Jairus might have thought. Jesus leaves nine disciples behind with the crowd, perhaps to hold them back. Again Jairus might have thought, "Why did Jesus not do that in the first place? I told him my little girl was dying." With just Jairus and his three inner core disciples, Peter, James and John, Jesus strides towards Jairus' house. How far was it? Ten minutes? An hour and a half? Probably some distance, for it was long enough for the local mourners to have gathered and swung into action.

By the time they get there, Mark tells us, "Jesus saw a commotion, with people crying and wailing loudly" (v38). Jesus goes in and says to them, "why all this commotion and wailing? The child is not dead, but asleep" (v39). But they laugh at him. Here Jesus does not ignore the mourners as he had ignored the messengers (v36), but takes them on. He chooses to confront and challenge the way the culture operates. I believe he is not challenging their analysis of her physical condition, their ability

to determine whether she had stopped breathing or not, but their cultural response to that condition.

Was the child in fact dead? Luke the doctor makes it absolutely clear that she was. “Her spirit returned”, Luke writes later, so her spirit had for some time at least left her body (Luke 8:55), and Luke also says that the people knew she was dead (Luke 8: 55). So why does Jesus say the child was not dead but asleep (v39)?

Clearly, Jesus is speaking figuratively. Elsewhere in the gospels Jesus uses the idea of sleep when without doubt he is speaking of death (e.g. John 11: 11). There are several possible reasons why he does so. He may be trying to avoid sensationalism so as to protect his future ministry. Imagine what “The Sun,” or the equivalent local communication networks, would have made of a girl being raised from the dead! Jesus would have been avalanched with curious onlookers and impossibly large crowds just interested in the bizarre and extraordinary. Or perhaps Jesus wanted to prevent the truth from being too obvious, to make sure people had to “*search*” if they were to find the truth, as he used the parables (cf. Mark 14:12). Note that Jesus later tells the girl’s parents “not to let anyone know about this” (v43).

Although both the above reasons are plausible, and may be part of the explanation, my own view is that the primary reason why Jesus refers to sleep here is an attempt to re-educate the people “crying and wailing loudly” about the nature and meaning of death. When a person dies “in the faith”, as we may assume this child did with her pious and believing father, onlookers are entitled to conclude that death is not the end. From God’s perspective, Jesus is saying, death is like falling asleep. You will wake up later on. So why all the fuss?

Surely here is a profound lesson for Christians. How do we view death? Do we see it in terms of “sleep” as Jesus did? Or do we see it as final, absolute, irrevocable? Is death in our thinking a gateway to life, to eternal joy in the presence of our loving heavenly father, or a total and final smashing of all possibility of relationship? Of course, there will always be sadness when someone we love dies, just as if that same person were to leave for several years to go to another country. But for Christians the sorrow of what we lose, in terms of regular human contact, should be balanced by the joy of knowing that person is with Christ.

I remember attending a funeral in Kenya. A farmer friend in the highlands, in the prime of life, had died tragically climbing Mount Kenya one last time before returning to Britain. For his wife and three children his death was devastating. He had been an outstanding Christian, and had been extraordinarily

generous to his farm hands in giving them pieces of land from his farm before he sold it. The funeral was in two stages. First, the standard Anglican service, held in a small church near the mountain, with all the pathos and grief one would expect on such an occasion. Then we moved to the graveside in the little cemetery for the burial, which the African Christians had asked to take. The atmosphere was transformed from tears to joy. As they lowered his coffin into the grave, they sang with all their hearts of the certainty of their eternal hope of glory. For them, my friend had fought the good fight, and was now with Jesus in glory. Their faith made them radiant. To my mind, the overall balance of the funeral was just right. The shared grief with the family; this great joy of the Christian’s certain hope of glory.

How we view and understand death will determine how we respond to it. The wailing and excessive mourning was a response bred from a complete misunderstanding of what had happened to the little girl. That wrong understanding of death had been expressed so many times in the life of the community that it had become embedded in cultural practices which were misleading and unhelpful. It is as vital today as it was when Jesus lived that those who live by faith should challenge and break out of cultural norms which have given out wrong messages about the nature of life and death. It is not easy to do it. The mourners laugh at Jesus (v40), a mark of unbelief and disrespect. The laughter is hostile, angry, mocking. But Jesus is not fazed by it. He ignores it and moves inside the house to address the problem directly.

A Balance of Spiritual and Practical Perspectives

Now we move on to the moment of healing. Jesus first removes the mourners; Mark tells us that “he put them all out” (v40). Healing miracles are not given to convince the sceptic, but as a response to those who have faith. God never seeks to *compel* belief by revealing his miraculous powers. Rather he conceals miracles and even truth itself from those who choose to reject him (see Mark 4:12 etc). If a person is to find God, the first step has to be the decision to look for Him, and to look seriously. So Jesus takes just the girl’s parents, and his three close disciples, and moves on to where the child was lying.

As far as the healing itself is concerned, the events are recorded in just 30 words. Jesus does not lay hands on her as Jairus had originally requested him to do (v23). The miracle healing does not occur, in fact, at all as Jairus had expected. Rather Jesus takes her by the hand, perhaps as a mark of affection. He addresses her as “little girl”, just as her father had

done (v23), perhaps again as a mark of tenderness. He calls on her to “get up”, just as she may have been told each morning to “get up” by her mother. Mark records the actual words used, the two Aramaic words “Talitha koum”, probably because they were indelibly written on the minds of the eyewitness who gave Mark this account. He or she could never forget that extraordinary moment.

The response by the little girl is both immediate and dramatic. She does not open her eyes slowly and look around the room in a daze, as well she might have done after a severe illness leading to death. Mark tells us, “Immediately she stood up and walked around” (v42). Here was no half-baked cure. One minute the girl was dead, the next minute she was on her feet and walking about. These are not the normal processes of the human body!

Let us not lose sight of just how extraordinary this event is just because the account of it is so briefly told. A little girl who was dead in a matter of seconds has recovered consciousness, stood up and walked around the room. The story is told in a matter of fact way, not as if the result of some extended mythology. There are five witnesses, at least two of whom in years to come were to write letters of outstanding spiritual and ethical content, and this account of what happened was almost certainly circulating well within their lifetime. There are many examples of miracles claimed by the leaders and prophets of the world’s religions; however, there are none - or virtually none - where a claim is made that a person is brought back to life. Although this is one of three occasions when such a claim is made by the gospel writers - the other two being the raising of the widow of Nain’s son and the raising of Lazarus - and although it may seem to pale into insignificance beside the resurrection of Jesus himself from the dead, we should not lose sight of what a special moment this must have been in the spiritual life and growth of those who witnessed it.

So we are probably not surprised to read Mark’s next comment, that the girl’s parents and the three disciples were “completely astonished” (v42). Apparently none of them had for a moment envisaged or imagined this outcome. What does their amazement tell us about their assessment of the person and the power of Jesus? Unconsciously, probably, they had limited God’s power: they thought that in the face of death itself there was nothing more Jesus could do. Scepticism about God’s power, even among believers, is found at other places in the biblical record (e.g. Acts 12:15). We should examine our own preconceptions today in the light of this experience. We need to ask ourselves to what extent we are constantly limiting the power of God in our prayers, and in our

expectations, and thus failing to look to him to intervene and act in situations where he would love to do so. Our lack of faith is a major factor in our limited experience of God’s work in the world.

Jesus then gives two very practical instructions. First, they should not let anyone know about what had happened. This may have been to protect the girl from being hounded by curious neighbours and others from afar wanting to hear her tell her story. Or it may have been to protect Jesus’ own ministry from people who might want to make him “King” as they began to realise the extent of his miraculous powers (cf. John 6:15). The second very practical command is that she should be given something to eat. If she had been ill for some time, she would have been extremely weak, and there was presumably a real possibility she might faint or collapse.

These practical concerns raise another issue. Why does Jesus use his miraculous powers one moment, and become so intensely practical the next? If he could raise the dead, he could surely use his supernatural powers to restrict the spread of gossip, or ensure the girl’s body had the nourishment necessary to sustain her during the first few hours of celebration after the cure. Jesus’ practical concerns point to a general principle: God does not use His supernatural power in human affairs except in those exceptional situations where natural processes and human obedience are inadequate to achieve His purpose. Where normal human care and thought can provide the answer to a problem, God would have his followers use his gift of common sense, and to address the needs and problems we face as best we can within the priorities of following Him.

Final Thoughts

The primary point of this incident which I wish to draw out is how Jesus tested Jairus’ faith to the limit, and beyond that limit, when answering his earnest prayer for help. Part of the means Jesus used for this was his use of timing. Jesus did not “hurry” in human terms in response to Jairus’ plea for help. He did not push the crowds out of the way immediately, and pursue a direct path to Jairus’ house. He did not answer Jairus’ prayer in the way Jairus expected it to be answered. But Jesus did take the seed of faith Jairus offered him. He allowed circumstances and delays which caused the crisis to deepen - to the point where Jairus despaired. He taught Jairus to trust him when it seemed too late to help his daughter, and all over.

Think how much Jairus would have missed if Jesus had answered Jairus’ prayer exactly as originally stated. Jesus would have gone to Jairus’ house, laid hands on the sick child and healed her. He would

have missed that climactic moment when the messengers arrived and told him his daughter was dead, and Jesus' unforgettable response, "Don't be afraid, just believe". He would have missed Jesus' challenge to the mourners to see death more from an eternal perspective, as sleep rather than as final and irretrievable loss of relationship. Above all, he would have missed seeing his daughter raised from the dead in those few seconds of awesome spiritual authority. He might never have come face to face with the fact Jesus was more than a teacher, but was God Himself incarnate in human flesh. For when Jesus raised Jairus' daughter from the dead, he was demonstrating that he was indeed God: for who else can restore life to a dead body?

So God will deal with us when we approach him through Christ *seriously*, and not casually, and cry for his help. The answer will seldom be immediate, or how we imagine it should be. It will often involve a deepening of the crisis. It will require that we do not let fear overcome us, and that in the supreme moment of crisis we "just believe". And in the end he will reveal to us far more of Himself than we ever looked for in the first place so that we can recognise Jesus for who he really is - not just a teacher, a prophet or a great man, but as God Himself.

That is the way God worked through circumstances then. It is the way he works in *our* lives today. For Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and forever (Hebrews 13:8).

Questions for Discussion

1. Jairus' daughter was close to death when he left home to go looking for Jesus. What clues does Mark give us about his feelings when he finally comes face to face with Jesus? (vv21-24a)
2. Jesus and Jairus get caught in a densely-packed crowd, like a large football crowd today. They can hardly move. Then a woman touches Jesus' cloak and Jesus stops. Describe what you think Jairus could have been thinking while Jesus sorted out the woman's illness (vv24b-34).
3. Jairus is in a desperate hurry. Jesus seems to be in no hurry. He could have insisted on going fast as he does in verse 37. Do you think Jesus is oblivious of the time issue before he hears Jairus' daughter is dead? What is Jesus teaching Jairus about prayer?
4. When we pray, things often seem to go from bad to worse. Does this incident give us any understanding of why this might be the case?
5. What can you tell about the attitude of the men from Jairus' home from what they say to Jairus in verse 35?
6. What would you expect Jesus to have said to Jairus when he heard the girl was dead? What can we learn from what Jesus did say? (verse 36)
7. Why does Jesus say, 'The child is not dead but asleep' (v39) when Dr Luke makes it clear the girl was clinically dead (Luke 8: 55)? What is he trying to teach Jairus?
8. What does the 'complete amazement' of Jairus and his wife tell us about the underlying attitude of Jairus and his wife towards God, and towards Jesus? Is there a lesson for us today?
9. Why do you think Jesus does not extend his miracle to include the girl being adequately nourished when she revived? Is there another lesson here which Jesus is wanting to teach Jairus?
10. If Jesus had answered Jairus' prayer exactly as he had hoped and expected in the first place, what would Jairus have missed in his spiritual education? In what ways would his relationship with God, and with Jesus, have been the poorer?

5. How a Woman Pleads Her Case with Jesus

Mark 7: 24-30

²⁴Jesus left that place and went to the vicinity of Tyre. He entered a house and did not want anyone to know it; yet he could not keep his presence secret. ²⁵In fact, as soon as she heard about him, a woman whose little daughter was possessed by an evil spirit came and fell at his feet. ²⁶The woman was a Greek, born in Syrian Phoenicia. She begged Jesus to drive the demon out of her daughter.

²⁷"First let the children eat all they want," he told her, "for it is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to their dogs."

²⁸"Yes, Lord," she replied, "but even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs."

²⁹Then he told her, "For such a reply, you may go; the demon has left your daughter."

³⁰She went home and found her child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.

Prayer is important in our lives as Christians. We all know that. And yet do we still find prayer a hit and miss kind of experience? We have had the joy of seeing God answer our prayers on occasion, and doubtless the disappointment of seeing no apparent answer to other prayers. It all seems rather unpredictable. So we are left with a lot of question marks. Why does God sometimes answer our prayers and sometimes not? What acts as a barrier to God answering my prayers? How can I pray in such a way as to see more of my prayers being answered?

This passage is about prayer. More than that, it is about a woman whom Jesus at first refused to help, but who through her persistence, and because of her reply to Jesus (v29), obtains what she seeks. I believe her answer to Jesus reveals several important clues as to how we can pray more effectively - not to change God's mind but to be certain that there are no barriers in our attitudes which will prevent God from being able to give us those things which we ask from him.

Setting the Scene (vv24-26)

We are told first in verse 24 that Jesus leaves Jewish Territory and goes off towards Tyre. Why? It seems likely that he wants to escape the crowds, as he tried to keep his presence secret (v24), so that he could have time to concentrate on teaching and training his disciples. Note that Jesus is now so famous that he has a problem avoiding problems and needs! But Jesus does not have the attitude that he has to meet every need, wherever he goes. He is

prepared to avoid needy people and situations on some occasions, although when sought out, he never turns away (see Mark 6:31-34). This should be an encouragement to those of us who find ourselves very hectic in Christian ministry. If Jesus could hide away sometimes, even when there was more good 'he could have done', how much more do we need those opportunities to get away to a quiet place.

But Jesus does not succeed in escaping public attention. Someone must have recognised him and passed the word round. Many from Tyre had been present in Galilee on occasion while he was preaching and healing (Mark 3: 18). So this woman comes to know he is in the area.

We are not told much about her. We do not know her name. There is no mention of her husband. Was he around but not as part of the incident? Had he died? Was the woman what we would call today 'a one-parent family'? We don't know.

Her daughter is described as 'a little girl', a diminutive form which points to the sorrow or pathos of the situation. The little girl has 'an evil spirit'. This is not just another word for insane; "it describes a condition in which a distinct and evil being, foreign to the person possessed, has taken control of that person".¹ So the woman in the passage is living day in and day out with her little girl who behaves in a way which is not just bizarre

¹ Hendriksen, Mark, p.64.

but would also show signs of the presence of evil. It is hard enough to live with a child who is mentally ill. How much harder if your child also shows signs of the presence of evil.

So perhaps the woman is desperate. We read here that as soon as she hears Jesus is nearby, she acts at once 'to make contact with him (v25)'. And when she finds Jesus, she does not wait at the door or hesitate for some method of formal introduction but throws herself at his feet (v25). And this behaviour is regarded as all the more extraordinary, Mark notes, because of her racial background (v26). She is a Greek woman, so not Jewish, and not even born in Palestine but in the area known as Phoenicia. Mark notes this as the Phoenicia in Syria - around Tyre and Sidon - rather than the Phoenicia in North Africa. Hence, she is referred to today as 'the Syro-Phoenician woman'. Her nationality and place of birth is vital to the story as it unfolds, as we shall see.

This woman asks Jesus for just one thing. She begs Jesus to drive the demon out of her daughter (v26). She is not asking for money, or prosperity, or success. She is not asking anything for herself at all, although of course if her child is healed it will affect her, too. She wants her daughter made well. She recognises the problem is a demon, she also recognises that there is one person in the world with the power and authority to drive it out. So she comes to Jesus and begs him to act.

Jesus States His Position (v27)

From all we know of Jesus, from all the miracles Mark has recorded already in his gospel, from the love Jesus has displayed to every other distressed person he has encountered, surely we would expect Jesus to say, "Go, your daughter is healed; your faith has saved her". Instead Jesus gives her what amounts to a straight 'No, I won't help you". This is so out of character with Jesus that it is worth considering carefully the reason he gives. Jesus says to her "First let the children eat all they want, for it is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to their dogs" (v27).

What is Jesus saying? Remember the woman is not a Jew, not even a Proselyte (someone converted to Judaism). So he argues that first his calling is to the Jews. But he puts over the point rather offensively to a non-Jew! He describes the Jews as 'the children' and the non-Jews as 'dogs'. Here was, apparently, a typical piece of Jewish racial arrogance. And Jesus rubs it in for he says that it would not be 'right' - i.e. it would be morally wrong - to take the food God had intended for the children (the Jews) and throw it to the dogs (the non-Jews).

The bread Jesus refers to here cannot apply to all God's blessings to mankind. For non-Jews as well as

Jews enjoy the blessings of life, sun and rain, springtime and harvest. The children's bread applies specifically to the privileges of adoption. As Calvin puts it, "The blessing which was to be expected in Christ dwelt exclusively in the family of Abraham. To lay open without distinction that which God had conferred as a peculiar privilege on a single nation was nothing short of setting aside the covenant of God; for in this way the Jews, who ought to have the preference, were placed on a level with the Gentiles". By using the word 'throw' Jesus is suggesting that he would be showing a casual and inappropriate attitude to the covenant God had made with the Jews if he was to heal this woman's daughter, seeing that she was not a Jew. Perhaps more than that, he is saying to the woman that she is acting presumptuously to proceed as it were, in the middle of a dinner party, to seize what was on the table!

Jesus seems to give a comprehensive negative answer to the woman's plea. Perhaps, you could argue he leaves a small chink when he says, 'first let the children eat...', for this gave her the option of coming back later. The reason Jesus gives for refusal to help is not lack of time, or lack of ability to help, or even a lack of willingness to help if it lay in his remit. He gives a *theological* reason. He argues that the way God has established the covenant with Israel would make it morally wrong for him to help - for it would imply setting aside God's unique covenant with his people. How can a poor Greek woman, totally theologically uneducated we may assume, cope with that kind of an argument? We must expect her to wait her turn and leave, a sad and disappointed woman. Jesus would not help, and one must continue living with the bitterness and sorrow of a suffering child. So we see her go.

No! She will not relinquish so quickly her one hope, her one chance. Perhaps she understands Jesus better than we imagine. She knows the love in his heart I'm sure, by intuition - perhaps from the look in his eyes or perhaps by hearing him preach (cf. Mark 3: 8). She is determined to find a way round the theological problem posed to her; she finds an answer. She says to Jesus, "Yes Lord, but even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs" (v28). And Jesus responds "for such a reply you may go; the demon has left your daughter" (v29). What an extraordinary turnaround. Within a few seconds, the whole weight of the theological argument has been set aside and the woman's plea has been answered. Jesus makes it clear that the determining factor on which the issue turned was her reply. So what was it that she said which was so stunning, that caused Jesus to 'change his mind' and which overcame the theological problem?

The Woman's Response: Why was it so effective?

There are three reasons, I think, why this woman's prayer - her reply to Jesus - was so effective, and each of them is an important lesson for us if we wish our prayers to be effective in our relationship with God.

(a) **She accepted the framework God had laid down.** It is remarkable that when the woman replies to Jesus remark about not throwing the children's food to the dogs, she does not start her answer by complaining about being called a dog! Imagine such an event occurring today. She would surely have been within her rights to call Jesus a racist, if not a sexist. She could have appealed to the Equal Opportunities Commission, because Jesus was admitting racial bias in selecting those to be healed, or brought a case under the Public Order Act (1986 s.5) against Jesus for using "abusive or insulting words... likely to cause harassment, alarm or distress."

