

MARK SERMON SERIES – WEEK FIVE

Readings: Mark 10: 23-45; Mark 11: 15-19; Mark 12: 38-44

May I speak now in the name of God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

So here we are, once again, looking at the gospel of Mark, week five of seven. For those of you who were here last week, you know what I'm going to ask, don't you? What have we been learning about from Mark over the course of the past four weeks? I wonder if our powers of recall might be a little stronger this week than last? Let's see. So, by way of a quick memory test for those who were here four weeks ago, what did our first sermon focus on? (*The beginning of the gospel; the emergence of John the Baptist; Jesus' baptism and temptation; followed by his calling of his first disciples (or followers) and his healing of a man with an evil spirit*). What about the second sermon? (*Jesus' response to the Sabbath including healing the man with a withered hand; and Jesus' stilling of the storm in a boat on Lake Galilee*). The third sermon? (*Jesus' healing of a woman with a haemorrhage; his sending out of his disciples; Jesus' challenging of some of the Jewish leaders and their rituals*). And last week? (*Peter's declaration about Jesus at Caesarea Philippi, the Transfiguration and a discussion between the disciples and Jesus about greatness*). This week, we are going to be looking at Mark chapters ten, eleven and twelve, and we are going to be thinking about salvation and what can get in the way of following Jesus, His cleansing of the temple, and the story of the widow's mite.

Our first reading from Mark chapter ten today was rather a long one, wasn't it? There are really two parts to it, but in essence they both focus on what gets in the way of following Jesus. The first few verses suggest it may be our wealth, "How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God" Jesus says, as well as "it is easier for a camel to go through eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God". Wealth is, of course, a relative term. We may not think of ourselves as being particularly wealthy here in Lower Caversham, but compared to most people in the world who live on less than \$2 a day, we are. So is our relative wealth a barrier to our following Jesus, does it make it impossible indeed? Well, the answer from Jesus is an emphatic no, since for God, "all things are possible". Thankfully, our salvation is dependent upon God, and not upon us. We are saved by God in order that we might follow his son Jesus. But given that fact, might our relative wealth get in the way of our following Jesus? And I think the answer to that question is that it can – remember the story of the rich young ruler who turned away from following Jesus when he said to him, "Go, sell all that you have and give the money to the poor". There is nothing wrong with having money per se, though how we gain it at the hands of others may be morally dubious (thinking of where our pensions may be invested for example), but how we use the money we have been given is important. Are we greedy with our money, hoarding it up for ourselves (if so remember the story Jesus told of the man who kept his riches in bigger and bigger barns until one night he died and could do nothing with it), or are we gracious about it, ensuring that we have not only enough for ourselves, but are also able to be generous to others, especially those in need? And if our relative wealth might get in the way of following Jesus, so too can our desire for status. The second part of our first reading from chapter ten has been described as 'the first ecclesiastical intrigue for high places in the church'. Throughout its history, there have always been those who have sought positions of high authority, high status within the church (or other institutions) for the wrong reasons – for self-aggrandisement, for example. But Jesus reminds James and John, and the rest of the disciples, that true greatness comes from serving others, not lording it over them as we

were also reminded in last week's readings. True greatness for the followers of Jesus will inevitably involve drinking the cup of his suffering and being baptised into his death (as well as his resurrection). It will involve persecutions (as well as the blessings of a new spiritual community to belong to). As the Garfield poster of that well known cat setting off down a mountain on his skis puts it, 'No guts, no glory'.*(show picture)*.

In our second reading from Mark chapter eleven, we are reminded at its beginning that Jesus and his disciples have now come to Jerusalem, the place of his suffering and death. And not surprisingly, like any good Jew, Jesus heads for the temple, the place where he amazed the religious leaders as a young boy when he spoke with them at the age of twelve. But this time, he does not court their favour, but stirs their anger towards him by driving the money-changers out of the temple. It's important to understand the context of this particular incident. In one of the outer courts of the Temple, the Court of the Gentiles, all those Jews going in to offer sacrifices to God were required to pay for their sacrifices (doves or pigeons) through using Jewish coinage, not Roman coinage which was considered blasphemous as it had the emperor's head on it. The unscrupulous money lenders were ripping people off with their exorbitant exchange rates (even higher than those charged by the bureau de change at our airports!) and it was this that angered Jesus, not the fact that money or goods were being exchanged or sold in the temple. Hence he says, "You have made it a den of robbers". This really put the proverbial cat amongst the temple pigeons, and so note that Jesus and his disciples leave the city in the evening. Perhaps he knew that his life was at risk if he stayed there at this point, but there was more he had to accomplish first.

