

## SERMON SERIES ON MARK'S GOSPEL – WEEK SIX

Readings: Mark 13: 1-13; Mark 14: 10-25; Mark 14: 32-50

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

Well, here we are, five weeks have passed since I was last with you when we started our sermon series on Mark's gospel. Five sermons have been given by different people so far, and there are two more to go. You may be feeling a sense of relief that we are nearing the end of this series; you may be feeling disappointed that it is drawing to a close; or equally, you may not really mind as long as the preachers don't drone on for too long on any given morning! So, I'll try not to go on for too long (no more than an hour – just checking you're still awake!) but equally I hope long enough to both capture and retain your interest in what I think is a fascinating gospel. Just by way of a memory test to start us off this morning, I wonder if anyone here can remind us what I preached about five weeks ago on 7<sup>th</sup> June? (*the introduction to Mark's gospel; John the Baptist; the baptism and temptation of Jesus; the calling of the first disciples, and the healing of a man with an evil spirit*). What about the second Sunday, when I think Mike was with you? (*Jesus' attitude to the Sabbath; Jesus' relationship to his family; and his stilling of the storm on the lake*). Then on 21<sup>st</sup> June, I think Marion was here, what did she preach on? (*Jesus' healing of a woman with a haemorrhage; the sending out of the twelve disciples; and Jesus' challenge to the Pharisees regarding their religious rituals*). On 28<sup>th</sup> June, I think it was Mike again (*he preached on the nature of Jesus' identity; the Transfiguration; and Jesus' identification of greatness with service*). Finally, last week, Phil, our LLM, was here, and he preached on? (*What might get in the way of following Jesus – our wealth, our status; Jesus' cleansing of the temple; and the story of the widow's mite*). This morning we are going to look at Jesus teaching about the Temple, his sharing of the Passover meal with his disciples, and his arrest in Gethsemane. So the tension is mounting in Mark's gospel...let alone the anticipation of this sermon!

Our first reading from Mark chapter thirteen is, I find, a very interesting one for it raises the question of Jesus' attitude to the Temple. The Temple was, of course, one of the visible pillars of Judaism, the place of prayer and sacrifice at the heart of the Jewish faith. To suggest its destruction, as Jesus does, was tantamount to heresy and an affront to the religious leaders. Hence Peter, James, John and Andrew approach Jesus privately, "Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign that all these things are about to be accomplished?" Jesus, as is often the case, doesn't answer the question directly (I think he would have made a very good politician, don't you?) but says that there are many things which must take place before that time which also seems to be linked by Mark with an expectation of Jesus' return – there will be false Messiahs, wars and conflicts, earthquakes and famines. But even when these things have occurred, these are but the beginning of the beginning of the end, the beginning of the 'birth pangs' of a new age. The Temple was in fact destroyed by the Romans in AD 70, and yet still we wait for Christ to return in glory, despite the claims of many even in our own lifetimes. But alongside such apocalyptic expectations, Jesus says that his disciples must also suffer. Alongside their proclaiming of the gospel, they will experience being handed over to the authorities, be beaten in the synagogues, and placed on trial. Their family members will turn against them; they will be hated by all because of their loyalty to Jesus. But for those who endure to the end, they will be saved. Such was their hope in the midst of their suffering, a hope shared by many Christians undergoing suffering in parts of the world today – in Syria, Iraq and Pakistan for example.