Rather than speak out against the way Jesus describes her, or perhaps her position with respect to God's covenant with Israel, she freely accepts it and pursues her request within the framework Jesus has laid down. She was prepared to argue her point on the basis that she was 'just a dog'. Indeed, it is likely she was genuinely so humble that she saw herself in those terms. There is not a hint of resentment.

Accepting the framework God lays down is the first vital clue from this passage about answered prayer. It has a bearing on the basis on which we receive salvation from God and enter into a relationship with Him. The first step to becoming a Christian is to acknowledge that we have no standing whatsoever before God. We are worthless sinners. Paul told the Ephesians that they were "dead in their transgressions and sins," and goes on, "All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath" (Ephesians 2:1,3). If we came to Jesus confident of our good character as the basis of being received by God, we would get nowhere. Salvation begins with accepting how God sees us.

The same principle applies throughout our lives as Christians. God will often put us in situations, in jobs, in relationships which we would rather avoid or escape. Having our prayers answered depends first on accepting where God has placed us and ceasing, in Paul's words, to kick against the goads' (Acts 26:14). Norman Anderson told me the story of a great missionary to the Arab world called Arthur Upton who after a short period on the mission field went deaf. He went to the Keswick Convention

when home on furlough and asked the Lord for healing. He received back his hearing for just a very short time - about 20 minutes. Many people begged him afterwards to seek healing again but he always refused. He argued, "God gave me back my hearing, but then chose to take it away again. I will not ask him for it a second time." Norman Anderson went on to tell me of this missionary's outstanding work as a writer of tracts in Arabic for use in Egypt and elsewhere. He accepted the framework God had laid down for his ministry, and God used him greatly within that framework. I am reminded of Paul who asked God three times to remove some severe ailment, but then accepted it when God did not take it away (2 Corinthians 12: 7-10).

Of course, on occasion we should persevere in prayer for some significant change in our circumstances. Indeed, when we know such a change would be within God's will, such as the conversion of a close relative, such prayer is almost mandatory for a Christian! Nor should we necessarily accept our lot in terms of education, income and anything else when we have God-given opportunities to learn, or to exercise stewardship over our gifts, or to increase our earnings - perhaps through plain hard work.

However, I know from my own experience that an important barrier in my prayers, and in my spiritual life, has been my unwillingness to accept the framework for life that God has laid down for me. My particular job requires long hours, and with family and other demands there is seldom much time which I feel is really my own. Rather than accepting that as the way God has established the pattern of my life, and seeking God's grace within that framework, it has been easy to be resentful and frustrated. My underlying attitude has been, "it's unfair; I'm not getting my rights". How much better it would have been to have asked God to change it if he would - and if not, to have accepted it from His hand. Perhaps, like Paul, I would have reached the point of praising Him for it as it is. He would then show me its spiritual benefits. And this underlying frustration and tension would not then have infected my relationship with the Lord and hindered my prayers.

There are all sorts of handicaps and difficulties each of us face in life which God does not seem willing to change. It may be a difficult financial situation. It may be some physical disability or recurring ailment which the doctors cannot sort out and which the Lord does not heal, it may be some painful personal relationship which God is slow to put right. It may be a task I have been given, either at work or in the church. The lesson from this Greek woman is that we may need to *accept* this situation as being from God, at least for the time-being, and

base our prayers and our whole relationship with the Lord within the framework that this problem lays down - seeing it coming from Him. Acceptance can open up our prayer life in wonderful ways.

(b) She understood God's ways in the past. Remember the woman's response to Jesus, "even the dogs eat the crumbs..." Whether she realised it or not, the woman was making a point that had always been true in Israel's history. God had never confined his blessing only to the Jews. Much to the anger of his hearers, Jesus makes precisely this point when he preaches in Nazareth. He points to Elijah being sent to a widow in Zarephath, in the region of Sidon, when there were many widows who needed help in Israel. And Jesus points to the fact that there were many lepers in Israel back at the time of Elisha, but only Naaman the Syrian was healed (Luke 4: 25-27). The woman herself may well have known of these events.

Perhaps the woman also knew of cases of non-Jews who had been healed by Jesus Himself over the previous year, or two years. Clearly the crowds coming to hear Jesus and witness his healing ministry in Galilee included people from the area north of Israel's borders, including Tyre and Sidon (Mark 3:8).

It seems to me much more likely that this woman's answer was based on knowledge and reflection on the ways of the God of the Jews rather than it being just a particularly clever verbal response in the heat of the moment. It is possible she was appealing simply to the way life is, as part of her determination to see her daughter healed. But it is also possible she realised it might be hard to persuade a Jew to heal her daughter, and had prepared in advance the argument she would employ if pressed, just as we would prepare ourselves when going to ask a favour from the boss at work. Indeed, Jesus' resistance to immediately helping her may have been precisely to draw out of her what she had been thinking, as a lesson for his disciples and for us.

To have our prayers answered we need to *know*, and then to *appeal to*, God's own revealed will, his character, and above all his promises as the basis of our appeal to Him to intervene in our situation. We need to learn from this passage the importance of not merely begging God for this or that, but of asking ourselves - and then making the case to God - as to *why* He should do it; what is it about this situation or prayer-request which means that God for the sake of his own integrity, for the sake of his purposes and will in the world, should be prepared to answer our prayer?

There is all the difference in the world between going to God with a list of petitions which we repeat

in an almost mindless way, and going to God in prayer with a carefully argued case which rests on His own purpose and character. Look at the great prayers of the Bible - David's prayer in 2 Samuel chapter 7 or Nehemiah's prayer in Nehemiah chapter 1 for example, and you will see how these great leaders present their case to God. And yet my own prayers so often are just a list. No wonder we see so little prayer answered. We need to learn to make a case to God for those things we want, and we will learn far more of Him and His word as we do so.

I do not wish to leave the impression that persistence in prayer isn't vital. Jesus told the story of the woman who kept banging on the door of an unjust judge until he dispensed justice to illustrate the need for much persistence (Luke 18: 1-7). Sometimes we will need to keep asking. But let such prayer never rely on how often it is spoken, for it can so easily become what Jesus describes as 'vain repetition' when someone thinks they will be heard 'for their many words' (Matthew 6:7), and let us be sure that what we persist in asking for has a good case for it - that it is in line with the will of God.

(c) She believed a crumb was enough (v28). Recall how the woman replied to Jesus' apparently harsh words, "even the dogs under the table eat the children's *crumbs*" (v28). Jesus himself had suggested that to heal her daughter would involve throwing the children's *bread* to the dogs - i.e. a miraculous healing where a demon was cast out of a child was a significant and substantial event. But the woman suggests in her reply that surely to Jesus it is no more than a 'crumb'. Such is the greatness and power of Jesus that to cast out a demon is a very small thing indeed. And remember this woman was not even a Jew. 'The woman was a Greek, born in Syrian Phoenicia' (v26). Here was extraordinary faith. No wonder Jesus says to the woman in Matthew's account, "Woman, you have great faith" (Matthew 15: 28).

The woman further demonstrates her faith as she leaves to go home. When Jesus apparently did not want to help her, she clung tenaciously to her opportunity and pleaded her case. Now that Jesus

There is all the difference in the world between going to God with a list of petitions which we repeat in an almost mindless way, and going to God in prayer with a carefully argued case which rests on His own purpose and character.

has spoken, now he assures her "the demon has left your daughter" (v29), she requires no further word or proof that Jesus has healed her daughter. She believes what Jesus says and goes home. It is hard to find other examples in the New Testament of people showing faith that Jesus could heal at a distance. There is, of course, the case of the centurion - also not a Jew - who sent Jewish elders and asked Jesus just 'to say the word' and his slave would be healed (Luke 7: 1-10). But he is the exception. Others like Jairus insisted on Jesus actually visiting his house and putting his hand on the little girl to achieve healing (Mark 5: 23).

There is a lesson here, too, for our prayers. How often are our prayers hindered by our lack of faith. We cannot believe that even God could change the situation we confront. It may be a financial crisis which seems beyond God's power to resolve. It may be relationship breakdown. It may be some physical or mental distress. We lock God out of the situation, we never even ask for help, because it is somehow too difficult for God to handle. So it never becomes the subject of our prayers.

This woman challenges our faith at this point. She believed that Jesus could do it, and that for Him the request was really just a very small thing - a crumb. She had such a sense of the greatness of Jesus, his power and authority over everything in human life, and beyond human life in the world of the spirits as well, that she was certain a word from Him would heal her daughter. There was nothing special about Jesus to look at. Yet she recognised who He really was, and the implications of his true identity for the situation she confronted. Even with our knowledge today of the cross and resurrection, with the experience of 2000 years in the Christian church, does our faith match hers? Do we recognise Jesus for who He really is, and appreciate its implications for our lives? Even a crumb is enough.

Final Thoughts

So let's summarise finally the three lessons about effective prayer that we can learn from this Greek woman, from outside Israel, who came to Jesus for help.

Firstly she *accepted* the framework Jesus set down. You remember that when Jesus described her as a 'dog', with no status in terms of Israel's covenant, she does fight against 'the system'. She accepts it, and presents her case on the basis that this is framework God has laid down. We need to ask God to help us discern the framework He has laid down for our lives so that we do not try to change what is part of His established purpose.

Secondly, she *argued* with Jesus on the basis of God's way of doing things. In saying to Jesus that even the crumbs were thrown to the dogs she was

showing an understanding of how God had always dealt with the nations outside Israel. They had *always* received the crumbs. Prayer is effective when we argue our case with God, and when we argue it on the basis of His track-record, His character, His promises.

Thirdly, she appeals to Jesus' power to change things. While Jesus speaks of it being wrong to throw the *bread* to the dogs, she speaks of the dogs eating the *crumbs*. In her mind, the healing of her little girl is a small, small thing for Jesus to do - a crumb. She has such a high level of trust and confidence in Jesus' ability to handle the crisis in her life. For this woman, the issue is not whether Jesus can do it, but how to persuade him that he should do it for her.

So she accepts, she argues, she appeals. No wonder Jesus says of her, 'You are a woman of great faith' (Matthew 15:28).

Questions for Discussion

1. Why does God sometimes answer our prayers, and sometimes seems not to? What do you think are the chief barriers to effective prayer?
2. What is the significance of the details Mark gives us about Jesus' plans, the woman's background and the daughter's illness? (vv24-26).
3. Jesus turns her away. This is out of character. What reason does Jesus give? Can you interpret his statement in terms of the history of Israel's special relationship with God and its impact on Israel's relationship with surrounding nations?
4. Why does the woman not argue with Jesus about her status, or appeal to the Equal Opportunities Commission? Is there a lesson here for our prayers? Are there times we should *accept* the framework (job, home, relationships, church) which God has laid down for our lives? (cf. 2 Corinthians 12: 7-10).
5. What is the woman's argument back to Jesus in verse 28? What is she really saying? What does this tell us about her understanding of God's relationship with non-Jews in the past? Was she right?
6. When we ask God to give us some blessing (the conversion of a relative, a more exciting church life, a spouse, a better job ...), do we argue our case with God? Why do we so often fail to assume that God is rational and likes us to make our case to Him based on His character, His revealed will, His promises?
7. The woman asks only for 'crumbs'? What is the 'crumb' she is asking for? What does this vocabulary tell us about her view of Jesus? Is there a lesson here for our own prayers?
8. Jesus does a U-turn in his response to the woman's reply. What has persuaded him? In what ways has she shown 'faith'?
9. Think about one issue you are praying about at the moment. In what ways are you showing faith in the way you are praying for it? How could you show more faith in your prayers on that issue?
10. The woman went home without further discussion as soon as Jesus told her that the demon had left her daughter (v29). Jesus did not go with her. She did not ask for proof. Are there situations today when God tests our faith further in the way he answers our prayers?

6. 'All Real Life is Meeting': The Impact of an Encounter with Jesus

Mark 10: 17-22

¹⁷As Jesus started on his way, a man ran up to him and fell on his knees before him. "Good teacher," he asked, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

¹⁸"Why do you call me good?" Jesus answered. "No-one is good – except God alone. ¹⁹You know the commandments: 'Do not murder, do not commit adultery, do not steal, do not give false testimony, do not defraud, honour your mother and father.'"

²⁰"Teacher," he declared, "all these I have kept since I was a boy.

²¹Jesus looked at him and loved him. "One thing you lack," he said. "Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me."

²²At this the man's face fell. He went away sad, because he had great wealth.

We generally associate key turning points in our lives with career choices. However, sometimes - and perhaps more often than we realise - the turning point revolves around someone we meet and subsequently get to know. The most obvious example is the moment we first meet a particular person of the opposite sex who later on becomes a spouse! Many people can remember well that first encounter. But it may be a teacher at school who plays a significant role in our lives, giving us an interest in a school subject which later determines our career path or moulding our approach to life along particular lines. Or perhaps some 'chance' encounter with someone at a conference, or in the course of a business transaction, changes profoundly our perspectives and priorities. Perhaps it is the long-term steady influence of a close friend or business colleague, although we find it difficult to remember the moment of first meeting. Meeting other people can be on some occasions an exciting and even dangerous opportunity.

A meeting with Jesus is the most exciting and challenging of all encounters. What is at stake as the young man in our passage meets Jesus is not just his career, not just every day for the rest of his life, but his eternal destiny. How he responds to Jesus will determine the pattern of every other relationship he has; the decision he makes will have much more far-reaching effects than even his decision as to whom he marries. The reverberations will be felt over the rest of his life, over every part of his human experience, and will stretch beyond life into the vast arena of eternity. So we do well to study carefully what is in this man's mind as he

approaches Jesus, what Jesus offers him and how he responds, to see what we can learn from this encounter.

What do we know about the man? (v17)

Mark simply describes this person as 'a man' (v17). We have to turn to Matthew or Luke's account to find out that he was a *young* man, although we might guess that from the fact that he comes *running* to Jesus. Mark never wastes even a word, so might expect us to put two and two together after telling us about the energetic style of approach! He is, it seems, eager to catch Jesus before he leaves the village for his onward journey to Jerusalem. He has a burning question, and it is to Jesus that he chooses to put that question. We may guess he has more time and respect for Jesus' opinion on his problem than he has for that of the religious establishment.

This fundamental respect for the person of Jesus also finds expression in the way the man falls down on his knees in front of Jesus. This was no more a normal style of greeting than it would be today. The only other individuals who fall on their knees in front of Jesus in the gospels are a man with leprosy (Mark 1: 40), fathers desperate about the mental illness of their children (Mark 5: 22, Matthew 17: 14), and Peter after an enormous and dramatic catch of fish (Luke 5: 8). These are all moments of extreme stress or drama, and not part of every-day behaviour. The man's action reveals the unusual depth of his respect for Jesus, and the way he runs up to Jesus perhaps demonstrates a rather impetuous character. But it also indicates that he recognises that Jesus is greater than he, a person of

profound religious wisdom and insight, one of the most important people on the face of the earth. This is in defiance of the views of the religious establishment of his day, of which he would almost certainly have been aware, and suggests some independence of thought.

The few words in his question recorded by Mark also tell us quite a bit about his theological starting point. He asks, 'what must I do to inherit eternal life?' Mark uses the imperfect tense, literally he was asking, which suggests that in fact he poured out much more than this but that Mark has chosen only to summarise the essence of the question he raised. The question tells us first that this man believed that there was such a thing as eternal life. He may not have understood the term in quite the same way as Jesus did, but where did his belief come from? He was obviously from a religious background. Jesus says to him a little later, 'You know the commandments ...' (v19), which may have been true of all young men at the time, or may indicate Jesus could discern, by means natural or supernatural, this man's religious upbringing. The young man may have learnt it from one or two key Old Testament texts (e.g. Daniel 12: 2). Or he might have followed the Pharisees rather than the Sadducees, for the Pharisees taught that there was eternal life based on teaching in their traditional literature, such as the book of Maccabees, as well as some Old Testament texts. Or perhaps he heard Jesus speaking about eternal life on some earlier occasion, which seems to me the most likely possibility.

It would have been difficult to ask Jesus a question at the end of one of his public sermons because of the crush. So the young man chooses a quiet moment when Jesus is less busy to seek clarification of what Jesus had said. Perhaps the fact that he comes running indicates he had been watching and waiting down the street for Jesus to leave the house, as he did not want to bother Jesus at home. All this would help to explain the great warmth Jesus obviously feels towards him later in the story (v21).

His question also reveals that he believes his access to eternal life depends on his decision and his action. The question he asks is, 'what must I *do* to inherit eternal life?' He held the view that his destiny in eternity lay in his own hands, under his own control. All he sought from Jesus was direction as to how he could act in such a way as to procure the salvation he sought. He saw eternal life as a reward, in common with all forms of human religion which advocate ethical behaviour on the reward principle. His expectations were already conditioned by his culture. And as he is seeking something he must do, Jesus gives him something he must do, as we shall see.

The third aspect of this man's situation which we can learn from his question is that his problem was one of assurance. Like so many people today, this man believed in life after death, but had no assurance that he would be one of those who would 'inherit' this supreme gift or privilege. The use of the word 'inherit' is, in fact, a little odd in this context. For what you inherit is a gift, a bequest, and not something you earn, and not something which depends on anything you do. An inheritance depends on who you are, not what you do. And yet he asks 'what must I *do* to *inherit* eternal life?'. This seems to be a contradiction in terms. In any event, it is his lack of assurance, and the absence of peace of mind about his destiny, which spurs him on to seek out Jesus. The fact that he comes running, and falls at Jesus' feet, suggests that the 'issue' is worrying him deeply. Here is no casual encounter, no frivolous or ensnaring question; rather here is a man earnestly wanting to find an answer which will allow him peace in his soul.

One more thing we know about this man; he had a superficial view of goodness, and thus probably a superficial view of God. Jesus is obviously listening to every word carefully, for he picks out one word in what the man said to throw a question back at him, 'Why do you call me good? No one is good - except God alone' (v18). Jesus is using shock tactics. 'Why have you come to me? What do you think really constitutes goodness? Isn't your view of goodness, and by implication your view of God, rather superficial? So Jesus introduces the theme of what constitutes goodness which he goes on to explore. That this man has a superficial view of goodness is further confirmed by his self-assessment that he has kept all the commandments cited by Jesus since he was a boy (v20). For a Jew, God alone was good, although the word 'good' could also be used to describe what was created by God (e.g. Genesis 1: 31). So by calling Jesus 'good', he was either acknowledging Jesus as divine, which the context here clearly rules out, or he is using the word 'good' in an exaggerated or careless manner.

After Jesus has questioned the use of the word 'good', and thus set the stage for a discussion of what constitutes goodness as far as God is concerned, he does not wait for an answer. And so we now turn to the second broad question raised in this passage.

What does Jesus offer him? What is the deal?

So how does Jesus answer the question, 'Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?' After picking up the young man's use of the word 'good' by pointing out that only God is good, Jesus follows it up with a focus on God's law as a definition. 'You

know the commandments', he says, 'do not murder, do not commit adultery, do not steal, do not give false testimony, do not defraud, honour your father and mother' (v19). In effect Jesus is saying this: To inherit eternal life you must be perfectly good, and goodness consists of doing God's will; God's will is expressed in the ten commandments. So if you keep the ten commandments, you will be good and you will inherit eternal life.

Jesus is not the first to assert that keeping the law will procure eternal life. Moses says the same (Leviticus 18: 5, Deuteronomy 30: 19), and indeed Jesus makes the connection explicit in his encounter on another occasion with a lawyer (Luke 10: 28). The problem, of course, is that none of us is capable of keeping the law. Jesus, it seems, is trying to make the young man face up to the fact that he does not, and cannot, keep the law, and so attain goodness and eternal life, by that route. However, the young man fails to take the point, for he believes he has in fact kept the law all or most of his life. So he thinks he is good, that he has done all that is necessary to attain eternal life, although he still lacks peace about it.