Then, in our final reading from Mark chapter twelve, Jesus turns his attention to the scribes once again. Having previously criticised them elsewhere in this gospel for their teaching, he now condemns them for their practices as showy, greedy and hypocritical. The reference to devouring the houses of widows' may be referring to an abuse of hospitality offered to them, taking rich fees from pious services, or the harsh pressing of their rights as creditors (topical in view of the current situation in Greece perhaps?). Either way, Jesus is not happy and says they will receive the greater condemnation for their practices. And then we have this interesting story concerning the treasury. The treasury refers to the money chests which were against the wall in another of the courts (the Court of Women) in the temple where all would place their offerings. If only copper coins were allowed to be placed in these, the a large contribution would have made a good deal of noise (just like some of the money receptacles you get in certain churches today which make a good clunk as you put money into them). And Jesus notes the significance of the poor widow's sacrificial contribution, whose two small coins were worth far more than the large sums put in by the rich. For she was giving out of the little she had, compared to the abundance they had.

So what challenges do today's readings throw up for us here in twenty first century Caversham? Let me once again suggest three. Firstly, a word about salvation. The first reading made it clear that salvation is the gift of God; it is not something that we can earn or deserve. But our response to God's salvation in Jesus does depend on us. We can choose to follow Jesus, or to let other things like our wealth or our status to get in the way. Will we accept the free offer of his grace, his undeserved favour, that says even though you have made a mess of things, I am willing to forgive you and enable you to make a fresh start with your life? I remember making a response to that grace of God as a ten year old boy, many years ago now. Have you responded to that gift of salvation, said 'yes' to God, and if so, when was that? There may not be a specific time that you can remember, you may feel

that all of your life has been a 'yes' to God. But the important thing is are you following Jesus now? If you are not currently doing that, you can do that at any time, you can do it this morning. And if you have already said yes to God, whether four days, four months, four years or forty years ago, then you are still invited by him to say 'yes', to turn to him and to follow his Son Jesus daily. For salvation and our response to it is a process – we have been saved, we are being saved, we will be saved. We may have chosen to follow Jesus, we can choose to follow Jesus now, we can choose to follow Jesus in the future. Secondly, a thought about this church building and how we use it. The Jewish temple was a multi-functional building – a place of gathering, of commerce, of worship. How do we view this church building now? Should it only be used for worship on a Sunday or Thursday morning, or should it also be used as a meeting place and a place for business, whether holding fairs, concerts and a café? If we are going to follow Jesus' example in our second reading, then I suggest holding events other than worship in this building is not wrong. What is important though is that we use this place, this 'house of prayer', responsibly and that in our financial transactions we are neither overcharging nor necessarily undercharging people either. Sometimes, it's good to offer things for free, but when we do charge we must certainly never rip people off. Thirdly, what is the nature of our personal giving to God? Are we giving sacrificially, like the widow, or from what we don't miss, like the rich people in the story? A sacrifice is something that hurts. Is our giving pain-full or pain-free? In my experience, when church members are giving sacrificially, great things can be achieved in the life of a church since money is freed up to be used for the Kingdom of God.

So, to conclude. We have looked this morning at three different accounts from Mark and been challenged to think about God's gift of salvation to us and our response to following his son Jesus. We have thought about what true greatness consists of, in serving others, and how we do that in ways which respect and not oppress them on account of our relative wealth. We have also thought about the nature of our personal giving to God and what it might be to give sacrificially.

Let us pray..

Almighty God, you loved the world so much that you gave your only Son Jesus so that everyone who believes in him (who trusts in him) might have eternal life - life with you both now and forever. Help us to respond wholeheartedly to your love for us in Jesus, whether for the first time, or the umpteenth time, and may we know the power of your Holy Spirit to help us as we seek to follow him. Amen.

If that's the first time that you have ever prayed a prayer like that, do have a word with me afterwards.