

Reflections on the Gospel Readings¹ – 7 Studies for Lent 2015²

Session One: Mark 1:9-15

Mark, our earliest gospel, sets the scene for all that follows both in his gospel and in the mission of the church ever since. John the Baptist has just declared that the coming one will baptise with the Holy Spirit (1:8). Baptising with the Spirit is imagery. We could say: he will flood the world with God's Spirit. Mark goes straight on to show Jesus receiving the Spirit for that task at his baptism (1:9-11). John the Baptist declared that God was doing a new thing and called all to show their willingness to be submerged in it by letting him plunge them into the Jordan. Jesus not only embraces the challenge but emerges as the one to lead the way.

The scene might remind us of our own baptism, though for most of us it lies back in our infancy in a stylised form with pouring of water rather than immersion in a river. But we also hail our baptism as our incorporation into this great body of water, our becoming sons and daughters of God. Jesus is God's Son, however, in a unique sense (1:11), such that in him we not only see ourselves, but we see God.

But what is the flood of the Spirit about? Mark's story gives us the clue. Jesus goes outback to face Satan (1:12-13). In Mark's world mission was very much seen as liberation from oppressive powers. They depicted such powers in personalised ways as spirits and demons, where today we would describe oppression in less mythological language, but oppression itself remains real. Spending 40 days in the remote outback was like Israel spending 40 years on the way to the promised land, a time of owning priorities or abandoning them to compromise.



When Mark then has Jesus announce God's reign (1:14-15), he means flooding the world with God's Spirit which sets people free for love to rule, a promise of forgiveness, healing, belonging and social change. Jesus first enlists disciples (and us) in this. Then his first public act in Mark is one of liberation and his last, in Jerusalem, a confrontation of oppressive power.

Explore ... the image of water as a way of expressing the life of God in the world: what images of water do you find helpful for thinking about faith? How does it help you explore your own personal faith?

How does it help you explore your discipleship in the world?

How does it help you explore the task of the church in today's world?

You may want to do something creative with water or images of water which you could with a wider group.

¹ These studies were prepared by Professor Bill Loader for the Anglican Board of Missions for Lent 2015 and are freely available for you to download and use from this site. The images are his own.

² You may not be able to do all 7 in a group, especially the 7th. Choose what suits you best.

Session Two: Mark 8:31-38

This is a very human story. Peter, the leading disciple, had just acclaimed Jesus the Messiah (8:27-29). This is a high point, but then it all goes wrong. Jesus' understanding of messiahship means to follow God's priorities, which in his case will mean taking the challenge of the gospel of love to the seat of local power, Jerusalem, and risking death, indeed embracing it (8:31). Peter understands God's priorities differently. God's Messiah in his view should be powerful and victorious. That should be his ambition (8:32). But Jesus saw God and God's priorities differently (8:33).

The conflict repeats itself in the next chapter where we find the disciples arguing among themselves about who among them would be the greatest (9:30-35) and then in the following chapter where James and John want the top leadership positions (10:32-40). In response Jesus declares that the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve (10:45).



In this first episode Peter slips from being the hero to end up embracing the priorities of Satan, echoing the temptations of Jesus (8:33). This is enough to set us all thinking about what we really mean when we confess our faith. Jesus indeed broadens the issues to all disciples. God's priorities are to govern not only Jesus' priorities but also theirs. Jesus declares the life of putting self ahead of others and of God, which may as seem to be the best way to act in one's self-interest, as in fact the opposite.

True self-interest is served when we merge together: love of God, love of neighbour and love of self. Love your neighbour as you love yourself (8:34-37). This is not a demand to stop caring about oneself or to deny one's interests or pretend to (even more dangerous).

Jesus is saying that what is good for God and good for him is also good for us. Life finds its meaning not in exploiting others whether economically or psychologically for our own interest, but in engaging in inclusive love. To round it off he puts it bluntly in an image of judgement: you want to know what counts in the end? It is precisely this way of discipleship (8:38).

Explore ... the way that people's understanding of God shapes how they understand themselves and their role as Christians.

What did Peter get wrong? Talk about what you think are unhelpful or dangerous ideas about God.

What does it mean to deny oneself if we are also meant to love ourselves?

Could you put together a small skit about Jesus' conversation with Peter to share with a wider group?

Session Three: John 2:13-22

The trouble in the temple is told in all four gospels. Matthew, Mark, and Luke report it as one of Jesus' last acts and one which would land him in serious strife (Matt 21:12-17; Mark 11:15-17; Luke 19:45-46). It appears likely that the author of John's gospel has deliberately relocated it to the beginning of Jesus' ministry as a way of shedding light on all that was to follow. It is rich in symbolism but with roots in history.

Historically Jesus entered the outer precincts of the temple, the size of many football fields, and performed a symbolic act of judgment. That act was not attacking the temple, which he calls "my Father's house", but its leaders. Mark reports allegations of financial exploitation (12:38-40). The temple was in effect the bank. Luke brings the parable of the Good Samaritan which depicts temple personnel ignoring human need. John's account suggests the clutter of commerce (10:30-37). People coming to the temple needed to change their money into the currency required for temple donations and needed to buy animals for sacrifice, but even necessary things can get in the road and take over. Jesus was calling for change in the system so that justice and compassion might rule. Only with that would the rites and rituals of temple service make sense.