The order in which Jesus quotes the commandments, as well as his choice of what to cite and what to omit, reinforce this point. Jesus refers the young man to those commandments which are concerned with social relationships rather than those ordering the individual's relationship with God directly. For a wealthy person it is perhaps easier to deceive yourself that you keep the Godward commandments rather than the manward. The order of the commandments cited by Jesus is also significant.

<u>Order in Decalogue</u>	<u>Content</u>
6	do not murder
7	do not commit adultery
8	do not steal
9	do not give false testimony
8 (corollary)	do not defraud (corollary of do not steal)
5	honour your father and mother

It seems likely that Jesus leads the young man from those where he might feel most comfortable to those where he might feel most vulnerable. Without realising that murder includes 'murder in the heart', or simply anger (Matthew 5: 27), the young man might have felt he had kept the sixth commandment. So, too, with the seventh, eighth and ninth commandments if the application of each commandment is kept very tight. To bring home to him his sin, Jesus first uses a corollary of the eighth commandment, 'Do not defraud'. As a wealthy man,

he almost certainly had financial interests. The question here is whether he pays his workers properly, and whether all business transactions are completely honest. It was as easy then as it is now to rationalise paying lousy wages by an appeal to 'market forces'. Then Jesus asks him about how he has treated his parents.

Both 'defraud' and 'honour' are more about what we fail to do than about what we do, about sins of omission rather than sins of commission. In Luke 10, Jesus uses the story of the Good Samaritan to bring home to a lawyer the point that righteousness in God's eyes involves positive actions for good, and not simply the avoidance of evil. For in that story the priest and Levite who passed by on the other side without stopping to help the stricken Samaritan could, like the young man in our passage here, have thought to themselves that they had not broken any of the commandments because they had not committed any evil act. The 'sins of omission' test is far more rigorous. So here Jesus, I believe, is trying to make the young man realise his sinfulness, the absence of goodness, by emphasising at the end of the list those commandments which are not about doing something wrong, but about failing to do something right.

Despite Jesus' efforts to make the man realise his sinfulness, the young man's response shows no sign of any awareness of how God sees him. With an extraordinary display of spiritual confidence he says to Jesus, 'Teacher, all these I have kept since I was a boy'. This man may have lacked assurance of salvation, but this lack of assurance did not trace back to an awareness of his sinfulness before God. Because he is ignorant of the extent of the application of God's law to the thoughts and attitudes of our hearts, which Jesus spells out in Matthew 5, like many others then and now this man thought that sin was not his problem. Jesus now faces a problem: how can he get across to this man that his relationship with God is not right?

Jesus now gives this young man a tough answer. But before we come to that, Mark gives us a glimpse of what Jesus was feeling and thinking at this moment, 'Jesus looked at him and loved him.' (v21). What endeared him to Jesus so much? It may have been his eagerness to find an answer, for he came running. It may have been his willingness to seek an answer from Jesus in defiance of the religious establishment. Perhaps Jesus rejoiced at this young man's humility, for how many others had fallen at his feet just to ask a question? Or perhaps Jesus felt sympathy for a person who struggled so deeply with lack of spiritual assurance - who had so much wealth but so little peace. Whatever the reason, we are told Jesus 'loved him'.

The context in which this young man is given the tough options which follow is of crucial importance to its interpretation. A message is conveyed not just by the words which are spoken but by the manner in which they are delivered, and indeed by the wider context of circumstances. Remember that this incident occurs 'as Jesus started on his way' (v17). Jesus is setting out on the next day's journey, which will take him a day closer to the cross. Jesus is prepared to lay down his life for this young man, to face a moment of eternal separation from the Father, to take upon Himself all the evil of the world, so that this young man could have the eternal life he sought. It is against this background, and in the context of the great warmth of love that Jesus has for this young man, that Jesus issues his make-or-break challenge.

So here is the deal Jesus offers the young man. 'One thing you lack. Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven, then come, follow me' (v21). Jesus does not give this man a long sermon, or a long list of things he must do. With unerring accuracy, he 'focuses down on to the one key issue in this man's life: 'One thing you lack', says Jesus. Everything else might be fine, but if just one thing stands between a person and their complete commitment to God, it is sufficient to take away salvation itself. 'One thing you lack', says Jesus.

And what did he lack? It is not immediately obvious what he lacks. It is clear what he does not lack in human terms. Money. Possessions. Jesus tells him to go and sell everything he has. So perhaps what he lacks is a willingness to part with possessions, a willingness to give up comfort, security, good food, personal enjoyment and excitement. The crunch issue is this: what matters most in life? Is it to know God, or is it to have a comfortable and secure lifestyle? To sell what he had would be hard. It might include a farm where he had been brought up, his home, trendy clothes, and the kind of personal effects which provide prestige and guarantee you are shown respect by your neighbours. Money buys reputation as well as comfort.

There is more that Jesus says to this man than just 'sell your possessions'. Jesus also tells him to give his money to the poor. Calvin in his commentary on these verses tells of a man called Crates, a Theban, who threw his money into the sea for he did not think he could save himself unless his wealth were

lost. Jesus does not just ask this man to sell everything he has; he also asks him to give the proceeds to the poor. The issue is not primarily abstinence, asceticism, or mortification of the flesh, but ensuring right relationships - both vertically with God and horizontally with neighbours. It is in the giving of his wealth to the poor that this man will please God, who is the one who hears the cry of the needy and the afflicted.

We may also note in passing that Jesus does not tell the young man to sell all he has and give the money to him and to his movement. Unlike many of today's cults which ask their adherents to give up their possessions and give the resulting wealth to 'the cause', which all too often means to the personal bank accounts of its leaders, Jesus never anywhere in his ministry asks for money, food or any other material support from any person. He looks only to his heavenly Father for all these things.

What is this young man offered if he will sell all he has? What Jesus promises is not wealth and honour in some future political scenario where he will rule in Jerusalem having ousted the Roman armies. No, Jesus simply says '... and you will have treasure in heaven.' It is hard to know what exactly Jesus means, for clearly there are no bank accounts or financial assets in heaven! However, elsewhere as here Jesus speaks of treasure or reward in heaven, (e.g. Matthew 5: 12, 6: 19), suggesting some special form of blessing which God gives under particular circumstances when a person reaches heaven.

We are not unfamiliar with people making sacrifices today for the sake of some benefit in the distant future. Nearly 20 per cent of those in their 20s, I believe, now set aside money for their pension which they will only receive when they are 65. Such savings have to be seen as an act of faith, for some of these savers will never reach the age of 65, and the possibility of some future political event (e.g. a war), or a financial upheaval which will wipe out these savings, cannot be ruled out. In contrast, Jesus' offer of treasure in heaven is absolutely certain and indestructible (Matthew 6: 19-21). The only condition necessary to receive it is 'faith', that is 'being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see (Hebrews 11: 1).

Again, this young man is being challenged by Jesus as to whether he really believes in eternal realities. For if his faith is genuine, he will make sacrifices today to secure his future tomorrow. Sometimes there is no way to find out if a person really believes something is true, or what they are really thinking deep down, without challenging them to some real act of commitment which compels them to come off the fence. Did this young man really believe Jesus' promise of treasure in heaven? Jesus puts the offer

What matters most in life? Is it to know God, or is it to have a comfortable and secure lifestyle?

in such a way that the man is compelled to reveal his hand.

Jesus does not tell this man, having sold everything he has, to retreat from the hurly burly of life and enter a monastery. Rather the opposite. Jesus says, 'Then, come, follow me'. Follow Jesus? Where to? Remember where Jesus is going. He is on his way to Jerusalem, to the pain, the humiliation, the rejection and the social exclusion of the cross. Here is the antithesis of the comfort, pleasure-seeking, social acceptance and security of the life of a wealthy young aristocrat. Jesus wants this young man close to him, to be involved in the great events about to unfold in Jerusalem, unentangled by the financial interests and concerns of his wealthy background.

Above all, Jesus wants him close to him, so that the young man will come to know him, so that a deep personal and permanent relationship can be established. For this is Jesus' primary goal with each one of his disciples, that we should live in an intimate relationship with him and he with us. Anything which hinders the development of that relationship has to go. Nothing may stand in its way. For this young man the choice lay between holding on to wealth and getting to know Jesus deeply by following him. No middle way is offered. It is all or nothing.

At this point it is important to stress that Jesus does not tell all his disciples to sell all they have. Joseph of Arimathea, for example, who gave his tomb to Jesus after the crucifixion was clearly a wealthy man. He is described by Matthew as rich and a disciple of Jesus (Matthew 27: 57), and Luke says of him that he was 'a good and upright man' (Luke 23: 50). In the book of Acts, although some sold their fields to support the apostles and the growth of the church (Acts 2: 45), there is no criticism of those who did not. Indeed, in the case of Ananias and Sapphira, who lied about the price at which they sold their property, Peter makes it absolutely clear that Ananias was under no obligation as a disciple to sell his property, and after selling it he was under no obligation to give the proceeds to the church (Acts 5: 4). The issue for Ananias was truth-telling, not sale of assets. Looking at the issue more widely, given the responsibility we are given to provide for parents and other relatives (Mark 7: 9-13, 1 Timothy 5: 3-8), it would be wrong for many then and now to sell all their possessions and give their money to the poor.

So why then does Jesus demand that this particular young man sell all he has? Surely the reason is that for this young man the one thing which prevented him following Jesus with all his heart and soul was his wealth. For others it may be reputation, family, a chosen career, a girlfriend or boyfriend, a sport, fashion or even a dog. Perhaps wealth is not an

uncommon obstacle to full-blooded discipleship, however, and it is to a fuller discussion of the rewards of the disciple that Jesus moves on after the young man has left (vv23-27).

How does the young man respond?

Mark tells us in a few brief words the outcome of this encounter, "At this the man's face fell. He went away said, because he had great wealth" (v22). It's not clear what exactly Mark means when he says "his face fell". Literally the Greek means that he looked sombre or gloomy. The same word is used by Jesus to describe an overcast sky (Matthew 16: 3). We may imagine that when the young man had run up to Jesus, he looked hopeful, excited, expectant. Our facial expressions so often betray our feelings, and so here. The young man had come with high hopes of resolving the tensions and uncertainties in his heart. He must now face the reality that he cannot be sure of his salvation without giving up his wealth. He cannot have both his comfortable lifestyle and 'assurance of salvation'. He has to make a choice.

Matthew Henry, who wrote on this passage nearly 300 years ago, believed that this man in effect despised Christ, as do all of us who prefer the world before him. For you cannot serve God and Mammon. Matthew Henry wrote this about the young man, "He bids for what he has a mind for in the market, yet goes away grieved, and leaves it, because he cannot have it at his own price."

Jesus lets him go. Jesus makes no special concession, no attempt to persuade him, because he is rich. Jesus makes no attempt to find a middle way, to tone down his demands, to find a compromise solution. Jesus does not call him back. What evangelist today would have been so tough? What Christian worker would have turned away someone with such intense interest? Which of us as Christians is prepared to say 'take it or leave it' and watch our potential disciple walk away? Yet Jesus' attitude is not that of the tough businessman who is able to distance himself emotionally from the human consequences of his decisions. No, we know Jesus was emotionally engaged, for we are told Jesus 'loved him' (v21). But there was no way round the choice the man had to make. It was time to 'bite the bullet'. He had to make up his mind what mattered most to him in life.

And so must we.

Questions for Discussion

1. What have been the main turning points in your life? To what extent were they connected with meeting a particular person?
2. What do we know about this 'man' of verse 17? (See also the rest of these verses, and Matthew 19: 16-22). In particular, what can you tell from the passage about his view of Jesus, and his view of himself?
3. When people kneel in front of Jesus in the gospels, it is usually a sign of crisis in their lives (e.g. Mark 1: 40, Mark 5: 22, Matthew 17: 14, Luke 5:8). What do you think might have been troubling this young man sufficiently to make him kneel in front of Jesus?
4. What are the assumptions which lie behind the young man's question in verse 17? And why do you think he lacks assurance about his eternal destiny?
5. What gives away the fact that he has a superficial view of goodness? (vv18-20).
6. Can you find any significance in which commandments Jesus cites to this young man, how they are worded, or the order in which they are quoted? (compare v19 with Exodus 10: 1-17, especially vv12-17).
7. From Mark's telling of this story, what do you think might have prompted Jesus' special feeling of love towards this young man?
8. Jesus says to the young man, 'one thing you lack' (v21). From the context, what do you think that was?
9. Jesus does not tell all his followers to sell everything they have and give to the poor (e.g. Matthew 27: 57, Acts 5: 4). So why do you think Jesus makes it a key issue for this young man?
10. 'The man went away sad' (v22). Why do you think Jesus was unwilling to compromise on his earlier conditions? What are the implications of Jesus' uncompromising attitude for us today?

7. The Relational Implications of Paying Taxes to Caesar

Mark 12: 13-17

¹³Later they sent some of the Pharisees and Herodians to Jesus to catch him in his words. ¹⁴They came to him and said, "Teacher, we know you are a man of integrity. You aren't swayed by men, because you pay no attention to who they are; but you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth. Is it right to pay taxes to Caesar or not? ¹⁵Should we pay or shouldn't we?"

But Jesus knew their hypocrisy. "Why are you trying to trap me?" he asked. "Bring me a denarius and let me look at it." ¹⁶They brought the coin, and he asked them, "Whose portrait is this? And whose inscription?"

"Caesar's," they replied.

¹⁷Then Jesus said to them, "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's."

And they were amazed at him.

Life seems to be all about compromise. How often have we heard it said that an issue is not just black and white? Issues are seldom clear-cut, always more complex than at first sight. So often we feel compelled to act not as we would really like to in a given situation, but in ways which satisfy other people, even other interest groups. Different factors have to be weighed up, a balance has to be struck.

Politics has been called the art of compromise. The art is to find the point of consensus, the middle way, which will keep enough people on board. Yet as a leader your task is to take 'the people' and 'the system' in the direction you believe it should go. You have to decide what you will compromise on, and what is of such importance that you will allow no compromise. Otherwise politics becomes simply a matter of holding on to power for its own sake. I have just been reading Mrs Thatcher's autobiography. She was utterly committed to bringing in 'the free market'. She would make compromises on other issues, but not on her central objective.

In spiritual matters alone, arguably, there should be no compromise. Our goal should be to love the Lord our God with *all* our heart, soul, mind and strength (Mark 12:30). Jesus urges his followers to leave *everything* to follow him; we can hold nothing back. While God does not always ask us to give up everything to follow him, he requires that we should always be ready to do so. In practice, we have to take into consideration a number of practical realities, of course. We need a pension so we do not become a burden on others in our old age. We need to provide for our families, for if we

don't Paul tells us we will have 'denied the faith' (1 Timothy 5:8). We need to seek wisdom and listen to advice, so often urged in Proverbs. Yet there is the nagging truth that many of us have ceased to give our all to God. We end up protecting reputation, income, position in church or company. We no longer give to God what is God's.

There are two ways in which Christians can all too easily compromise when involved in the world of politics so that they no longer give God their full allegiance. The first is to believe that the *main* way to change situations of oppression, exploitation and injustice is through political means, that is, through the use of power. Christians have joined wholeheartedly into secular political movements, on the Right and on the Left, believing those movements could end injustice. Also, Christians have started 'Christian parties' and movements to bring in a better world, such as the Christian Socialist Movement in Britain and Christian Democratic parties in continental Europe. Christians were prominent in the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa and in other revolutionary movements against colonialism.

I am not suggesting Christians should stay out of politics. Far from it! Our Christian 'salt' is needed as much in the world of politics as in business, education, medicine and financial markets. Christians need to be involved so as to fight corrupt practices and to demonstrate integrity, honesty and transparency. Much can be achieved to bring about greater justice in society through the political process. However, it is easy for Christians in politics to set their expectations too high on what politics

can deliver. When deeply involved in politics, it is easy to forget that *all* systems breed injustice; only when people commit themselves to Christ and His Kingdom will injustice end.

A particularly dangerous form of spiritual compromise in the world of politics occurs when politicians seek to use the church for political ends. We can see in Mark's gospel how the Pharisees were using the Sabbath, and the Temple, not to encourage faith but as symbols of nationalist resistance to Roman rule. Politicians today will frequently try to co-opt the church as an institution, or particular church leaders, to serve selfish political ends. Again, there are desperate situations where such involvement is legitimate; there is at least one example within Scripture itself (2 Kings 11). However, I fear that more often than not, the primary motivation of politicians involving the church is the pursuit of power for personal ends rather than the pursuit of righteousness for God's sake.

The second form of spiritual compromise in politics is for Christians to become part of a political party or process although it is utterly corrupt, and based only on the pursuit of power or financial greed. This is not to suggest that Christians should never be part of a corrupt government. Which government is not corrupt? Obadiah played a crucial role in Ahab's government in saving 100 of God's people (1 Kings 18: 13). However, it is so easy to compromise, to start to go along with things that are wrong, to fail to say 'no' because it may prevent you exercising influence in the future. Gradually a person in this situation legitimates wrong attitudes and actions in their lives, and through a series of events, each small in themselves, becomes thoroughly compromised.

In practice, the decisions which Christian politicians have to make are often very difficult. I saw this first-hand when I was running the Keep Sunday Special Campaign in Britain. Christian MPs had to decide whether to vote against the orders of their own government and risk losing future promotion prospects, or whether to support total deregulation of Sunday Trading with all the results that would have on family and community life. Some decided to vote one way and some the other. Only God can judge their hearts and their actions.

In this incident Jesus was presented with two possible compromises in an attempt to trap him. We shall see how he responds.

The Question and its Preamble (vv13-15)

The first issue to raise is who asked this question and why. Mark tells us that the questioners were Pharisees and Herodians, and Matthew adds that they were 'disciples' of the Pharisees (Matthew 22:

15). They did not come of their own accord but were 'sent', presumably by the chief priests who were looking for a way to kill Jesus (Mark 11: 18). Clearly Jesus had managed to upset all the senior groupings that had political influence in Israel at that time. The Pharisees had a theological problem with Roman rule, because God alone ruled the world: so they were looking for God to intervene and restore His people to their rightful position as top dogs. They probably rationalised the current situation on the basis that God sometimes puts pagan individuals in charge for a time (Daniel 2: 20-21). In contrast, the Herodians were unashamedly allied with the Romans on a purely pragmatic basis. The chief priests tried to play it both ways; they went along with Roman rule but at the same time constantly promoted the temple as a nationalistic symbol in case the long-awaited Messiah actually did turn up. Despite the very different attitudes of the Pharisees and the Herodians to both politics and religion, they all agreed on one thing - Jesus must go!

Why did both the Pharisees and the Herodians feel so threatened by Jesus? Remember how they came together early on in Jesus' ministry to share ideas as to how they might kill him (Mark 3: 6). It seems that the Pharisees felt threatened by Jesus because he attacked their literalistic and hard-line interpretation of the Law on which their hold over the people rested. The Herodians recognised that as Jesus called people to radical discipleship this would undermine the compliant attitude to Rome which they were encouraging. Jesus' ride into Jerusalem as the prophet-king would certainly have encouraged such a view. Both groups must have felt directly attacked by Jesus' parable of the Tenants in the vineyard in which Jesus made clear his view that when God did return to Jerusalem they would lose their privileged positions (Mark 12: 1-12). At root the issues were all about power and status. They so often are.