The second reading from Mark chapter fourteen is perhaps one of the classic texts of the New Testament, for it concerns Jesus' sharing of the Passover with his disciples and what is known as the words of the institution of the Lord's Supper, Communion, Eucharist or Mass. It starts off with the chilling reminder of Judas's desire to betray Jesus. Why did Judas want to do that? Was it for the money? Seemingly not, for he gets rid of it shortly afterwards. Was it because he felt let down by Jesus, that this Messiah was not bringing the revolt he expected against the Romans? Was it because he, unknowingly, had been chosen to carry out God's will to enable the Son of God to be put to death? For whatever reason, we can never be sure, other than we know that he did it and felt incredibly guilty afterwards, hanging his head in shame. Mark goes on to tell us that on the 'first day of Unleavened Bread', when the Passover lamb is sacrificed, Jesus' disciples approach him to make preparations for their celebrating of the Passover. There is some debate by scholars about when this actual date was, suffice to say that it appears clear that for Mark the supper held was a Passover meal since he refers to the 'bowl' or 'dish' which would have contained the sauce eaten with the Passover Lamb. The inference is also made here that Jesus is to be seen as the Lamb of God, whose sacrifice of his body and blood (represented by the bread and wine of the Passover meal) is to be made for the sins of the world. It is also interesting to note that some scholars comment that it is from the meal table, the place of unity, that betrayal comes. This would have been unthinkable in Oriental custom, for meal fellowship was considered sacred.

And so on to our third reading, also from Mark chapter fourteen, and the account of Jesus in Gethsemane. I've been to Gethsemane and stood amongst the olives trees there which are considered to date back to the time of Jesus. In bright sunlight, it is a lovely place to sit and be quiet. At night it could well feel quite lonely and desolate. And here Jesus experiences real desolation, Mark describing him as being deeply grieved, even to death. The picture painted is of Jesus knowing at least something of the suffering that lay ahead, and the understandable human reaction of shrinking from it. And yet he submits himself to his Father's will, "yet not what I want, but what you want." For the disciples this is all too much, it seems, they cannot stay awake in prayer with Jesus, they fall into the temptation to sleep. And then the betrayal occurs, Judas being accompanied by a hired rabble, a mob assembled by the chief priests, scribes and elders. Jesus is betrayed not just with a kiss but according to the Greek text with many kisses, more than the usual show of fervour and affection. Judas, in the dim light, could not afford to make it unclear who his target was; he risked betraying his other friends if he got it wrong. And those same friends then desert Jesus and flee – who knows, if they hung around they too might have been arrested or worse. Didn't Jesus say that he would suffer and be put to death?

So what challenges might today's readings pose for us then, who may be seeking to follow Jesus in the twenty first century? Firstly, how do we respond to the idea of suffering for our faith? As previously mentioned, this is an all too real situation for Christians in many parts of the Middle East today, who have been killed, crucified even, by Islamic State, for example. How would we respond if we were in their shoes? Would we flee, like the disciples did in Gethsemane? Would we renounce our faith, to save ourselves? Would we stand firm, even unto death? Secondly, how do we cope with betrayal? How do we cope with those who may have betrayed us, as well as those we may have betrayed – partners, spouses, work colleagues, friends or family? Betrayal is one of those very human responses isn't it, perhaps due to feeling insecure in ourselves. Can we allow God to forgive us if we have done that to others or indeed for them to forgive us? Can we allow God to help us forgive others who may have betrayed us? Thirdly, note the initial response of one of the disciples to

Jesus' arrest; it is with violence, cutting off the ear of the slave of the high priest. Jesus however does not respond violently. How do we respond to the violence in our world today? To groups like Islamic State, Boko Haram or Al-Qaeda? What is most effective? We can choose to respond with violence, or with non-violence. What might Jesus do?

So, to conclude, we have this week focussed on Jesus' teaching about the temple and the suffering that will come the way of his followers, and we have been reminded that if we endure to the end, we will be saved. We have thought about that Passover meal which Jesus shared with his disciples, through which he instituted the service of Holy Communion which we share this morning. A meal built on unity out of which comes betrayal. Will our actions betray Jesus following our sharing together in this sacrament this morning? And we have thought about Jesus' struggle in Gethsemane, his arrest and the subsequent desertion of his followers. May I encourage you to reflect on the questions posed on today's notice sheet sometime this week. 'How would you feel if you were one of Jesus' disciples at this stage in his ministry? What do you imagine God is experiencing as the time of the Son's death draws near?'

Let us pray...

God, give us insight to experience Jesus' story as it was, not only the beautiful parts, but the difficult as well, and help us to take inspiration from those for our journeys through life, with all their highs and lows. Amen.