It was dangerous to take on such powerful interests. Jesus' warning about the temple's doom was twisted into an attack on divine worship at his trial (Mark 14:56-59) and used to mock him on the cross (Mark 15:29).



When half a century later John's gospel retold the story, people listening would remember the tragedy twenty years earlier when the Romans destroyed the Jerusalem temple. Their gospel now told them that true worship was not tied to a place, but to a person.

Jesus was that person (2:18-22; 4:19-24). He was the ambassador of God's love. In playful and pointed dialogue the story recalls that Jesus' daring to confront the religious authorities brought his death but by his resurrection built something new in which we can all have a part – as long as we, too, avoid the clutter and corruption which can so easily crowd out holy space.

Explore ... the role of Christians can have in speaking out about big issues where powerful financial and political interests are at play. Is it ever wrong to do so? Is it ever wrong to stay silent?

What are the issues you think should concern people faith in your community, and nationally and internationally?

What the best ways and best resources for engaging in action to bring change in society?

You may want to share your findings about resources with a wider group. Is there an initiative you want to undertake as a group on issues that concern you and invite others to be involved?

Session Four: John 3:14-21

A tale about recovery from poisonous snake bites by looking to a snake model made in bronze (Numb 21:4-9) inspires the image with which our passage begins. Something much more was at stake in Jesus' life and death. Some who lifted him up onto a cross saw it as the best way to rid of him. Crucifying people was a crude mechanism for deterring criminals. It struck fear into passers by. It was the low point of human cruelty designed to humiliate, like rape and torture. In a bizarre reversal of all that such humiliation was designed to achieve Christians turned the event into an act of defiance against hatred and cruelty. Instead, they declared, what seemed a revelation of hate was a remarkable declaration of love.

Jesus had embodied God's love in his life, reaching out to the hated and despised, and even to hateful people, and had pursued the path of love to the very end. This love which sought out individuals also sought out Jerusalem and the powerful with a message of hope and change, and did not flinch or fold even when those powers turned on him and stamped on his endeavours. At stake was the life of God and the love of God who sent him on his mission, not to condemn but to offer life and healing (3:16-17).



They killed the love as people do who resist change and as we can do when love invites us to new freedom, new generosity. To open oneself to be truly loved is to open oneself, to face oneself, one's truth, and for many that can be so threatening that they ever so gently kill it off (3:19-21).

The cross remains the place where we find ourselves – identified with the crucified or the crucifiers. Love is like light which can show us the way. Each encounter with love's light is a critical moment a day of judgement when we dare to be loved and to love or choose the comfort and conspiracy of our darkness. God so loved the world to save us from that and to be bearers of that light and love to others.

Reflect ... on the words of the spiritual: "Were you there when they crucified my Lord?" Where would you place yourself in the story of Jesus' death?

You may want to share personally about times when you have felt like the crucified, times when you felt like the crucifiers, or times when you just stood at a distance. You may want just to talk less personally about how you see people responding to love and change and how some hate it.

How can we bring love and light into the contexts of need we know of?

You may want to put together a small skit with music in which 3 or 4 people identify roles people play when they are there in the story of Jesus' death and share it with a wider group.

Session Five: John 12:20-33

It is best to skip back one verse to 12:19 where we read: “Look, the whole world has gone after him”. It sets the scene for what follows where “Greeks” come (12:20-22). “Greeks” will have been a general terms to refer to foreigners. So here for the first time in the gospel the focus falls on the wider world. Philip and Andrew come from Bethsaida, across the border outside Jewish territory. Love opens us to include all peoples, all races without discrimination.

The gospel then has Jesus respond with a comment on the bigger picture. The hour of major change is at hand (12:23). Jesus will be crucified, an appalling humiliation, but to the eyes of faith this is just the beginning of what will lead Jesus not to disgrace but to the glory or returning the embrace of God.

The eye of faith also knows that the dying will like the burying of a seed bring something new (12:24). That something new will be the gift of the Spirit and mission of the disciples to all the world bearing fruit. That fruit will include the bringing of the gospel to all peoples (12:32).



The disciples will play a key role, so Jesus models the way they are to live. If they collapse into selfish concerns they will shrivel and die. If they spurn self centeredness they will find life and bring it to others, just as Jesus did.

Following Jesus brings with it the reassurance that they will follow him right through to the end – into the embrace of God and so they can step out in confidence (12:25-26). It becomes very clear that confidence about the outcome does not mean one is exempt from hardship and suffering. For Jesus that is no different (12:27-30). He is about to be hoisted upon the cross but to the eyes of faith lifted on his way to God’s presence. This is a day of judgement and victory over the powers that thought they could crush love (12:31). Now love will flow out to all and all will be drawn in invitation to respond to that love (12:32).

Reflect ... on cultural and racial diversity, including what it means to be excluded and discriminated against. Where have you experienced this – in yourself or in others? Where do you see shaming and demeaning of people happening in your world?