Their aim was 'to catch Jesus in his words' (v13). Very shortly they would abandon this strategy (v34), but for now this was how they hoped they could destroy Jesus. They were under no illusions about Jesus' popularity with the crowds (v12). So what exactly were they hoping to achieve with this question? They hoped to drive a wedge between Jesus and the crowd; alternatively, if Jesus was foolish enough to tell the crowds that they should not be paying taxes to the Roman Emperor, they could hope to persuade the local Roman officials that Jesus really was a threat as a seditious person and disturber of the peace. Up to this point the Romans seem to have been remarkably laid back about Jesus despite the obvious and large following which he had. However, just one sentence by Jesus questioning the right of the Emperor to collect taxes

would probably be enough to make them want to silence him for good.

They start with flattery. 'Teacher, we know you are a man of integrity. You aren't swayed by men, because you pay no attention to who they are; but you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth ...'. There are two elements in this flattery. In saying Jesus is (lit.) 'true', and (lit.) 'does not look on anyone's face', they are stressing that Jesus is not afraid of anyone; no matter what the subject and who the audience, what Jesus says will still be the same. This is to say Jesus is a person of utter integrity, courage and commitment to truth. He teaches without ambition, greed or other wrong motivation. Secondly, he is a faithful interpreter of God, he teaches the way of God rather than merely human ideas. So what he says can be utterly relied upon. He is not trying to win the approval of men but of God (cf. Galatians 6: 10). It is ironic that these men have such an accurate understanding of what constitutes a good teacher and yet cannot recognise one when he is standing in front of them.

So why this flattery? What were they trying to achieve by it? Perhaps they were trying to make Jesus relax and therefore get him off guard. More likely the flattery was aimed at the bystanders: they are trying to put Jesus on a pedestal so that people would take special notice of what he said in answer to this question. They want to underline the importance and significance of his reply. It is a measure of their confidence that they are willing to go to these lengths to ensure people listen carefully to what Jesus says here. They must have been really sure that they had got him this time.

The question of paying taxes is indeed highly charged. As Tom Wright has pointed out, the background of the Jewish listeners was well stocked with stories of slavery, battles and freedom- the Exodus, the Maccabean revolt, and most recently the revolt of Judas the Galilean. In their minds Temple, taxes, revolution and Messiahship all went together. Jesus' ride into Jerusalem two days before, followed by the cleansing of the temple, were highly symbolic actions, and would have been interpreted by many in Messianic terms. With it being Passover time especially, people were psychologically ready for something to happen.

The technical background to the question explains further why this particular tax which was paid to the Romans, was such a politically charged issue. It was referred to as the 'census tax' and was probably therefore a poll tax. Poll taxes are always unpopular with the masses because they feel it is unfair that the rich and the poor should have to pay the same amount. It was imposed when the Jews asked for Herod Archelaus to be removed in AD6 owing to his excesses and the Romans put in a Procurator. The

tax was paid straight to the Imperial Treasury. It came on top of all the local income and property taxes and the customs duties. It was only paid by those living in the area governed by the Procurator and so did not, for example, affect Galilee. According to Josephus, it aroused an intense feeling of nationalism and may have been a major factor in the rise of the Zealot movement.²

The question as posed was in fact a theological one: 'Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or not?' In other words, 'Does God allow us to pay this tax according to the Torah?' Behind the question is another question, of course, which is this: is this a lawful or legitimate tax, or to put it another way, do the Romans have the right to be ruling us? The question is then put in the starkest possible form - 'should we pay the tax or shouldn't we?' So the question has the aim of smoking Jesus out, forcing him to declare his hand on his attitude to Roman rule.

At an altogether deeper level, the issue at stake goes way beyond the question of tax. It is about Israel's destiny as the people of God. Is Israel's calling from Yahweh primarily about preserving her national identity until He returns to Jerusalem to set up his rule over the whole world, using violence when necessary? After all, Phineas and Elijah had both used force in times past to maintain the ethnic and religious purity of Israel (Numbers 25: 7, I Kings 18: 40). Or is Yahweh's purpose for Israel to be a 'light to the nations'? To play such a role it would, of course, be counter-productive to use violence against those Israel was called to influence. Is God's way in the world fundamentally about politics or to do with the attitudes of the heart, where politics is just one area of the outworking God brings about? If the key issue is for Israel to fight for her identity, then the people should not pay the tax; the only question then is whether or not this is the best moment to organise a revolt against Rome.

The Pharisees and Herodians were not interested at this point in using Jesus to lead a revolution against Rome. They simply wanted to get Jesus out of the way as he was undermining their position in society. So whichever way he answered would serve their purpose. If he said they should not pay the tax, they could get the Romans to execute him on charges of sedition. If he said they should pay the tax, he would lose much of his popularity with the people, and thus his influence. And if he refused to answer, the Pharisees could play it both ways. They could get the Romans to feel angry and at the same time they could stir up the people against Jesus. No wonder they felt so confident.

² See Robinson ...

Jesus Asks For a Coin (vv15-16)

'But Jesus knew their hypocrisy' (v15). To us the hypocrisy seems obvious, so why does Jesus bother to expose it? Presumably he does so because it was not obvious to the bystanders at the time. The words were all innocent enough. Nothing in the tone of voice, or in the opening remarks gave the game away. As this was both an ethically difficult and a politically burning question, there was no reason to doubt the sincerity of the questioners. However, Jesus wants those around him to realise that the Pharisees are 'trying to trap him' so that they realise the context in which to interpret his answer. For as we shall see his answer will not be unambiguous, and under different circumstances Jesus might have given a more transparent response.

So Jesus asks for a coin. To understand why we first have to know what this particular coin says on it. The census-tax had to be paid with a silver coin issued by the emperor. On one side was a bust of the current emperor - Tiberius (14-37AD) - crowned with a laurel wreath as a sign of his divine dignity and an inscription saying 'Tiberius Emperor, August Son of the Divine Augustus'. On the other side was a continuation of the inscription with the words 'High Priest'. Beneath this was an image of the wife of Augustus and mother of Tiberius, Livia, seated on a divine throne with a long Olympic sceptre in her right hand, and in her left an olive branch; she was portrayed as the incarnation of heavenly peace. Such a coin was blasphemous and would have been deeply offensive to the Jews and doubtless was also deeply offensive to Jesus. After all, Tiberius was claiming a position which rightly belonged to Jesus. What an insult!

Why does Jesus ask to see such a coin? Jesus is not just playing for time. Very effectively he turns the tables on the questioners. He takes the initiative away from them and forces them to reveal their own hand first. 'Oh, so you have a coin do you? What is that telling us about your view of the Romans?' By possessing such a coin the questioners showed that they accepted the *de facto* political situation of Roman rule, pointing towards an obligation to pay the tax. As Paul was to argue in his letters later, there is an obligation to pay tax to the *de facto* rulers of the state because they are appointed by God, whether one agrees with their politics or not (Romans 13: 1-7).

Then Jesus asks them, 'Whose portrait is this? And whose inscription?' Why does Jesus ask them to look at the coin and consider what is written on it? By asking a question, Jesus is forcing them to start to think for themselves and to take responsibility for the position they adopt on the issue. That seems to be why Jesus so often uses questions to

communicate in the gospels. By making them look into the face of the Emperor and ask themselves who he was and what he represented, Jesus is drawing attention to both the political authority of the Roman government, and the spiritual arrogance of its leadership. The problem is how those two factors balance up in the decision as to whether or not to pay the tax.

Give Back to Caesar What is Caesar's and to God What is God's

Before discussing what exactly Jesus meant here, some historical background will be helpful. Tom Wright draws attention to the speech of Mattathias, the father of the revolutionary leader Judas Maccabaeus, who led the successful revolt against the Syrian imperial power less than two hundred years earlier.³ This speech would have been familiar to Jesus' listeners through the annual Jewish festival of Hanukkah. Mattathias is reported to have said to his son before he died, 'Pay back the Gentiles to the full, and obey the commands of the law.' The implication was that Judas Maccabaeus would fulfil his duty to God through fighting Rome. And that was how Judas interpreted it.

So if this was part of what was in the mind of Jesus' listeners, what would they have thought Jesus meant when he said 'Give to Caesar what is Caesar's'? Jesus seems to have made the answer deliberately ambiguous, and yet still left his listeners with a profound spiritual challenge.

On the one hand, Jesus may be interpreted to be saying 'pay the tax'. He asks for a coin and underlines the fact that it belongs to Caesar by asking whose portrait and inscription it carried. Then he says, 'Give back to Caesar what is Caesar's'. So Jesus seems to be saying, 'If you use the coinage and accept the benefits of Roman rule, you have to accept the package and that involves paying the taxes they impose. By using the verb to 'give back', rather than 'give', the point is made more strongly: the coins belong to Caesar, so give back to him what belongs to him.

By then adding, 'Give to God what is God's', many have understood Jesus to be drawing a line between the spiritual and the material. On this interpretation, Jesus is saying, 'If you give your heart to God, then the payment of tax is merely a political and pragmatic expedient. It says nothing about where loyalty and allegiance really lie, or the motivation of the payment. What really matters is your commitment to God. His interest is what goes on in our hearts'. If Jesus had really thought that the appropriate response to the blasphemy on the coin

³ Tom Wright, ...

was a revolution, he would presumably have got on and organised one himself!

On the other hand, Jesus could be understood to be saying, 'Don't pay the tax'. Jesus does not just point to the portrait on the coin: he points to the inscription as well. He asks them to look into the face of the emperor and ask themselves who he is and what he represents. Given the blasphemous nature of the inscription, is Jesus saying that the Jews don't owe Caesar anything? Also, given the background of what Mattathias said to Judas Maccabaeus, when Jesus says, 'Give back to Caesar what is Caesar's', is he in effect saying 'revolt'? And when Jesus then adds, 'Give back to God what is God's', which involves giving God not just our worship but the right to control every part of what we possess, is he saying that we should be giving our money only to people and institutions which are acceptable to God, i.e. which are not blasphemous? So does giving worship to God preclude giving tax to the Emperor? Certainly some of those present thought that what Jesus said could be interpreted in this way, because at his trial Jesus is accused of opposing paying taxes to Caesar (Luke 23: 2).

In any event when Jesus says, 'Give back to God what is God's', the issues he raises go way beyond the question of paying tax to Caesar. Jesus is speaking in the temple courts. Many of the psalms of praise which were sung in the temple celebrate God as king of the whole earth, such as Psalm 96 which urges worshippers to remember, 'For all the gods of the nations are idols, but the Lord made the heavens' (v5). Jesus is saying in effect, 'Give to Yahweh the divine honour claimed by Caesar'. By drawing a distinction between what is due to Caesar and what is due to God, Jesus implicitly is rejecting Caesar's claim to have a spiritual as well as a political kingdom, to have control on men's hearts as well as their money. It is certainly an indirect warning to the Roman authorities, and all rulers since that time, not to claim the loyalty and honour in people's lives which rightly belongs to God.

Let us think again about the issue of what is 'God's'? If God is our creator, it is difficult to put any boundaries on what belongs to God. What belongs to God is our love, our worship, our obedience, our loyalty; our time, all of it; our health and our wealth; our career, ambitions, dreams and goals; our most precious relationships with spouse, children, parents, brothers and sisters and friends. To give back to God what is God's is to give Him our service, gratitude, commitment - our total selves. This means that you cannot argue from this passage, as some have tried to do, that Jesus is saying that purses belong to Caesar and consciences belong to God. Everything we own, including the money we

use to pay our tax, belongs to God. This point is also clear from the fact that Jesus does *not* say, 'Give to Caesar what is Caesar's *but* to God what is God's'. And anything we pay to the state has to be compatible with our duty to God. When there is clash between the demands of the state and the demands of God, there is no question where our loyalties should lie (Acts 5: 29).

If everything rightfully belongs to God, this must include the Law, the Temple and the Sabbath. Perhaps Jesus is also making a protest at the way the Jewish leadership had hijacked these institutions for their own political purposes. They were treating the Temple as if they owned it! As a result they had fallen into the kind of compromise that we were discussing right at the beginning of this study. Spiritual institutions were being used as political symbols. In particular, the Temple was not being used to promote prayer and worship among the people of all nations, but as a means of focusing attention on Jewish nationalistic aspirations. The spiritual compromise runs deeper still, as nationalism results in the Pharisees and others whipping up hate against the Romans which makes it impossible to share with them their knowledge of God and His ways. As happens so often, political ambition leads to spiritual compromise.

Why is the temptation to spiritual compromise for political players so strong? Why were the Pharisees tempted to use the Sabbath, the Temple and the sacrificial formalities to achieve their political goals? And why do politicians today so often want to use the church for political purposes? Partly, no doubt, it is because politicians like the rest of us set their minds on earthly things rather than 'things above' (Colossians 3: 2). Our minds get locked on to what the world has to offer - including power, wealth and reputation. Partly, however, it is more subtle than that. The ends of justice and peace seem to justify the means of subverting the church from preaching and teaching the kingdom of God.

This argument can be taken one stage further by those who believe the church should get directly involved in politics. They would point out that God is passionately concerned about justice, which is of course true. Therefore, it is a central part of the church's mission to be involved in politics because politics is about the just distribution of power and wealth in society. They might also make the point that the Kingdom of God is to be a rule of justice on the earth. However, while individual Christians are to seek to bring justice into society through political action, the role of the church in the New testament as the community of believers - as with the priesthood in the Old Testament - seems to have been to accept the political status quo and preach the good news of the kingdom within the prevailing

political dispensation. Both by his example and in his teaching Jesus constantly seems to point his disciples away from the idea that the world can be changed through the exercise of power, and towards the extraordinary proposition that it is through 'the word of God', and through an attitude of humble service, that personal and social transformation can be achieved.

That is not to suggest that God has no interest in the political and economic structures that have such a big influence on our lives. 'The ways of the Lord' set out in the Old Testament include instruction on the need for decentralisation of power, for example. Like the Ten Commandments these rules for the ordering of life in society are for our good. God

wants His people in the world to live out and promote these values. Jesus goes so far as to say that, 'those who practice and teach the (Old Testament) commands will be great in the kingdom of heaven' (Matthew 5: 19). However, these values cannot be forced on people. You cannot use the instruments of power

available to the state to compel people to conform to a biblical lifestyle. The Puritans tried it and left a legacy of public revulsion that has lasted hundreds of years. The only way it is feasible to change the attitudes and motivations of the heart is through persuasion, and above all through the message of the gospel itself. So the means used by the church are not to be those used by the politician. Jesus refused to use the sword himself, and did not encourage his disciples to use it either. It is always tempting for Christians to think that the answer to the problems in society lies in a different and better political programme; but that is not where Jesus points us.

Final Thoughts

'And they were amazed at him' (v17). If you think back to the beginning of this conversation, it is hardly surprising that they were amazed at him. They found themselves agreeing with his answer, when their whole goal in asking the question had been to trap him in his answer. Instead of their confidence in their control of the situation, which is indicated by their flattery when they ask the question, they now find that it is once more Jesus who is in control. They do not ask for clarification. They cannot think of any supplementary question to keep the discussion alive. They were just

'gobsmacked'. Amazement, however, does not lead on to faith, at least not now.

This passage must be applied with care today. Jesus makes no attempt here to set out a general theory of church - state relations. There is certainly no idea of Luther's 'two realms' except at a very superficial reading. On the tax issue specifically, the early church- presumably in the light of reflection on Jesus' words in this context- taught that Christians should pay tax to Caesar (Romans 13: 7). When confronted with a situation where the commands of the state and obedience to God were in direct conflict, the early church had no difficulty in deciding that obedience to God should take priority (Acts 5: 29). However, the pattern of resistance to the state by the early church was never through violence; rather it was through being willing to suffer in prison, and even die if necessary, that Jesus' followers showed that their ultimate allegiance was to God rather than to human government.

A few days after this incident, Jesus would demonstrate what it means to 'give back to God what is due to God'. At the cross there was no room for compromise. Either Jesus had to hand over himself totally to the terrors of separation from the Father and take on himself the sins of the world, or in turning away from this course leave humanity to face the judgement of God in eternity without hope. Whether in politics or business, whether in paying taxes or in any other sphere of life, the challenge we face is to give back to God what is due to God with the same total commitment and lack of compromise that Jesus showed on the cross. That was the 'bottom line' in Jesus' day, and it's the bottom line also for us today.

Questions for Discussion

1. The Pharisees were opposed to Roman rule, the Herodians were collaborators. What do you think each group was hoping to achieve by asking Jesus this question? (vv13-15). Why did each group feel so threatened by Jesus?
2. What do you think the questioners were hoping to achieve by the flattery with which they open the way for their question? (v14).
3. What exactly were the questioners saying about Jesus in their flattery? What does the flattery reveal about the questioners?
4. What deeper issues lie behind the question of whether to pay taxes to Caesar?
5. On the Roman coin was a bust of the current emperor (Tiberius, 14-37 AD), crowned with a laurel wreath as a sign of his divine status and an inscription saying, 'Tiberius Emperor, August Son of the Divine Augustus'. What is Jesus trying to achieve by making his questioners look so carefully at both the portrait and the inscription on the coin? What would have been Jesus' own feelings about this coin?
6. Why did Jesus make the questioners go and fetch a Roman coin?
7. 'Give to God what is due to God' (v17). What exactly was due to God in the lives of Jesus' questioners?
8. How does Jesus' statement, 'Give to God what is God's', challenge the portrait and inscription on the coin? What does it tell us about the relationship between the Christian citizen and the state?
9. From the way Jesus answered the question in this passage, do you think Luther was right to argue that the political realm and the spiritual realm are separate, and Jesus wanted us to keep them in two separate compartments in our lives?
10. What lessons can we learn from this passage about the way Jesus handled his relationships with his severest critics and most bitter opponents?

8. Relationships and Resurrection

Mark 12: 18-27

¹⁸Then the Sadducees, who say there is no resurrection, came to him with a question. ¹⁹“Teacher,” they said, “Moses wrote for us that if a man’s brother dies and leaves a wife but no children, the man must marry the widow and have children for his brother. ²⁰Now there were seven brothers. The first one married and died without leaving any children. ²¹The second one married the widow, but he also died, leaving no child. It was the same with the third. ²²In fact, none of the seven left any children. Last of all, the woman died too. ²³At the resurrection whose wife will she be, since the seven were married to her?”

²⁴Jesus replied, “Are you not in error because you do not know the Scriptures or the power of God? ²⁵When the dead rise, they will neither marry nor be given in marriage; they will be like the angels in heaven. ²⁶Now about the dead rising – have you not read in the book of Moses, in the account of the bush, how God said to him, ‘I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob’? ²⁷He is not the God of the dead, but of the living. You are badly mistaken!”

At a popular level all sorts of beliefs and fears are swilling around about life after death. The vast majority of people in Britain, even today, believe in some kind of after-life. This may be wishful thinking, because most of us cannot cope with the thought that we will not see ever again those we love who have died. Various little things can be cited in support of life after death as a possibility. We may have had “flashbacks” where it seems as if we have been in a place before, or that a situation in the past has just been repeated. Or we may have read about someone who died in a technical sense, and who tells of the experience of being lifted off the bed and floating round the room or some similar sensation. Such stories do not, of course, prove that there is life after death but they are reassuring for those who like to believe that there is.

A minority of people live more strictly according to their reason and reject the idea of life after death altogether. If human beings are no more than the result of a long-term evolutionary process, then when we die we shall simply return to the dust from which we came. The cold logic of believing that we are no more than the apex of a chance-driven evolutionary process leads to the conclusion that life simply snuffs out at death.

However, this is a difficult view to live with on a day to day basis. This is not just a problem of coming to terms with never seeing loved ones again when

they die so that the separation is forever. It is the problem of living with the knowledge that the injustice we see in the world has no final resolution. We watch on the television the starving African or Asian child, while our own child is well fed and tucked up in a warm bed, and we know - if we do not believe in life after death - that the misery of the African child will never be put right. The injustice will end in death, but in a sense will last forever. The frustration and futility of the situation raises questions about the value and purpose of my life as well. Any person with even an ounce of compassion must rebel with all their being at such gross and meaningless injustice.

Probably for this sort of reason it is not common to find a person who is willing to state categorically that they do not believe in life after death in some form. Most people prefer to remain undecided, which allows them both to avoid having to commit themselves to a religious position which might interfere with their lifestyle decisions, and to avoid confronting the logical conclusions of not believing in life after death. The Sadducees were a group of religious leaders in the time of Jesus who did not believe in life after death, except in some remote and shadowy form which was not influenced by the quality of the life they lived on earth. We shall examine in this passage how they tried to ridicule Jesus about his view of the resurrection, and how Jesus insisted that relationships continue after death with all that this implies for life today.

Background to the Question

First, a little bit more detail about the group of people who asked Jesus this question. The best way to describe the Sadducees is that they were not a financial but a religious elite. Most priests were Sadducees, including the High Priest, and most Sadducees were priests. They seem to have had little following among the ordinary people. For generations they had been in opposition to the Pharisees. They had two distinctive beliefs. They did not believe in the resurrection (see Acts 23:8), and they only accepted the first five books of the Old Testament as authoritative. They have been described by one commentator as “aristocratic, conservative and traditionalist” (Robinson). Certainly they were not closely in touch with what the masses were feeling and thinking.

As far as life after death was concerned, the Sadducees believed that after death a person would have only a shadowy kind of existence in the darkness of “Sheol”. They had refused to accept the teaching which had developed late in the Old Testament period that the righteous would be with God forever. This theological understanding had a number of practical consequences. Together with their belief that God is a God of justice, they concluded that any privilege they enjoyed in this life must be the outcome of their own course of action: they deserved the positions they occupied in society. However, to believe that the rewards of the godly and the punishment of the wicked are limited to this life must in practice contradict either the goodness of God or make a nonsense of human experience.

With no belief in the resurrection it is not surprising that the Sadducees were extremely materialistic in the way they ran the temple. If life after death is the same for everybody, and will be rather grim, the best strategy must be to enjoy it now as much as you can. No wonder that John the Baptist warned them to “flee the wrath to come” (Matthew 3: 7). When Jesus raised Lazarus from the tomb, just a couple of miles from where they were now standing, and just a few weeks before, it must have sent shock waves through their leadership and made Jesus the most potent threat to their beliefs and social position that they had ever encountered. Resurrection had, as it were, arrived on their doorstep. Not only that, but the temple was their main centre of influence and Jesus the day before had come into it uninvited and upset the whole commercial basis on which it was run. So they had plenty of reason for wanting to discredit Jesus at this particular moment.

So they put their question to Jesus. Theologically the question is well grounded in the words of Moses contained in the Torah. They start the question with

a term of respect and Jesus on this occasion does not question their sincerity. And the question is thought out: it starts with a statement of the law, goes on to narrate the facts and then applies the law to the facts. The law is the law of Levirate marriage, where “If a man’s brother dies and leaves a wife but no children, the man must marry the widow and have children for his brother” (v19). The “facts” relate to a highly improbable case of a woman whose husband died, and who ended up having seven husbands because the Levirate law was applied seven times. This hypothetical situation made the law itself look unfair and even ridiculous, and the concept of the resurrection look to be nonsensical in practice.

Today Christians do not make fun of the concept of the resurrection but of the idea of “Levirate marriage”. In our individualistic Western culture, we find it hard to accept the restriction on the freedom of the individuals concerned when a brother is required by God to marry his dead brother’s widow in order to raise up children for him. In the law given to the Israelites through Moses, the Family (extended family) was of such central importance to the social order that these constraints on the freedom of the individual were considered a price worth paying. The link between Family and land was deeply significant, in a way which in our mobile society we find it difficult to appreciate. The normal constraints on a sexual relationship between brother and sister-in-law (Lev18: 16) were set aside so that the Family would not lose one of its branches. While this law was bound up with Israel’s special covenant with God, the principles underlying this law of family solidarity, and individual sacrifice for the good of the wider family and community, should not be lightly discarded.

The tactic of the Sadducees here is not to impale Jesus on the horns of a dilemma, as the Pharisees had tried to do in the previous question about paying tax to Caesar. Rather the aim is to undermine Jesus’ claims to have raised Lazarus from the dead by ridiculing the whole concept of resurrection. If they had been genuinely concerned about the relationship issues in heaven they might have taken the case of a man who had two wives. The question would raise the same issues, and more realistically and poignantly if both brothers had really loved her. But the aim is not to find the answer to a question, but to ridicule. The Sadducees are not directly denying the truth of the resurrection, for they assume its reality in their question; rather they seek to undermine the truth of it by making fun of it. There is more than one way to attack a person’s position in public life, and Jesus seems to have faced them all.

You do not know... the power of God

In his answer to the question put by the Sadducees, Jesus attacks their reasoning at two points: "You do not know the Scriptures or the power of God" (v24). In what follows Jesus takes the second of these two issues first. Jesus first tackles the question of whether a physical resurrection is feasible, i.e. whether God has the *power* to raise a person from the dead. He chooses first to open up their thinking as to what resurrection life might be like, and attack their assumption that life after death would be very much a continuation of life as we know it on earth now. Only after he has redefined the way they understand the word "resurrection" does he show how the Old Testament scriptures point to its reality. There is little point in trying to teach people the truth which lies in the Bible if their understanding of the ideas and vocabulary used in the Bible is such that they will think the words mean something completely different from what they were intended to convey.

"When the dead rise," Jesus says, "they will neither marry nor be given in marriage" (v25). There will be no marriage in heaven. Jesus' answer relates to the procedures of marriage rather than the state of

being married, which is a point we shall consider in a moment. But Jesus is saying that the resurrection life is not simply the projection of this life onto a timeless scale: it is of a different quality altogether. With no death there will be no need of birth. The body will be a spiritual body so it will have no physical desires. Sexuality, which is such a big issue on earth, will not be an issue in heaven.

Our theology is coloured by our relationship with God. If we do not know God in a personal and direct way, our doctrinal understanding will be messed up.

So Jesus goes on, "When the dead rise, they will be like the angels in heaven" (v25). In what sense will they be like angels? What would Jesus' original hearers have understood about angels? From a careful study of the Old Testament scriptures it is possible to learn a great deal about angels. They are not bound by space-time restrictions: they appear to people as if from nowhere in a moment of time and then disappear just as suddenly as they came. They have a different material existence, yet they are not "ghostly" or less substantial than human beings. They appear to be as solid as any person, but have a different physics and chemistry.

Jesus is saying that those who rise from the dead will be like angels because they will not marry in

heaven. They will not form families in heaven. Angels do not have sex as part of their activity; it is less clear whether or not they have gender as part of their identity (cf. Mark 16:5). Jesus is not saying, however, that because they are like angels they will not have relationships. Angels in the Old Testament scriptures are not a sort of depersonalised divine robot. Rather they are messengers of God who meet God face to face. They do not just appear to human beings singly, but sometimes in twos and threes (Genesis 18 and 19). The angels seem to have relationships with each other as well as with God (Isaiah 6: 3). Above all they talk, they communicate with human beings. Towards the end of the Old Testament period, they appear with names: they have personality (e.g. Daniel 12: 1). They answer questions. They give help and support. Some have specific roles and tasks. And they express devotion and praise to God.

Why, then, does Jesus make the Sadducees' knowledge of the power of God the issue? As Calvin says, the resurrection far exceeds the capacity of our senses so it will be incredible to us until our minds rise to the contemplation of the boundless power of God. Whatever their intellectual knowledge of the Old Testament scriptures may or may not have been, their moral and experiential knowledge is inadequate. They cannot imagine from the experience of God in their daily lives that God's power is sufficient to bring about a resurrection. And here lies a warning for us too. Faith in God's power grows as we move on from one experience to another of his activity in our lives. There is seldom if ever instant faith. As in any other relationship, trust grows out of a sequence of events in which the reliability of the other person is tested. The Sadducees' inability to believe in the possibility of a resurrection shows how little they had known of God's working in their everyday lives.

It is important for us to be careful to note exactly what Jesus says here, and what he does not say. Although Jesus says there will not be any marriage in heaven, he does not say what the status of those who have been married on earth will be in heaven. Jesus himself says at another time that those who marry become not only "one flesh", but also "one" (Mark 10: 8). Even Paul finds it difficult to know exactly what Jesus meant, for he describes it as a "profound mystery" (Ephesians 5: 22). However, as the biblical view of the person does not allow us to divide up body, mind and spirit into separate compartments, but treats them all as parts of the person, there cannot be a joining of bodies without also some joining of souls and minds. Also, because our bodies will be raised at the last day, it is not clear what the status of two bodies which have been made one by God will be in the heavenly realm. I do not believe that Jesus directly answers the exact

question raised by the Sadducees, but rather he underlines significant discontinuities between the way relationships operate in this world and the next.

So Jesus corrects the Sadducees. Their theology is misguided because they do not know God; they have not seen or experienced his power. Because they do not know God, they make fundamental mistakes about life after death, which in turn distorts their perspective on a whole range of issues they confront in this life now. So for us, too, our theology is coloured by our relationship with God. If we do not know God in a personal and direct way, our doctrinal understanding will be messed up. In particular, we will tend to underestimate God's power, which is likely to mean we will constantly downplay the miraculous in the gospels, as well as in the rest of the Bible, as we have no experience of it ourselves in our daily lives. This then has knock-on effects into many other areas of our lives.

Having corrected the error, Jesus goes on to the attack to set out the truth; this should generally be the order of things.

You do not know the Scriptures...

Jesus begins his correction of the Sadducees' position with the words: "...Have you not read in the book of Moses, in the account of the bush, how God said..." (v26). As far as Jesus is concerned, if the Scriptures say that God said something, then God said it. Also Jesus expects his audience to have read it. This is not just because they were Sadducees who accepted the first five books of the Bible, and therefore should have been familiar with these verses, but also because Jesus assumes that what was spoken by God was for us as much as it was for its original audience. There is good reason for us to spend time reflecting on all that God has communicated to us through the Scriptures (see also Deuteronomy 8: 3). But this passage also brings out the point that we need to dig beneath the surface of what a passage is saying if we are to appreciate its full implications. As Matthew Henry puts it, "Much treasure lies under ground, that must be digged for".

Jesus makes the argument from this incident at the burning bush that the relationship God has with a person continues after death. God says to Moses: "I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob...". Jesus points out that God is not the God of the dead but of the living. God does not say to Moses "I was the God of Abraham..." As Moule puts it, "Death cannot break a relationship thus begun". God's love demands that there is resurrection, for his love is not a short-term

commitment but a relationship which lasts for eternity. That relationship is not snuffed out by death: God does not establish relationships with his people for just a few years, but forever. We are taken back to God's power which makes possible the fulfilment of his love. As Paul writes to the Romans: "for I am convinced that... death...will not be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord (Romans 8: 38-39).

Not only God's love demands that there should be a resurrection of the dead, but also the honour of his name. To be God in a person's life means to be the one who is worshipped, the one who rewards their good and right conduct, who acts as protector and guardian, and provides for physical, emotional and spiritual needs. The three patriarchs did not have easy lives on earth (Genesis 47: 9). So if this life is all there is, it does not say much for God if that is all that he is capable of delivering! The writer of the book of Hebrews can say after reviewing the lives of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob that, "They did not receive the things promised", they were all living by faith when they died, and "therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God" (Heb.11: 13-16). The implication is that if God had not fulfilled his promises to the patriarchs in the next life, considering what they had suffered in this life, God would have been ashamed to call himself their God. So this concern for the honour of God's name should also have pointed the Sadducees to the truth that there must be a resurrection.

Jesus traces the source of their error to their ignorance. They had read the Scriptures, or at least some of them, but they did not understand the significance or the true meaning of them. In part the problem was that they did not bow the reasoning of their minds to the authority of God's revealed word. In part the problem was that they put their own grid over the word of God before they ever reached reading it, which had the effect of ensuring that they never exposed their minds to what it was saying. In part their "liberal" view of Scripture, which did not recognise the inspiration of the writings of the prophets, for example, meant that these sections of the word of God, which had so much to teach them, were automatically excluded from their thinking. And even for those relatively small parts of the Scriptures which they did accept as being from God, they edited out anything, such as the existence of angels (Acts 23: 8), which did not fit in with their own preconceived ideas of the way God worked in the world. Given that the Scriptures are the best guard against error, the way they treated God's word was almost certain to have resulted in them going badly astray in their view of life after death.

Bringing this closer to home, could it be said of us that “knowledge of the teaching of the Bible is not his/her strongest point”? Do we know the teaching of the Bible beyond a very superficial level? Do we know what the Bible teaches not just about the fundamentals of our faith, but also about politics,

Do we know what the Bible teaches not just about the fundamentals of our faith, but also about politics, economics, finance, human rights, euthanasia, health, education, and the world of work and business organisation?

economics, finance, human rights, euthanasia, health, education, and the world of work and business organisation? If not, why not? Are we too busy, indicating that we have too weak a desire to know the mind of God? We have time to watch television and read the newspaper but no time to study the Bible. Or have we too liberal a view of the Bible, undermined by the so-called scholarship of those who for reasons of their own have done their best to discredit the text, so that we no longer believe that God speaks through it to us today? Or have we, perhaps even as evangelicals who claim to accept the authority of the Bible in all matters of faith

and conduct, put some grid of systematic theology over our reading of the text so that we are prevented from seeing the obvious implications of what the words on the page are telling us?

The way Jesus interlocks the knowledge of Scripture and the power of God is surely significant. It is vital as Christians that we know both. A study of Scripture which is not translated into changed life and lifestyle becomes dry and academic. If we try and change things in ourselves or in the world around us without depending on God’s power we will get nowhere, for as Jesus says, “Without me you can do nothing” (John 15: 5). We will find ourselves no longer really listening to what the word of God is saying to us because it doesn’t make any difference whether we listen or not. On the other hand, an approach which is dominated by “the power of God”, and which is disconnected from Scripture, can go off in almost any direction and runs huge risks. There is no check on the person who says that they believe the end of the world is coming tomorrow, or that they believe that for some reason God is going to send them to hell, or who says they do not believe in life after death. Only through the Bible can we be sure we have a reliable and sound

understanding of what we meet in life each day, and of the world around us.

Final Thoughts

For whatever reason the Sadducees did not know the Scriptures. Their whole understanding of the world they were living in, and of life after death, was distorted as a result. Much of their life on earth would have been wasted. The issue of whether we know the word of God or not is one with very high stakes attached.

At the end of this passage Jesus says to the Sadducees, “You are badly mistaken” (v27) underlining that the view they held of life after death was no peripheral issue but one with enormous implications. It is not hard to see why. Our perspective on life after death has such an enormous impact on the expectations and attitudes that govern our lives. I have a friend whose sister is dying of cancer. She has weeks, or at best months, to live. How he copes with this tragic situation depends on his view of life after death, and hers! Whether a person shows compassion to the less well off in low-income countries depends at least in part on whether he or she thinks that they will be held accountable in the next life for what they did or failed to do in this one. At a more subtle level, if a person believes both that God is just and that there is no life after death, they will conclude that any success or wealth that a person enjoys on earth must be due to the merit of their own good behaviour and any suffering must reflect their sins. This view is bound to lead to great arrogance towards the poor and an underlying sense of pride by a powerful person regarding their position in society. God’s blessing is understood as being an earned reward for good behaviour.

So our view of life after death has profound implications for our relationships here on earth, both with God and with other people. To get wrong our understanding of this doctrine really matters. It is an issue which requires serious attention. But Jesus’ comments here suggest that the way to get it right is partly through walking so closely with God in our daily lives that we come to know the power of God in our own experience, and partly through a study of God’s word that goes beneath the surface of the text to discover its true and deeper meaning. These are interlocking activities. To pursue these two goals is the challenge Jesus left the Sadducees, and it is the challenge that he leaves us too.

Questions for Discussion

1. What do people believe will happen to their deepest and closest relationships when they die? What factors in life and culture today are most influencing their views, and ours?
2. The requirement in the OT law was that if a man died without children, his brother should marry his widow (as a second marriage?) in order to raise up children 'for him' (so-called Levirate marriage – a form of surrogate parenthood – see Deuteronomy 25: 5-10). This limited the freedom of the surviving brother to do as he wished. However, what might have been the relational benefits of such an arrangement for society as a whole?
3. What kind of relationships do angels have with each other and with human beings? (See for example Genesis 19: 15-17, Isaiah 6:3, Luke 1: 11-20, 26-38). In what ways do you think angels' relationships differ from human relationships?
4. Answer the following carefully in terms of yes, no, or don't know:
 - there will be marriage in heaven
 - there will be sex in heaven
 - there will be gender in heaven
 - 'heavenly' (e.g. angels') bodies have no physical restrictions on their movement
5. There will not be marriage in heaven (v25). Does this mean that a couple who married on earth will no longer be 'one' in heaven (cf. Mark 10: 5-9)?
6. 'You do not know the Scriptures ...'. What aspects of God's relationships with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob had the Sadducees failed to grasp? In what ways can our ignorance of the Scriptures affect our understanding of God's relationships with us today?
7. The Sadducees doubted the resurrection because they did not know 'the power of God'. How do you think our experience of God's power in our lives affects our view today of key doctrines such as the resurrection and the incarnation?
8. Why is it important that Christians today know *both* the Scriptures *and* the power of God if their relationship with God and their neighbour are to develop rightly? What happens if they know the Scriptures but not the power of God, or if they know the power of God but not the Scriptures?
9. Jesus says to the Sadducees in v27, 'You are badly mistaken'. The resurrection is not a peripheral issue. How does a wrong or weak view of what happens to us when we die affect our relationships with God and with other people in the here and now?

9. Status, Faith and Relationships

Mark 12: 35-44

³⁵While Jesus was teaching in the temple courts, he asked, 'How is it that the teachers of the law say that the Christ is the son of David? ³⁶David himself, speaking by the Holy Spirit, declared:

“The Lord said to my Lord:
'Sit at my right hand
until I put your enemies
under your feet.'”

³⁷David himself calls him 'Lord'. How then can he be his son?' The large crowd listened to him with delight. ³⁸As he taught, Jesus said, 'Watch out for the teachers of the law. They like to walk around in flowing robes and be greeted in the market-places, ³⁹and have the most important seats in the synagogues and the places of honour at banquets. ⁴⁰They devour widows' houses and for a show make lengthy prayers. Such men will be punished most severely.'

⁴¹Jesus sat down opposite the place where the offerings were put and watched the crowd putting their money into the temple treasury. Many rich people threw in large amounts. ⁴²But a poor widow came and put in two very small copper coins worth only a fraction of a penny. ⁴³Calling his disciples to him, Jesus said, 'I tell you the truth, this poor widow has put more into the treasury than all the other. ⁴⁴They all gave out of their wealth; but she, out of her poverty, put in everything – all she had to live on.'

One of the most obvious attributes leading to status in Britain today is professional skills and position, often reflected in a job-title such as doctor, professor or company director. To say you are a doctor when asked your occupation ensures you will be treated with respect by most people, provided it is true of course. The honours system is also designed to give a person status, whether a person is given a knighthood and allowed to call themselves 'Sir...' or 'Dame...', or whether it is a lesser honour like a CBE or an OBE. We also attach status to wealth, so how we view our neighbour is likely to be influenced by the size of their house or car, where their kids go to school, whether they take foreign holidays and similar factors. Those who achieve fame or notoriety also gain status, whether it is in the realm of sport, films, television, or even chess.

It is also possible to gain status not from anything you have done yourself, but from your family or from association with other people. A person marrying into the Kennedy family will automatically gain status, as does a child born into the Royal Family. You do not have to be a famous person to gain status; it is often enough that you

know them. I confess that I have found myself seeking status from people by telling them, or where necessary reminding them, of the fact that I know a person whom they hold in high regard. This is status by association.