What does it mean for you to take risks in the name of love and justice today?

What is the difference between genuine hardship entailed in love and pain we bring upon ourselves by our own foolishness or religious intolerance?

Is there some way you can represent to a wider group the rich diversity of races and cultures and how they belong together – using things like images, music, language, dress? Or do you want to undertake an initiative to reach out across diverse cultures in your community?

Session Six: John 12:12-16 or Mark 1:1-11

Palm Sunday celebrates Jesus' entry into Jerusalem and invites us to join the celebration, which we sometimes even do, with our decorations and branches. History and fantasy mix richly producing multilayered meanings. Behind it all is historical memory that when Jesus entered Jerusalem he was received, at least by some with enthusiasm.

John tells us that the disciples did not originally see its meaning till after Easter (12:16). It will not have brought Jerusalem to a standstill; otherwise the authorities would have pounced, but would have been relatively small scale like his later symbolic act in the temple. Jesus was not engaged in heroics, but in bringing his message to the capital. That in itself was enough to land him in trouble, but reports of these events may well have reinforced the decision to lump him with those whom Rome was keen on exterminating to retain stability on its eastern flank.

Faith later saw parallels with Old Testament hopes for a king who would restore justice and hope like David (Zech 9:9). Thus we walk with the crowd of such disciples hailing lowliness and love as the way to peace. The more we play with the scene with our imagination the more we realise that being part of that crowd might mean we are also part of the crowd which would later prefer Barabbas. We might shout hosanna in the words of the psalm which welcomed pilgrims to the city (Psalm 118:25-26), but will we turn on him and drive him out again? The thought is deeply disturbing when we realise that we can all play the role of crucifier when it comes to the challenge which love and justice

bring.



People most likely to remain faithful are those who need and seek change. People least likely to, are those who are comfortable, do not want change and use their religion to inoculate themselves against change. Why should we be good news for the poor? Why should we care about climate change? Why should we care about world poverty? Why should we care about people who are marginalised or have marginalised themselves?

Explore ... the celebration of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem. Like the crucifixion scene, this story, too, is one in which we can find ourselves. Where are you?

What is your "Jerusalem", your place where you need to bring the good news of the gospel and its challenge – in yourself and in your world?

Does your worship, your hailing of Jesus, have consequences? What pressures do you experience to change with the crowd?

There is material here for a skit where you could represent different 3 or 4 voices in the crowd and what each ended up doing. You could include suggestions about concrete action in your community?

Session Seven: John 18:1 – 19:42 and 20:1-18 or Mark 14 – 16

Good Friday and Easter Day take us to the climax of Jesus' story. When the last Sunday of Lent is celebrated not as Palm Sunday, but Passion Sunday, the lectionary turns to Mark's account. On Good Friday we have John's account. On Easter Day we may choose either Mark's or John's version. Despite a level of diversity between the two authors there is a common thread and both are creative reflections on historical reality.



That reality is best understood as an exercise of raw pragmatic power. Like many totalitarian regimes the Romans brutally suppressed dissent, especially when they sensed that a movement planned or proclaimed an end to their reign. Niceties of careful analysis of such movements was too much to ask; so summary assessments sufficed. Crucifixions were common to deter dissent.

Jesus was accused of wanting to be a Jewish king, an aspiration espoused by others in the period, and it was deemed sufficient to remove him as leader for the movement to die out.

How could you claim that God's kingdom/empire was at hand to replace Rome's and not be picked up Rome's radar? Life was cheap. Law and order, keeping the peace, was something Rome was proud of. Some key temple authorities apparently went along with it, perhaps as John earlier reports, in the belief that singling out dissenters was a way of warding off full scale suppression, such as would occur four decades later when they destroyed the temple (11:48-50).

What was supposed to snuff the movement out instead set in motion a positive explosion of profound reflections – from seeing Jesus as just like the innocent sufferers of the psalms or the persecuted prophets, to being like a temple sacrifice himself to set people right with God for all time. What triggered such creativity was the reported experiences of Peter and others, including women (1 Cor 15:3-5; Mark 16:1; Luke 24:34; John 20:11-18), that they knew Jesus was alive, most dramatically set in narrative by the various stories which tell of an empty tomb. So Jesus was not “a flop”, but rather embodied God's truth, indeed, as faith would affirm, met us as God in human flesh.



Reflect ... on the callousness which almost incidentally “tidied away” Jesus as an irritant. Talk about other such acts by totalitarian regimes. Share experiences or knowledge you have of people who have been silenced by authorities.

What is it about Jesus' execution that makes us put a cross at the centre of our worship? Why is it not a symbol of hopelessness and defeat? Is it now too hard because it is now just part of our décor?

Does Easter mean we consign Jesus' earthly ministry to history or does it mean we take it as our pattern for today? Does Easter mean his life was an exception in the life of God or a revelation of the way God is? How can God still be a suffering God?

Can you find a symbol or symbols which represent key elements of the story – brokenness and renewal – from your garden, from history, or contemporary experience – to share with a wider group?