So why is status so important to us? Surely it is because status influences our relationships with family, friends and neighbours. First, status is a determinant of power. Recently one Cabinet minister in Britain borrowed a significant sum from another to buy a large house in central London. This was considered unwise because it threatened to undermine the independence of judgement he needed to exercise in his official position. So why did he do it? He obviously felt that the large house would enhance his prestige and status, and that it was worth the risk that someone would find out. Status is often a stepping-stone to power and wealth.

Or the motivation may be a desire to be loved, or at least praised and appreciated. Many of us crave attention, and status is one way we get other people to focus their attention on us. We often long for 'the praise of men' (cf. John 12: 43). We long to be extolled, honoured, consulted, approved, and, yes,

loved. Status offers the illusion of love; generally such 'love' is superficial and short-lived. Just think of the famous footballer who stops scoring goals. Or think of the politician who 'falls from grace'.

We might probe a little further. Why do people crave love in this way? At the heart of the matter is our fallenness; we are sinful and selfish so we love ourselves more than we love God or anyone else. But for many this natural self-centredness is made worse by the lack of love we experience from our families. A child who has grown up in a household where both parents are so busy that they do not have time to spend talking and listening is likely to carry around with him or her a 'love-deficit' for the rest of their lives. If there is a divorce between the parents, the child often blames themselves for it and in many cases this becomes tangible evidence in the mind of the child that the parents do not really love him or her. And being loved matters because it is what gives us our identity and sense of significance.

There is nothing intrinsically wrong with status; it is simply a description of one aspect of a relationship. Indeed any form of authority structure in society requires that people recognise and accept a system of status among themselves. If the personnel of a company are to implement its strategy, they must accept the status of the management in giving them direction and instructions. It is essential that people accord status to a prime minister or president if the person holding the office is to be able to provide effective leadership. To deny a leader their legitimate status is to point the way to anarchy and chaos.

In what ways do we in our pride try to seek status for ourselves?

But to *seek* status is another matter. For pride, which is so often highlighted as a sin in the Bible, is in essence to attribute status to oneself, or to hold 'an unduly high opinion of one's own qualities,

merits' (Oxford English Dictionary). Pride leads to arrogant attitudes and conduct, which is the antithesis of love: pride leads to wrong relationships. We then expect others to listen and pay attention to us instead of us focussing our attention on them and their situation and needs. Our attention is fixed on ourselves. Pride is spiritually and morally dangerous.

In what ways do we in our pride try to seek status for ourselves? It is not difficult to identify how we seek status once we have determined what gives status in our society, and among our particular peer group. If wealth is the key to status, then we will seek status through those things that display

wealth, such as expensive clothes, a large house, or a large and fast car with personalised number plate. If reputation is our focus, then we may boast of the achievements of our children, the well-known people who are our 'friends', or some recent success in our business or other line of work. In any event, pride is likely to cause us to push ourselves forward into positions of status and privilege in a manner which God finds repulsive.

And so we come to this passage here. At the end of a lengthy and doubtless exhausting set of questions in the temple precincts, just a few days before his death, Jesus turns the spotlight onto the issue of status. There is first the issue of his own status, and then the question of how the Jewish leadership sought status for themselves. Jesus then uses a poor widow giving money into the temple treasury to give his disciples an object lesson in what they should recognise as status in the eyes of God. Let us look at each of these sections in turn.

Jesus and his Status (vv35-37)

Jesus is still teaching in the temple precincts. So the context is one of spiritual rather than political authority. Silence has descended after the final question put to him by the lawyers and his other opponents. Now Jesus takes the initiative to ask them a question. We may safely assume the key issue still in the background to everyone's thinking was the way Jesus had driven out the moneychangers from the temple just two days before. What right had a poor peasant preacher from the provinces to challenge directly the legitimacy and organisation of the great national centre of worship in Jerusalem? And as Jesus had clearly attempted to indicate a claim to be the 'Messiah,' with its military overtones, by riding into Jerusalem on a donkey in fulfilment of one of the best known of the Messianic prophecies (Zechariah 9: 9), many must have been wondering whether this miracle-working but poor preacher could possibly be the One they had been waiting for. Jesus decides to take the issue head-on, but in his usual way by asking a question rather than by making direct statements. Jesus goes to Psalm 110 as his starting point.

The question Jesus puts is as follows: 'How is it that the teachers of the law say that the Messiah is the son of David? David himself, speaking by the Holy Spirit, declared:

"The Lord said to my lord:
'Sit at my right hand
until I put your enemies
under your feet.'"

David himself calls him 'Lord'. How then can he be his son?

From this verse in Psalm 110, Jesus is raising the issue of what the status of the Messiah was to be. What kind of person were they looking for? What type or level of position would he hold? What kind of activity would he undertake? Just a few days before his death on a cross as a criminal, Jesus wants to raise questions indirectly again about his own status and identity.

The Jews in Jesus' day were looking for a Messiah who could be identified as the Son of David. At one level they were right to do so. The Old Testament clearly taught that the Messiah would be the 'Son of David'; for example Nathan prophesies to David 'I will raise up your offspring to succeed you... and I will establish the throne of his kingdom for ever' (2 Samuel 7: 12-13). In context, Nathan's statement referred to Solomon, but it also has a Messianic fulfilment as it speaks of a kingdom which will last for ever. Jesus did not object when people called him 'Son of David' (e.g. Mark 10: 47), but it seemed to anger the Pharisees who disliked Jesus being accorded this status (Luke 19: 39). The reason for their objection was that the title was understood to imply not just that the Messiah was a biological descendent of David, but that he would have the same sort of political status and military success as David.

Jesus was also concerned that the use of the title 'Son of David' might lead to people gaining a false impression of his role and mission. They might think that the promised Messiah would bring along with him nothing more elevated than political or military achievement. If people thought of the Messiah just as another human-being, it would lead to all sorts of wrong expectations. They would be likely to understand his role purely in political terms, and see salvation as no more than political liberation. If they did not recognise him as divine, they would fail to appreciate his role in coming to rescue sinners from the judgement to come and his authority to forgive sins (Mark 2: 1-8). And when Jesus died on a cross, as he would in few days' time, they would interpret the event as evidence that he was not the Messiah rather than as confirmation that he was. So when the scribes taught that the Messiah was the Son of David, they were teaching a dangerous half-truth. It was essential that Jesus found a way to correct it.

So how does Jesus seek to revise their view? He quotes a psalm from the Old Testament as the foundation of his argument, reinforcing his point by making it clear that that the psalm was written by David himself under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit (v36). It adds great force to the argument that these words are inspired by God himself. As France argues, the method of argument used here is familiar in Rabbinic debate, to set up two scriptural

themes which are apparently in conflict and to seek a resolution - only Jesus does not indicate the resolution, leaving it to the listeners to work it out for themselves.

The paradox arises in the first line of the quote which reads 'The Lord said to my lord...'. 'My lord' is the lord or master of the speaker, and yet in the context of the psalm was understood to refer to the Messiah. If the Messiah is the son of David, why would David call him lord? How can a son be lord of his father or ancestor who directly, or indirectly, gave him birth? Since the quote is under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, the question cannot be swept under the carpet. It demands an answer.

There is only one possible solution, which is that the Messiah is no mere successor or replica of David but has a role and authority far higher than David ever had. As David represents the pinnacle of political power in Israel in human terms, the only possible conclusion is that the Messiah is a divine being and not a mere human being. This is made clear also by the rest of Psalm 110, for David in the psalm quotes God as saying to the Messiah figure, 'Sit at my right hand...', which refers to a position in the universe close to that of God himself. This person is God's deputy, holding the highest governmental power in the name of God, embracing both heaven and earth. And the victory of this Messiah figure is to be complete... 'until I (God) put your enemies under your feet'. The picture which this conjures up for the reader, and for us, is of an enemy lying in the dust so that the conqueror can rest his feet on their neck.

This quote might also have raised some other questions in the minds of Jesus' listeners. If this refers to the Messiah, why does he not go and deal with the enemies himself; why does God do it for him? What is his role as Messiah if it is not to do with conquest? Psalm 110 goes on to speak of the Messiah both as a ruler and as a priest but not as a military commander, although he is described as having 'willing troops'. Note also that in the verse Jesus uses from the psalm the Messiah is being told to do nothing but 'sit', i.e. wait. It is God who will act and will crush the Messiah's enemies. So the scribes should have realised that if Jesus was referring to himself in using this quotation, they had nothing to fear from him taking his own initiative.

Let us return to the question of why Jesus raises the issue of the identity of the Messiah at this point in his teaching. It is a few days before the crucifixion. Jesus has just a few days before physically attacked the trading and money-making activities in the temple. After the popular acclaim that he received that same morning he is now regarded as a major political threat by the establishment at their temple headquarters. The delight with which the crowd

heard this very message would have added further pressure on the Jewish leadership to act quickly to squash what they perceived to be a growing threat to their power-base. Against this background, Jesus' aim seems to have been to assert that he was the Son of God, and not the Messiah as traditionally understood, so that his followers and the crowd would recognise that he was not trying to achieve *political* goals. As the cross drew near, he wanted to alert the people to his real purpose and mission. But he does not do so directly; rather he demonstrates that the scribes were wrong to think of the Messiah as a mere man and points to the Messiah being above human politics. The stakes were very much higher than they imagined.

The local religious leaders underestimated the status of Jesus: there is a danger we will do the same. And as with the leaders of Jesus' day, the reason for this failure of vision and comprehension may lie in our own priorities. These religious leaders were preoccupied, it seems, with holding on to power. They did not spend their time thinking about how people can have a right relationship with God, and how the problem of moral failure (sin) could be overcome. Issues of guilt and conscience were not high on their agenda, nor issues of greed, exploitation and suffering. Their perspective was political and materialistic rather than spiritual and relational. So they missed the significance of who Jesus really was and what he had come to do.

Are we similarly looking in the wrong direction as we consider the life and death of Jesus? Are we focussed on what politics can achieve so that we define salvation in secular terms? Is our worldview dominated by materialistic concerns about wealth and poverty, housing and health? Have we missed the fact that Jesus had to be divine to carry out his mission? Do we realise that the implications of Jesus' life and death cover not just time but also eternity? Is our view of Jesus still too small?

The Status of the Religious Leaders

Having punctured the lawyers' view of the status of the Messiah as just a political leader, and shown it should have been much higher than that, Jesus turns the attention of the crowd to the status which these lawyers sought for themselves in the society of his day. It is important to realise that Jesus is not indiscriminately condemning all scribes in what he says here. The Greek text is not saying, as translated in the NIV, 'Beware of all scribes because they like to walk around in long robes...' but rather 'Beware of those scribes who like to walk around in long robes...'. Some scribes were genuinely seeking the truth, such as the man whom Jesus a short time before had described as being 'not far from the kingdom of God' (v34). However, many were more interested in the status which their religious

position gave them in society, and it is this substantial group, then as now, that Jesus is addressing.

Status is probably a special temptation for ministers of religion as they are seldom well paid, and thus miss out on many forms of status which derive from wealth. Also, most societies through the ages have wanted to give a special place of honour to religious leaders, perhaps as a form of eternal insurance policy! Any religious leader, and anyone like myself who relies to a significant extent on people's religious sentiments, will readily appreciate the issues that Jesus is referring to here.

There is always a danger in attacking religious leaders that the public will throw away the baby with the bath water, that they will fail to distinguish between the messenger and the message. Jesus makes it clear in Matthew's account of this incident that he is not wanting to undermine in any way the Law which it was the task of the scribes to expound and enforce (see Matthew 23:1-2). The issue is not their mandate, or the text of Scripture, but their motivation and attitudes. In attacking these clerics, Jesus is prepared to take the risk of undermining respect for the text of Scripture in the public mind in order to expose their self-seeking attitudes and to make the people of his day aware of the difference between true and false religion. For it is as true today as it was then that people find it difficult to draw a line between the truth of a religion and the lifestyle of those who claim to follow it.

Jesus warns the people that they need to be on their guard against the scribes who 'like to walk around in flowing robes'. They relish or delight in the status these special robes give them. Special clothes are not always wrong for religious leaders: John the Baptist wore distinctive clothing (Mark 1: 6), as did the Old Testament prophets (Zechariah 13: 4). But the scribes had gone for a form of dress which did not emphasise simplicity and humility but luxury and display. Robes, as one writer has put it, can become 'the badges of proud tyranny'. In the Reformation, Collinson tells us 'the Elizabethan Protestants regarded the surplice and the square cap as the uniform of an oppressive class'.⁴ However, Jesus here is focussing on the motivation of these scribes - the fact that they relished the status which these robes gave them - rather than on the form of that clothing.

Another aspect of the lawyers' lifestyle which Jesus warns the people against is that 'they like to be greeted in the market-places...'. This seems to refer

⁴ The Elizabethan Puritan Movement, Clarendon Press, 1990 edition, p95.

to a formal greeting, where people often called them 'Rabbi' (Matthew 23: 7) and thus showed them verbally or in some other way a mark of respect rather than simply an expression of friendship. As Robinson points out, religious leaders will generally be recognised and appreciated so that the kind of respectful greeting Jesus speaks of here is par for the course.⁵ However, such greetings are a source of real danger. As the proverb puts it, 'a man is tested by the praise he receives' (Proverbs 27: 21). Even when praise is not explicit, there is the pleasure a person like myself derives simply from being recognised in a large conference or city street, the small glory of local fame, the privilege of being picked out from the crowd as someone special. That, too, is a source of temptation, for we can take pleasure in the status we receive rather than focussing on the needs of those we are there to serve.

Jesus continues, '...they like to have the most important seats in the synagogues, and the places of honour at banquets'. Jesus here is presumably not referring to the role of the leader of the service in the synagogue, for that individual is bound to be positioned 'up front' in some way. Rather, it is where they sit, or expect to be offered a seat, when they attend religious services, or indeed social functions in wider society. This seems to have been an issue of importance in Jesus' mind, for he refers to it several times in his ministry, especially in the context of seating at banquets - warning his disciples against seeking privilege (Luke 14: 7-11, Mark 10: 37-40). The issue of 'the best seats' at religious services is also discussed in the book of James in the context of showing favouritism to the rich in church life (James 2: 1-4). Was this relevant only in the hierarchical world of first century Palestine, or does it have relevance in Britain today?

Our constant prayer needs to be that God will purify our motives and rid us of the desire for status.

A few years back the Archbishop of Canterbury visited the church I was attending. There was a row afterwards with his chaplain because he was asked to sit in the front row and not on the stage! In crowded services on a Sunday, do wealthy people expect to get a

seat or are they willing to stand at the back? Who gets to sit on the platform at Christian conferences is still an issue. And in the secular world, do our Anglican vicars, Catholic priests, and free church

ministers expect to be shown some deference over the rank and file at formal occasions, or even down at the pub?

Applying this today, and to myself, I need to ask myself about the ways that I pursue personal ambition and even power through my position as a Christian leader. To tackle the problems of unemployment, or to reach millions with the gospel, can all be part of a massive ego-trip, where the real goal is human praise. At best, so often my own motives are mixed. Our constant prayer needs to be that God will purify our motives and rid us of the desire for status.

Jesus now moves on from discussing pursuit of privilege to consider abuse of privilege. He continues, 'They devour widows' houses and for a show make lengthy prayers ...' (v40). Widows were a particularly vulnerable group in biblical times, as they often are even today. Their welfare is a frequent concern of the prophets (e.g. Isaiah 1: 14). 'Devouring widows' houses may be an example of any form of abuse of privilege, any seeking of power over those who are weak'. In the text itself, it is not clear exactly what Jesus is referring to. Were these teachers of the law selling these houses and realising the cash, with little or none of it going to the widow? Or were they taking over the houses to live in them themselves? Whatever it was, Jesus was not afraid to call a spade a spade, despite the threat this involved to his own safety.

Their prayers, too, were a pretence, not genuine spirituality. Calvin believed the scribes sold their prayers, so that 'just as a labourer sells his daily labour they aim at profit by their long prayers'. This would provide a strong link with the accusation about the widows' houses as both would then be about using positions of religious leadership to make money. The offence to God of the lengthy prayers may just have been the pretence, the hypocrisy of such prayers, for Jesus underlines that they make these prayers 'for show', rather than saying that they make them 'for profit'. God's eyes always penetrate to the real motives of a person and He hates any kind of fraud or dishonesty, especially in any communication we have with him (see Matthew 6: 5). Or both the elements of profit and hypocrisy may have been involved.

So Jesus goes on to warn them, 'Such men will be punished most severely', or more literally 'These men will receive greater condemnation'. The point to note is that in the Greek it is a comparative and not a superlative, i.e. such men will be punished 'more severely', it does not say 'most severely'. However, it still raises the issue of degrees of punishment, and of seriousness of offence in the sight of God. It is not immediately clear whether this 'greater condemnation' applies to those

⁵ Robinson, ...

teachers of the law who do any or all of the things mentioned in verses 38-40, or whether it only applies to those who 'devour widows' houses and for a show make lengthy prayers' (v40). Is God's special anger directed to all those who *seek* status wrongly, or to those who *abuse* the status their role in religious leadership gives them? Or is the issue that 'to whom much is given, of them much will be required' (Amos 3: 2, Luke 12: 47-48)? It seems likely that the 'greater condemnation' applies as much to those who seek status through their leadership position as to those who abuse that status. Jesus is warning all those in positions of religious leadership that God takes special offence at any misuse of that leadership role. This is a warning stated in the strongest possible language and which we dare not ignore today: God really minds if we seek status for ourselves from our Christian work.

The Status of the Poor Widow (vv41-44)

The next thing we read in this passage is that 'Jesus sat down opposite the place where the offerings were put and watched the crowd putting their money into the temple treasury' (v41). This seems to have taken place immediately after the tough words spoken against the teachers of the law. He must have sat down in the 'courtyard of the women', which was as far as women were allowed to go and where the collecting boxes for the temple were placed. Perhaps worn out after the earlier confrontation, Jesus sits down and watches human behaviour, or more specifically the crowd putting their money into the temple coffers. It is interesting that he took time out to do this. Perhaps there is a lesson for us even in this simple action: sometimes perhaps we just need to take time out to watch what is happening in the lives of our Christian communities, and to reflect on the implications of what we observe.

What Jesus observed was rich and poor putting money into the temple treasury. 'Many rich people threw in large amounts. But a poor widow came and put in two very small copper coins worth only a fraction of a penny' (vv41-42). The temple in Jerusalem was big business. It would have employed manual workers to keep the place clean, administrators, singers, clerks, guards, builders, as well as the priests and Levites required to carry out the sacrifices themselves. A lot of money was needed to keep the organisation going and thus the temptation to judge the value of a gift by its size. Against this background Jesus draws the attention of his disciples to the action of one poor widow. Earlier in the gospel, two women in separate incidents are recorded as seeking Jesus out for healing, one for herself and one for her daughter (Mark 5: 24-34, 7: 24-30); now at the end of his life,

two women are recorded as dedicating their lives to God in very remarkable ways (here and Mark 14: 3-9).

So it is the poor widow whom Jesus commends to his disciples especially in this situation with the words, 'I tell you the truth, this poor widow has put more into the treasury than all the others' (v43). As in the earlier discussion about greetings in the market-places and the seats at feasts, Jesus is more interested in motives than the action itself. For in what sense had this woman put 'more' into the treasury than all the others? On what scale? Jesus measures her gift not in financial terms but in relational terms. What matters to God is the thoughts and feelings of the heart towards Him. Jesus goes on to explain his assessment.

'They all gave out of their wealth; but she, out of her poverty, put in everything - all that she had to live on' (v44). You can imagine how she would not have been praised but criticised if she had done such a foolish thing today. She would have been told that her first responsibility was to look after herself so she would not be a burden on the community. It was not a wise decision to give away her money without first providing for herself. Presumably she was throwing herself on the mercy of God and trusting him to provide for her next meal; could she not have been accused of presuming on the goodness of God which James in his epistle warns businessmen that they should not be doing (James 4:13-17). Yet Jesus praises her, and praises her highly for he contrasts the context out of which the wealthy gave their donations and the context of poverty out of which she gave hers. And in evaluating our actions, too, God does not just take into account the action itself but the background against which we do it; this includes the cost to us, the hidden benefits we think we might derive for ourselves, the impact we think it might have on other people, and above all the way it expresses or influences our relationship with Him.

So Jesus explains to his disciples what would not have obvious to the casual bystander: 'They all gave out of their wealth; but she, out of her poverty, put in everything - all she had to live on' (v44). In a very real sense she had given 'everything', for she had no guarantee that God would provide the next meal. She might go hungry, she might die. There was no limit to her commitment. She put life itself on the line by the extent of her giving. Here indeed is a huge challenge, especially to those of us who are wealthy. We should evaluate our giving not by the amount we give, but by the amount we hold back. Not by what we give in comparison to other people, but in terms of how much it represents a gift of our very selves. Not by what our gift can achieve, for God does not need our money to fulfil his purpose,

The bottom line is this: how much do we trust God as we look into the future?

but by whether our gift in some sense demonstrates our dependence on God for life itself.

The bottom line is this: how much do we trust God as we look into the future? This woman had

small resources but huge faith. It was her faith which gave her status in the eyes of Jesus. The opposite of seeking status is to exercise faith. To seek status is to lack faith, and to have faith is to disdain status.

Some Questions for Ourselves

So Jesus yet again turns human evaluation on its head. We think that we get status from our position in society, expressed by how and when people greet us and treat us in public places, the extent to which we are shown respect by our peers. We think status derives from wealth, from the New Year's honours list, from where we went to school or university. And in human terms, that may often be right. That is how we do attract and attribute status. But God sees it differently. It is not our wealth but our relationship with Him which is the source of status in heaven. It is not our confidence in our achievements or attributes which matters, but our confidence in His care for us in the future – at a very practical level. It is not even our generosity to religious or other good causes which interests him, but our love for Him and His people.

And as far as his own status was concerned, Jesus makes it clear that this is a matter which God Himself has determined. Jesus has not sought status for himself, but God gave it to him as a gift when he said to him, 'Sit at my right hand...' for that is to have the highest conceivable status in heaven. No one in earth or heaven has been given a higher status than Jesus, and yet he never sought it for himself.

Paul summarises the key lesson from this passage most wonderfully in his letter to the Philippians as follows:

'Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus:

Who being in very nature God did not consider equality with God something to be grasped,

but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness.

And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death- even death on a cross.

Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name,

that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth,

and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father'.
(Philippians 2:5-11)

Questions for Discussion

1. Introduction

- (a) What sorts of people have status in our society?
- (b) Why do we want status in our relationships with other people?
- (c) How do we try and get status for ourselves?

2. The Status of Jesus (vv35-37)

- (a) What kind of Messiah were the Jews looking for?
- (b) What status does Jesus point to for the Messiah?
- (c) If the Jews (and ourselves) understood the true status of Jesus, how would it affect our relationship with him?

3. The Status of the Religious Leaders

- (a) In what ways did the religious leaders seek status? How do religious leaders seek status today? How does it affect their relationships with other people?
- (b) Why do you think they will be 'punished most severely?' Why is God so offended by this?
- (c) If we seek status for ourselves, how does this affect our relationship with God?

4. The Status of the Poor Widow (vv41-44)

- (a) Money was important for keeping the temple going, as is the case in churches today. So why do you think Jesus focuses on the gift of the widow, rather than on the much larger gifts of the wealthy?
- (b) What does this woman's action tell you about her relationship with God?
- (c) How does our use of money reveal the true nature of our relationships in life today?

10. Gethsemane: When Jesus' Relationships with God and His Friends are Tested to the Limit

Mark 14: 27-42

²⁷"You will all fall away," Jesus told them, "for it is written:

"I will strike the shepherd,
and the sheep will be scattered.'

²⁸But after I have risen, I will go ahead of you into Galilee."

²⁹Peter declared, "Even if all fall away, I will not."

³⁰"I tell you the truth," Jesus answered, "today – yes, tonight – before the cock crows twice you yourself will disown me three times."

³¹But Peter insisted emphatically, "Even if I have to die with you, I will never disown you." And all the others said the same.

³²They went to a place called Gethsemane, and Jesus said to his disciples, "Sit here while I pray." ³³He took Peter, James and John along with him, and he began to be deeply distressed and troubled. ³⁴"My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death," he said to them. "Stay here and keep watch."

³⁵Going a little farther, he fell to the ground and prayed that if possible the hour might pass from him. ³⁶"*Abba*, Father," he said, "everything is possible for you. Take this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will."

³⁷Then he returned to his disciples and found them sleeping. "Simon," he said to Peter, "are you asleep? Could you not keep watch for one hour?"

³⁸Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the body is weak."

³⁹Once more he went away and prayed the same thing. ⁴⁰When he came back, he again found them sleeping, because their eyes were heavy. They did not know what to say to him.

⁴¹Returning the third time, he said to them, "Are you still sleeping and resting? Enough! The hour has come. Look, the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners. ⁴²Rise! Let us go! Here comes my betrayer!"

Crises come in many different forms. They may touch our material possessions, our health or life itself. They may come suddenly, when you least expect them, with no warning at all. Or they may be the results of years of preparation, the climax of a process which has been planned and thought through in the greatest detail. However, seldom if ever is there a crisis in the physical, emotional or financial aspects of our lives which does not at the same time represent a crisis in our spiritual lives, a crucial moment in the development of our relationship with God.

Two weeks ago, as I write this, I woke up from a Sunday afternoon nap. It had been raining hard all day. My neighbour had been over at lunchtime to express his concern that the stream running across

the end of our properties was rising fast. I assured him there was no danger. There had not been much rain in the previous two weeks. There were leaves still on the trees to absorb moisture from the ground. There had been no warnings on radio or TV of possible floods. We had nothing to worry about. Now at about 4 p.m., although there was flooding in a field across the road, there was no sign of any water in our garden.

How quickly it all changed. Within half an hour the garden was flooded and the water was lapping at the back door. In another hour it was threatening the main ground floor of the house, over a foot above the level of the garden. By 9 p.m. the whole of the ground floor of the house was covered with 14 inches of muddy brown water. Although we hoisted

the piano onto bricks, frantically moved books and furniture upstairs, moved mementoes and valuables out of reach of the water, our house was a disaster area. After that fateful day, the carpets and underlay had to be thrown out, the electrical appliances all had to be replaced (cooker, boiler, freezer, washing machine ...), and it will be months, not weeks, before the house is properly dried out and electric power and heating are fully restored to use.

This is a crisis of lifestyle, convenience. It is in a small way a financial crisis, too, as we were not insured due to two previous near floods. It has also been a spiritual crisis. How would my wife and I respond to the hard manual work and inconvenience thrust upon us with no warning? How much would we complain, and how much praise God despite everything (see Hebrews 3:17-18)? How would we manage financially? This was not a good time to cash in our 'ethical savings' as the world's stock markets had just taken a severe jolt after the collapse of the World Trade Centre in New York? Would God really continue to provide for us? Would we trust Him? The spiritual side of the crisis would not just last a few hours; it would stretch over the weeks and months ahead until life returned to comfortable 'normal'.

Our flood, of course, is a much less severe crisis than those which face many couples and individuals. A friend wrote to say her husband had the dreaded 'C' word. He is on chemotherapy. At this point, they do not know whether he will live weeks, months or years. Life itself is under threat, and even more profoundly their relationship together. They have been married 40 years. Death may tear them apart. Here again it is not just a physical and emotional crisis for this older couple. It is a spiritual crisis. They have known and loved the Lord for a very long time. When their love and relationship is under threat, will they turn towards God, or away from him? Will the crisis destroy their faith, or deepen it?

These moments of crisis do not just influence the course of our lives for a few days or hours. They cast a much longer shadow. They are likely to influence our outlook on life, our attitudes towards God and our neighbour, our willingness to suffer for Christ in the future when God calls on us to do so. They are moments of great opportunity as well as moments of great trial, difficulty, and struggle. Often it is true that "life will never be the same again".

In this passage we see Jesus approaching the greatest crisis and test in his life. The crisis for Jesus is equally a crisis for his disciples: how they respond will have a huge impact on the rest of their lives. The outcome of this crisis, when Jesus is tried, condemned and executed, is determined for both

Jesus and his disciples not in the heat of the moment, not when the events themselves take place, but in the hours preceding the crisis. Jesus knows in advance what is about to happen to him, and he gives his disciples the clearest possible warnings. The key issue is how Jesus and his disciples will prepare themselves for this crisis. For us, too, the key lessons from this passage will lie in recognising when a crisis is looming, and learning what key steps to take if we are to be ready for a crisis.

Where Do Peter and the Other Disciples Go Wrong? (vv27-31)

Straight after the most wonderful and significant moment in the lives of the disciples, when Jesus shared the bread and wine and spoke about 'the new covenant' during their supper together, Jesus confronts them with a most painful fact, "You will all fall away" (v27). This is announced in a way which leaves not the least room for doubt. Jesus cites the prophet Zechariah both to underline the certainty and to explain the wider context, "I will strike the shepherd and the sheep will be scattered". (v27, of Zechariah 13:7).

This is a dramatic moment, and also a sad one. We know from the rest of Mark's gospel that Peter, for all his impetuosity, loved Jesus deeply and desired to serve him well. We know from later history of his remarkable leadership gifts and his spiritual insight. So where does Peter go wrong? Where do all the other disciples go wrong as well? All eleven still with Jesus are tarred with the same brush. Every single one of them would fall away. Not even one would cope with the crisis which was about to break over them.

Peter responds to the warning Jesus gives with a flat contradiction. He passes over Jesus reassurance, "...but after I have risen, I will go ahead of you into Galilee" (v28), and concentrates only on the prediction, "You will all fall away". Peter doesn't believe it, and even seems to resent being lumped together with all the other disciples, for he replies, "Even if all fall away, I will not" (v29). How arrogant he sounds!

Jesus does not back off, or not yet. Rather, he reaffirms what he has already said to Peter, but says it even more emphatically. "I tell you the truth", says Jesus, "today – yes, tonight – before the cock crows twice, you yourself will disown me three times" (v30). This prediction is more specific than the first one as far as Peter is concerned in three ways. Firstly, Jesus now names Peter individually, rather than just including him as one of the eleven. Secondly, Jesus is much more specific about the time scale. He predicts it will happen 'tonight', i.e. – within the next 6 to 8 hours! Thirdly, he predicts

Peter will not just “fall away”, which might have a number of possible interpretations from ‘run away’ to ‘lose his confidence that Jesus is the Messiah’, but predicts that Peter will verbally disown him – and not just once, but three times. Jesus could hardly have warned Peter of the crisis he was going to confront with greater precision than he does here.

How does Peter respond as Jesus spells it out for him. Now at last do we see Peter’s confidence ebb away? Does he fall to the ground and beg for help and support to go through the crisis? Does he apologise for the arrogance of his last reply? Far from it. Rather, Peter digs his toes in and insists emphatically, “Even if I have to die with you, I will never disown you!” And it wasn’t just Peter. As Mark records, “all the others said the same” (v31). So we have the extraordinary scene of “You will”, “I won’t”, “You definitely will,” “I definitely won’t” between Jesus and Peter. Peter was still willing to take Jesus on in a confrontation, to disagree publicly, to say he is wrong. Jesus graciously allows Peter the last word. No reply is recorded to Peter’s last emphatic refusal to take on board what Jesus is saying. Jesus knows he will not have to wait long to be proved right. But more importantly, Jesus knows there is nothing more he can say to persuade Peter to listen and prepare.

So where do Peter and the other disciples go wrong? What can we learn from this? They do not listen to what Jesus is saying to them; they do not take seriously enough either his warnings or his encouragement about what will happen ‘after he has risen’ (v28). Nor do they take seriously the reference Jesus makes to the Old Testament prophecy, “I will strike the shepherd and the sheep

will be scattered” (v27). It is, after all, God himself who is the ‘I’ in this prophecy, who predicts this will happen and who will cause this to happen. How often do we, like Peter and the other disciples, hear Jesus’ words – his warnings and promises – and fail to take them on board, fail to realise he is speaking to us, now? How often do I take his words lightly, and not attach to them their true weight? How often do

I trust my assessment of the situation over against his?

I am struck by Peter’s words in verse 29, “Even if all fall away, I will not”. He is saying to Jesus, “I don’t believe this is going to happen, but even if it did...”

This is as close as anything to saying Jesus is a liar, or perhaps just that he is plain wrong. When we refuse to listen to the warnings or the promises of Jesus, we are in effect doing the same thing. Of course, we have to be careful about applying promises in the Bible to ourselves when they are not promises to all believers. There are occasions, however, when we know in our deepest hearts God has spoken directly to us as individuals. More commonly, the challenge is to accept and apply the promises given to all of Jesus’ disciples – such as the promise that nothing can separate us from the love of Christ (Romans 8: 38), that God will hear and answer our prayers (e.g. John 16: 24), that however far we stray from God there is always a way back if we will only turn to him (John 6: 37).

The other ugly aspect of Peter’s refusal to listen to Jesus is his pride. Hear how he contrasts himself with the other disciples, “Even if all fall away, I will not” (v29). Peter clearly has built up a view of himself over the years which makes him feel that in spiritual terms he is a cut above the rest. This pride is the beginning of the fulfilment of the Zechariah prophecy which Jesus has just quoted that “the sheep will be scattered” (v27, cf. Zech 13: 7). Peter cannot accept Jesus’ diagnosis of his spiritual weakness. How little Peter knows himself. How little he is in touch with his own thoughts and feelings, how little he still reflects on his own words and actions. I can empathise with Peter here, for I have a similar weakness. But it is exactly this weakness which lays the ground for his spiritual fall. If only he had realised his spiritual vulnerability, if only he could have recognised his spiritual pride, he would have taken on board the warning and could have prepared in prayer for the test that was about to hit him.

Again, we need to ask ourselves, how confident are we of our spiritual strength in the face of temptation or testing? How sure are we that we will remain steadfast in Christ if our circumstances radically change? How well do we know ourselves and our own spiritual weaknesses?

How did Jesus handle his own crisis?

‘Jesus began to be deeply distressed and troubled. “My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death... Stay here and keep watch” (v34). Jesus feels distressed, troubled, overwhelmed. He knows what it’s like to feel emotional trauma. He has been there. The words ‘distressed’ and ‘troubled’ describe a compound of fear, uncertainty and anxiety; nowhere else in Jesus’ life are his feelings portrayed in such vivid terms. In the psalms, too, there is a tradition of anguish in the face of death (for example, see Psalm 55: 4-8, 42: 9-11). Jesus also describes how he feels in terms of being ‘overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death’.

How confident are we of our spiritual strength in the face of temptation or testing? How well do we know ourselves and our own spiritual weaknesses?

This is a way of describing emotional pain which is so great that it takes him to the very limits of the human capacity to sustain pain. He says he feels 'overwhelmed', which is perhaps a way of saying he cannot cope with it. He no longer feels in control of the situation. It is beyond him in some sense.

Calvin comments on this passage that, "the test of true virtue is to be found when the contest begins – for then the weakness of the flesh and the secret feelings are displayed", and quotes Ambrose as saying, "There is no instance in which I admire more his kindness and his majesty – for he would not have done so much for me if he had not taken upon himself my feelings. He grieved for me, who had no cause of grief for himself. Laying aside the delights of the eternal Godhead, he experiences the affliction of my weakness". As we look on Jesus in Gethsemane, we see not the appearance, but the reality, of incarnation.

Notice, too, that Jesus does not keep his grief to himself. Although he has to do business with God, as we shall see, at this point he shares his feelings with his closest friends. Friendship always requires self-disclosure, and never is it more important to share our innermost feelings with those closest to us than when we face the greatest crisis of all in our lives, death itself. To talk about feelings and fears not only strengthens friendship; it is a vital God-given means for us as human beings to cope with the pressure which these fears place upon us.

What caused Jesus such deep distress and sorrow? There are three main possibilities. There is the prospect of the crucifixion itself, the physical torture and public humiliation (men were probably crucified naked) which that involved. It should not be underestimated. Very few human beings are called to die in such physical agony. Few men, however brave, could contemplate such torture without fear, distress, foreboding. And Jesus was not just God; he was also a man.

At a much deeper level there is the prospect of "drinking the cup of God's wrath", taking the sins of the whole world upon himself. As it says in Isaiah, "the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all" (Isaiah 53: 6). What is it like to face the judgement of God? We catch the smallest glimpse here and there in Scripture. The destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. Achan's family being swallowed up by the earth. The siege, starvation and fall of Jerusalem. As the writer to the Hebrews puts it, speaking of judgement, "It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God" (Hebrews 10: 31). In our churches God is so often portrayed as having the softness of a pussycat that we find it difficult to empathise with the fear and dread Jesus must have felt as he contemplated coming under God's judgement – not just for the sin of one person, but

for the sin of the whole world through all its generations.

Yet there is another dimension of suffering beyond all this which Jesus faced. For Jesus does not say that he is overwhelmed with *fear* to the point of death. He says he is overwhelmed with *sorrow* to the point of death. What is the cause of this sorrow? Leaving his earthly friends and family? Perhaps. Jesus is about to be betrayed and deserted by his closest friends and colleagues, the total negation of their love for him when it came to the crunch, and an event which would make his life's work of training them look a complete failure. But more likely Jesus is referring to the dread and emotional pain of being separated from God the Father and God the Holy Spirit – the break-up of the eternal trinity. Remember how Jesus cries out on the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Mark 15: 34). Jesus has to face death alone, absolutely alone.

British men particularly are not good at acknowledging and coming to terms with emotional pain. It is part of our national culture, and deeply bred into us in our public schools especially, that we should always show a 'stiff upper lip'. It is anathema for a boy at school to cry. Men learn to hide pain, suppress it, ignore it, pretend it isn't there. Perhaps in this process we lose touch with our innermost selves, and learn to underestimate the role of feelings in developing any relationship.

In general, the amount a person dreads separation in a relationship depends on the length, intimacy, and the degree of dependence – or interdependence – in that relationship. The longer and closer and deeper the relationship, the greater the pain of separation. Jesus is about to have his relationship with the Father severed by the cross. How close was the relationship?

Regarding the length of the relationship, it was, of course, an eternal relationship. There had never been a time when that relationship did not exist. It had been there for aeons and aeons and aeons. Most of us can think back to a time when life was lived without the person who is now our closest friend in the world; Jesus could not. In terms of closeness of relationship, Jesus says he and the Father are 'one' (John 10: 30), inseparable in thought, word and action. Jesus never said or did anything except what the Father showed him to do (John 5: 19-20). Here is a relationship of interdependence *par excellence*, total and complete, with perfect harmony of understanding and purpose. Often in the gospels there is explicit reference to the love which exists between Father and Son (e.g. Mark 1: 11, Mark 9: 7), a love which goes deeper than we as mere humans can ever experience, at least on earth. If our human love at its best is sincere, faithful, lasting,

passionate, constant, the love between the Father and Jesus is a thousand times deeper even than this.

So how, then, does Jesus feel at the prospect of death – of having that love cut off, and indeed cut off in wrath as he bears the sin of the world? How does he feel about the prospect of not just being forsaken but in a sense ‘rejected’ as he carries our sin? Mark tells us Jesus feels ‘overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death’.

If our human love at its best is sincere, faithful, lasting, passionate, constant, the love between the Father and Jesus is a thousand times deeper even than this.

There are two points of encouragement for us here. One of the most painful things about death is the separation from those we love most dearly. There is no way to avoid that separation. When we die, we have to go alone and leave them behind. The story of Gethsemane assures us that Jesus knows what it feels like. He has been there. Indeed, he has been through the trauma of separation on

a scale, or to a degree, far worse than we shall ever have to face. Well may the author of Hebrews write, ‘we do not have a High Priest who is unable to sympathise with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are’ (Hebrews 4: 15). If he has “been there’, he can understand our anguish, and knows how to bring us peace in times of deepest hurt.

The second encouragement for us will come at the point when we have to look death squarely in the face, as we realise that it is not as bad for us as it was for Jesus. I am not referring to the fact that our death is likely to involve less physical torture, although that is almost certainly the case. I am referring to the fact that we will not die alone, as Jesus had to. The Father, with Jesus and the Holy Spirit, will be holding our hand as we cross the river to the other side. As Paul wrote, “...death ... cannot separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 8: 38-39). As any Christian can testify, that makes all the difference in the world. In our hour of greatest need, greatest loneliness, greatest sorrow, greatest uncertainty, the Lord will be there beside us, for He has promised, ‘I will *never* leave you nor forsake you’ (Hebrews 13: 5, Matthew 28: 20). It is because Jesus has been through death alone, on our behalf, that we do not have to face it alone.

‘Going a little further, he fell to the ground and prayed...’ (v35). Why does Jesus leave his three

closest friends and colleagues behind and go forward to pray alone? Partly, I think, to be able to focus more effectively on his communication with God and avoid all possible distractions. Partly to give himself greater freedom of expression, to be able to pour out his groans, fears, anxieties and anguish without restraint. Mark records that Jesus fell to the ground: he does not just kneel. Kneeling is commonly used as an expression of respect and reverence. But Jesus here goes further, to the ultimate physical expression of being a suppliant. He lies flat on the ground. The physical posture shows how desperate he is feeling. This is a prayer, alone, at night, against all the forces of evil that Satan can muster, for when we face death we also face temptation - temptation to doubt. And Jesus in addition faced a temptation we do not normally have when death approaches as our options are more limited – the temptation to run away, to avoid going through with it.

We should not miss the obvious point that at this supreme moment of crisis Jesus does not decide to turn in upon himself and seek total solitude, nor does he try and suppress the truth by laughing it off. He goes off-stage to a quiet garden and finds a spot where he can pray alone – asking his closest friends to wait nearby and pray along with him. The reply may not be given immediately; the relief may not come at once. But in our hour of greatest need, it is to God we should turn. As James puts it, ‘Is any one of you in trouble? He should pray’ (James 5: 13).

‘He prayed that if possible the hour might pass from him. “Abba, Father”, he said, “everything is possible for you. Take this cup from me ...”’ (vv35-36). ‘The hour’ refers to the moment of fulfilling the divine plan. He is asking in effect to be spared the suffering. This seems on the face of it a mad prayer. How can Jesus pray this when this moment is the very reason he came into the world, the culmination of his life’s work, the climax of his ministry? He has been absolutely clear about his calling right through his ministry and has made clear that his death has the supreme purpose of liberating humankind from their slavery to sin (e.g. Mark 10: 45). Even within the last two hours he had spoken of his blood as ‘the blood of the covenant which is poured out for many’ (v24).

As Calvin points out on this verse, the prayers of believers are not always constant, ordered, logical or even feasible. Rather they are often involved, confused, contradictory, ‘like a ship on a stormy sea which cannot sail straight to harbour’. At this moment of supreme crisis, Jesus vacillates between on the one hand his desire to fulfil his Father’s plan and save the world from its sin, and on the other his desire to avoid the suffering and separation which lie just ahead. So he prays one moment to be freed

from death, and the next for God's will to be done. The fear and anguish are transparent.

Notice, too, that Jesus prays 'Abba, Father ...'. In Aramaic, *Abba* is the diminutive form of *Ab*, Father. Such a form of address to God is unknown in Jewish literature. Jesus understood his relationship with God quite differently from all his contemporaries. Why do adults use the diminutive form, for example with their wives? Surely as a way of expressing affection and dependence. 'Please, Daddy, take this away ...'. How could any father refuse? How could God the Father who loves his son so totally, so passionately, turn away? The only reason the Father could 'no' was his love for you and me. There was no other way to handle the monster of my evil; Jesus had to go through with it.

Again, these reflections on what Jesus went through should encourage us. If our prayers are in some sense contradictory, his were too. If Jesus struggled to accept the path God had laid down for him when it led into suffering, is it surprising that we struggle too? If he begged his Father to give him a way out, we should not be surprised when we do the same.

'Everything is possible for you ... Yet not what I will, but what you will' (verse 36). A Hebrew prayer of petition was usually in three parts:

- (a) A calling on God – so here Jesus cried out to 'Abba'.
- (b) A recognition of God's power – 'everything is possible for you'.
- (c) The request – 'remove this cup from me'.

Now Jesus adds a fourth element, which is total subordination of his own will to God's will. Jesus was determined to do God's will, but he had to struggle to come to the point where he was fully ready to do it when it involved him in so much pain and suffering. Jesus does not intend by those words to bring the power of God into conflict with God's unchangeable plan and purpose; but when he faced a situation that seemed to involve so much suffering and pain, he appealed to the power of God to find a way out. Jesus knew the way of the suffering servant, who takes upon himself 'the iniquity of us all', was what God had laid down as his calling, and had been obedient to that calling right up to this moment through his ministry. It was not opposition to the Father's will which caused him to pray like this in Gethsemane; it was a deep horror of the death he faced just ahead. Yet even faced by the unspeakable terrors of the cross with its cosmic implications, he reaffirms his commitment to do his Father's will.

Sometimes, God's will goes contrary to our senses. We can desire things as human beings which seem good, and even excellent, from our limited perspective. We can pray that the church grows and

flourishes in areas where there is persecution, that all false religion is removed from the world, that legislation which harms young people does not pass through Parliament. These things are all right in themselves, but it may please God to order matters differently. For God wishes his children to be trained under the cross, and that there should thus be a triumph for faith and the gospel. So here, too, with Jesus his prayer that if it is possible the shadow of the cross should pass by, and some other way to redeem mankind be found, is a legitimate prayer. And yet Jesus recognises that God's purpose may be fulfilled through the path of his own intense suffering.

Jesus is clear in the Garden of Gethsemane that he wants nothing in the end but that God's will should be done. He submits his life, and his death, to God's will, trusting God to take care of all the consequences, all the fall-out, all the suffering which his death will involve. The bottom line is that he believes God loves him and that God will somehow see him through it all. So JC Ryle describes submission to the will of God as taking patiently whatever God sends, liking nothing except what God likes, wishing nothing except what God approves, and lying passively under God's hand. To learn to submit to God's will is to discover our own happiness.

'Once more he went away and prayed the same thing... Returning a third time he said to them... "Enough! The hour has come..." (vv39, 41). Jesus goes and prays the same thing again. Fear and horror of what lay ahead compelled him to ask his Father again that he might be spared the suffering and the separation.. This is not the kind of vain repetition which Jesus condemned (Matthew 6: 7). It is not a superfluous repetition of words if we ask again for what appears to have been denied. Jesus showed that we must not grow weary or discouraged in praying if we do not immediately obtain our wishes (see Luke 18: 1-8).

However, the 'bottom line' for Jesus is not to seek endlessly the outcome he desires, but to come to terms with his Father's will. The exclamation translated 'Enough' is probably addressed to the disciples. It could mean 'Enough of sleep,' i.e. it's time to wake up, or enough of me trying to cajole you to stay awake. Or it could mean, 'the account is closed,' i.e. the end has come. Or it could mean, 'It is settled,' i.e. it is now clear for Jesus that there is no other way than the cross and the matter is decided in his own heart and mind.

Personally, I think it most likely that Jesus is saying, 'It is settled. The hour has come.' The time for reflection, intercession, struggle with his Father and with himself is over. Events are now overtaking him. And in any case he has made up his mind. He

knows what he has to do, and he is going to go through with it. It is a supreme moment of decision. His last chance to run away, to take evasive action, to avoid the cross and all it involves, has gone. When Judas appears with the soldiers, he advances to meet them (v42). He is positively and willingly embracing the task his Father has assigned to him, and trusting God to see him through it.

I believe God intends that all of us reach this point in our own internal struggle when we face death. We each need to reach a point where we have submitted our own will to God's will, and when we have such a clear view of God's love for us, and confidence in Him to take us safely across the barrier of death into his presence that we can let go of life in peace. In our internal conflict we, too, need to reach the place Jesus came to when he said, 'It is settled'.

The writer of the book of Hebrews says, 'During the days of Jesus' life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with loud cries and tears to the one who could save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission' (Hebrews 5: 7). In what sense was Jesus 'heard' here? God the Father did not find another way to resolve the problem of human sin. Jesus was not able to avoid the cross, the public humiliation, and the physical torture. He was not able to avoid that terrible moment of separation from the ones he loved so deeply. So in what sense was Jesus 'heard because of his reverent submission'?

I believe this refers to God raising him from the dead. The resurrection was not an automatic outcome of the death of Jesus. If Jesus had sinned, if he had not submitted to his Father's will and gone through with it, he would not have been raised. The resurrection is a consequence of Jesus' obedience, his 'reverent submission'. We have here the ultimate incentive for our submission to the will of God. It is through that submission that we are heard, and it is through our relationship with God that we are raised to life with Christ in God. So as we face temptation and suffering in our own lives, as we have to come to terms with illness which we had hoped to avoid, with untimely separation from those we love most closely and most deeply, let us wrestle in prayer to come to that point of submission to our Father's will, to acceptance that his plan and purpose is perfect, to a confidence that he will take us safely across the river of death into the joy of being in his presence for ever.

How did Jesus handle his disciple's failure?

Jesus' instruction to his disciples in the garden of Gethsemane is simple and clear, 'Stay here and keep watch' (v34). Later on Jesus makes it clear that he

felt they should not just be 'watching' but also praying (v38). To 'watch' in this context seems to mean more than just staying awake. Jesus is surely referring to a state of spiritual as well as physical alertness as he has just warned them in the strongest possible terms that a time of severe testing is imminent, indeed would occur that very night (v27, 30). In addition, he has just shared with them the depth of his own emotional turmoil and the personal crisis he is struggling with (vv33-34). If they cared about him at all, this was a time to be on their knees to God seeking to uphold him through prayer. So they had every reason to keep awake and pray for him together as Jesus had encouraged them to do (Matthew 18: 19-20).

So what happens? When Jesus returns from his period of prayer, perhaps an hour of prayer as hinted at in verse 37, Jesus found the three leading disciples asleep (v37). How does Jesus react? It must have been a moment of profound discouragement for him. After all he had done for them and shared with them, and after the teaching and training he had given them, they had failed to learn the most basic spiritual lesson that prayer is crucial in times of testing. In addition, they had shown him no love and support when he needed it most.

Jesus does not criticise them or get angry with them for their apparent indifference to his spiritual turmoil and struggle. He could have done. He had made himself vulnerable by sharing his inmost feelings, yet the message they sent him by being asleep was that they didn't care. He had given them a specific instruction to stay alert which they had ignored. He does not shout at them, but nor does he hide his grief and disappointment. He gently chides Peter. It is significant that he calls Peter by his old name of Simon. For Peter had hardly been true here to his new name of 'Rock' in his relationship either with Jesus or with James and John. When Jesus says to Peter, 'Simon, are you asleep? Could you not keep watch for one hour?' he is surely referring back to the blunt disagreement earlier where Peter had emphatically claimed he would never disown Jesus (v31).

Again, the question form which Jesus uses so often is designed to make Peter ask himself why he had not been able to keep watch for one hour. Peter could have just said he was tired. But we all know that if the need is great enough we can stay awake under any and all circumstances. We have no evidence that Peter had been up all night the previous night. Yes, Peter was doubtless tired, living in the highly charged political environment of those final days of Jesus' life. But that is not sufficient explanation for his being asleep when Jesus had specifically charged him to keep watch – and had

Would Jesus be saying the same things to us today about some decision coming up in our lives, some crisis we are facing at home or at work, some relationship which is going badly wrong?

warned him of imminent spiritual danger that very night. So Jesus' question still needs an answer, 'Could you not keep watch for one hour?'

The issue obviously is not whether Peter was *able* to keep awake but whether he was *willing* to keep awake. That then directly raises issues around Peter's perception of the extent of the need, both in terms of his assessment of the physical and spiritual danger and in terms of the importance

he attaches to prayer as a means of coping with such danger. On both counts Peter falls down. He has underestimated the danger (v31); he has failed to recognise the importance of prayer. Would Jesus be saying the same things to us today about some decision coming up in our lives, some crisis we are facing at home or at work, some relationship which is going badly wrong?

Jesus explains to Peter and the other two, James and John, in the next sentence why it is so important to stay awake, 'Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation' (v38). Despite all the deep struggles Jesus is coping with himself at this moment, his reason for urging them to stay awake and pray is not support for himself but so that they may prevent themselves falling into temptation. Does it really matter if we fall into temptation, if we sin a bit? We may not think so, but Jesus clearly does think so. The greater our awareness of the holiness of God, the greater will be our awareness of why, and how much, sin matters. It is hard to communicate it in a society which has a designer God in its imagination, the sort of God who suits its own lax morality.

I am struck by Jesus' command to '*watch* and pray' (v38). Jesus has already told his disciples twice to '*watch*' (vv34, 37). Why does Jesus not just tell them to pray? Surely it is because our prayers come out of the reflections and attitudes of our hearts. Even in a crisis situation, our prayers will be an expression of what we are thinking and feeling. So to pray intelligently it is vital that we are thinking through the issues we face in life around us, identifying the important things to pray about, observing what is happening in our relationships, exercising spiritual discernment. To know what to talk about to God we need to have thought about it

first, in the same way that if you were granted an audience with your Prime Minister or President, you would think about what to say before you walked through the door.

Jesus also explains why it is so difficult to pray when you are tired out, even when there is a crisis. Jesus speaks with great gentleness and compassion when he says to his three close friends, 'The spirit is willing but the body is weak'. He is distinguishing between a person's physical weakness and the higher spiritual desires of his will. This is not to divide up body from spirit in the manner of Greek thought which claimed that what we do with our bodies does not matter so long as our spirits are right before God. Jesus is saying that what we do with our bodies has a crucial impact on our relationship with God. Paul makes the same point to the Corinthians in regard to sexual immorality (1 Corinthians 6:12-20).

Note that for the disciples the issue was not their spiritual perception about the need to pray, nor a spiritual reluctance to seek out the throne of grace with their requests. There was no fear of God, in this situation, that he would dismiss their approach and turn away from them. It was not the constraint of following some complicated and expensive procedure to be able to gain access to the One who rules the whole world, or the need to wait for months for an appointment! The disciples knew that access to God as their Father was simple, free, immediate. No. the issue was simply the weakness of their bodies. They were tired. As Mark puts it, 'their eyes were heavy' (v40). Luke explains that this tiredness was due in part to sorrow (Luke 22:45).

We have the same struggles in our daily lives. We find it hard to get up in the morning, hard not to eat or drink too much, hard to focus on God when we are sick or tired, hard simply to stay awake and pray. So there is often a struggle within us to do what is right – a struggle between a willing spirit and a weak body.

Jesus recognises their struggle; he knows himself the tension as he is human like us. But at this moment in Gethsemane his own struggle, I believe, is a different one. The issue Jesus faces is a willingness of his spirit to go through with the crucifixion when it means facing the judgement of God and being separated from him in eternity. He is caught between on the one hand the desire to do his Father's will, the desire to save us from eternal death and damnation, and on the other the desire to avoid the wrath of God which would be poured out on him as he took upon himself the sin of the world.

After urging the disciples again to watch and pray, Jesus goes away on his own a second time. When he

comes back a while later, he again finds them asleep. What is Jesus to do now? Should he wake them again, and urge them yet again to watch and pray? He does not. He has made that point to them already. He must have woken them up, for Mark records that they did not know what to say to him (v40). Although Jesus does not chide them again, they must have felt embarrassed and ashamed of themselves. They could not think of any plausible excuse. Jesus goes away a third time, leaving them with one last opportunity to join him in prayer, to 'watch', to prepare for the time of testing which is now so close to being upon them. A third time Jesus comes back to find them asleep (v41). You can almost hear the discouragement in his voice as he says to them, 'Are you still sleeping?' Jesus now wakes them up yet again, this time not in hope that they will share his vigil but because the soldiers with the arrest warrant are approaching the Garden. There is now no more they can do to prepare themselves. 'The hour has come' (v41).

Calvin asks why Jesus' disciples are so easily forgetful of God. These three disciples were 'la crème de la crème' of those who followed Jesus during his lifetime. They had so much opportunity to learn from Jesus himself. They were to prove such outstanding leaders in the early church. They were selected by Jesus as his chief companions. If they were so easily forgetful of God, what hope is there for us? If we are not in immediate physical danger, we give priority to sleep. If we experience fear or sorrow, which ought to arouse us to prayer, these feelings overwhelm us so that our spirits do not rise to God. So we are predisposed to fall away from God in a crisis until God Himself reaches down to us and restores us. Calvin's view may give a rather depressing perspective on the Christian life but which of us can deny the truth of what he says?

Final Thoughts

There are lessons for all of us in this passage. God may be warning us of times of difficulty and stress which lie just ahead, and urging us to prepare ourselves for them. He may be challenging our arrogant self-confidence that we are ready for whatever life may throw at us. He may be giving us comfort as we face the ultimate test of death, by reminding us that Jesus has been through exactly the same experience of looking in the face not just physical suffering but the separation from those we love most on earth. And that comfort lies most of all in knowing that whereas Jesus had to face it absolutely alone, he will never ask that of us. For Jesus is totally committed to staying by our side through the experience of final illness and death; he will never leave us or forsake us (Hebrews 13:5);

even death cannot separate us from the love of Christ (Romans 8:48).

Jesus loves us more than we can ever imagine. It is this eternal, faithful, overwhelming love which drives him to the cross even when his whole being recoils against it. It is this love which needs to be the main driver of our thinking and our actions throughout our lives, the factor which motivates us as he warns of troubles ahead to 'watch' and 'pray' as he has told us to.

Questions for Discussion

1. What are the greatest times of difficulty and testing you have faced in the past, and that you expect you might have to face in the future?
2. Vv27-31. Jesus warns Peter of exactly what is about to happen, and even puts a time on it – in about the next 6 hours (v28)! Why does Peter not accept Jesus' diagnosis of his spiritual weakness? (v29). How do you think this attitude developed? What can we learn from this?
3. How does Jesus describe how he's feeling at this point (vv32-34)? Why 'sorrow', not 'fear'?
4. Why does Jesus tell his three closest disciples how he's feeling? What can we learn from this? Why does he then go and pray alone? (v35).
5. Why does Jesus tell his disciples to 'watch and pray'? Why does he not tell them just to pray?
6. What does Jesus' prayer in verse 36 tell us about his relationship with God Almighty? Why is he so desperate?
7. Why was Jesus willing to go through with the cross even though it involves such intense suffering? What would you still want to ask God for if you knew that you could only receive it from God by passing through intense suffering?
8. In the end, God asked Jesus to submit to His will. Are there areas of our lives today where God is asking us to accept something, even after we have begged him to take it away (see 2 Corinthians 12: 8-9).
9. What are the implications for our own prayer life of Jesus' observation that 'the spirit is willing but the flesh is weak' (v38)?
10. Jesus has shared his deepest feelings with his disciples, at the time of his own deepest need. How does Jesus handle the failure of his closest disciples?

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