

Mark These Words

Mark chapters 11-16: *An Easter journey in the shadow of Coronavirus (April 2020)*

Welcome

Even for those of us who have seen a lot of 'Easters', this year is going to feel a lot different, especially if we find ourselves at home almost all day, with a bit of extra time on our hands. It's a great opportunity for us think afresh about the significance of Easter.

This set of 8 daily notes covering Palm Sunday to Easter Sunday takes us through Mark's account of the week that ends with the greatest event in history – the resurrection of Jesus. We'll be particularly 'marking' (i.e. taking note of) some of the words spoken by Jesus, thinking about what they mean in the context of the Easter story and also thinking about what they might say to us in the specific circumstances of the current 'Coronavirus crisis'.

Mark was a pretty ordinary chap, one with his own doubts and fears. He may well have been the "young man" who "fled naked" as Jesus was arrested (Mark 14:51-52); and he was almost certainly the 'John Mark' who abandoned Paul's 'First Missionary Journey' when the going got tough (Acts 13:13 & 15:38). But he worked through his doubts and fears, and (most likely) originally wrote this Gospel for the encouragement of Christians who were facing trials and persecution in Rome.

Each day, we have included a prayer which you might like to use at the end of your time reflecting on the Bible passage. We have also suggested a link to some kind of YouTube recording which you might find helpful (these 'recordings' cover a variety of music styles so if you don't especially connect with them one day you may do so the next...).

Have a blessed Easter!

Graham & Alison Everness

Mark 11:1-11



Jesus of Nazareth has completed his last journey south from Galilee to mark the Passover festival in Jerusalem with his disciples. Over the last three years he's become very popular with some, but very unpopular with others. The scene is set for a final showdown.

"Why are you doing this?" is the question Jesus tells his disciples to expect as they go off to commandeer a donkey for Jesus to ride on as he enters the city (v.3). The answer Jesus provides doesn't seem much of an explanation – not much more than "because I am" – but it's enough: "The Lord needs it...".

And "why are you doing this?" would – or perhaps should – have been the recurring question on everyone's lips as this unique week in history unfolded. Not just "why the donkey?", but "why all those last actions and teachings?", "why the 'Last Supper'?" and, above all, "why the cross?" We have the chance to think through these questions together this week...

"Why are you doing this?" – or, at least, "why are you *allowing* this?" – is also a question we might want to ask God about a 'disaster situation' like the one we are currently facing. There are no easy answers here, but what the big picture of the Easter story (and the 'smaller picture' of Jesus' response in verse 3 of our passage) reminds us is that *He is Lord*, and His love for us knows no bounds.

Prayer: Lord, we can't always understand why things happen as they do, but in difficult situations help us to trust in you as our loving Lord, and as we work our way through the Easter story over these coming days please show us more of yourself. Amen.

Today's music: *The Merchant's Carol* is a traditional folk song telling the story of some merchants arriving in Jerusalem on the first Palm Sunday. You can listen to a recording of it here <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1OcdA7Cv3Qw>, complete with accordion and fiddle. The words are reproduced at the end of this booklet (after day 8).

Day 2: Monday, 6th April

A den of robbers

Mark 11:12-19



Right at the end of yesterday's reading, you may have noticed that Jesus went to the temple and "looked around", but decided against any further action "since it was already late". But it seems he knew what he was going to be doing the next day – a day that certainly does not square with the sentimental view of 'Jesus meek and mild'.

Jesus was angry. Things were definitely not as they should have been. Like the fig tree, Jewish religion might have looked healthy on the outside but there was no fruit. And the temple was being woefully misused.

"My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations. But you have made it a den of robbers." The outer courts – the part of the temple supposed to be available to non-Jews for worship – had been taken over by a money-changing racket linked to the purchase of animals for sacrifice. The system operated here for the selfish benefit of the few, to the detriment or exclusion of others.

Similar, self-centred exploitation is still around today. It has shown itself in the 'virus crisis' through things like panic buying and certain vendors ramping up the price of paracetamol. These particular actions may only be carried out by a minority (and there are plenty of counter-examples of kindness and generosity to celebrate too), but they are symptomatic of the generally self-focused, sin-spoiled world to which *each and every one of us* contributes. We all do wrong; we are all sinners; we all deserve God's anger and judgment. But the Easter story will provide God's wonderful fix for that.

Prayer: Lord, we are sorry for the times when we have acted selfishly, when we have put our own needs above those of others, and when we have offended you by our actions. We ask that you would please forgive us, and help us to follow you more closely from this day on. Amen.

Today's music: *Purify my heart*, recording available here
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BLyQAx8DpBI> .

Day 3: Tuesday, 7th April

To all nations

Mark 13:1-23, although do try to read right through from 11:20 to 13:37 if you can so as to follow the whole story



Jesus follows up on his uncompromising Monday with an uncompromising Tuesday, filled with provocative and largely critical teaching, most especially directed at the religious authorities (see Chapter 12). This then leads on to talk of judgment, and ‘the end of the age’.

Chapter 13 isn’t easy to understand because it interweaves references to the imminent destruction of Jerusalem and its temple (which took place in 70 AD) with pictures of the second coming of Christ (still to happen, 2000 years later!). But two things are clear: no-one knows exactly when these ‘end times’ will come; and the only ‘answer’ to this coming judgment is the *gospel* – the ‘good news’ of Jesus Christ – and ‘standing firm’ in Him (v.13).

Yet, Jesus does tell us that *“the gospel must first be preached to all nations”* (v.10). The ‘good news’ story which Mark announced at the very beginning of his Gospel (see 1:1), and which is now about to come to its decisive conclusion, is *for everyone* (a stark contrast, we may note, to what we saw in the Jerusalem Temple yesterday). And it is *our* responsibility to share that ‘good news’ message now, at home and abroad...

Some of the pictures in this passage – suffering, chaos and despair – may strike a chord with the Coronavirus situation today, not only in the UK but across the whole world. Yes, medical and scientific expertise, and sensible and considerate behaviour, are all important, but God’s ultimate answer to this and any of the world’s problems is Jesus Christ.

Prayer: Thank you, Lord Jesus, for the ‘good news’ you bring to us, that you are in the process of putting things right, of making all things new. Please give us the heart and the strength to share that good news with everyone we can, especially in these current difficult times. Amen.

Today’s music: Go forth and tell, recording available here
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XNyDd9qtuk0> .

Day 4: Wednesday, 8th April

A beautiful thing

Mark 14:1-11



Jesus was already a ‘marked man’ at the beginning of the week, but after two more days of provocative talk and actions the religious authorities are now desperate to do away with him. At the beginning of our passage they’re wondering how they can pull it off; at the end, Judas gives them the solution.

But, sandwiched in between all this sly plotting of an execution, comes something completely different – an act of unbridled public devotion, an act of the highest extravagance, both emotionally and financially.

In current-day UK terms, the perfume was worth tens of thousands of pounds. The accusations of waste and imprudence are understandable. Some things, however, are more important than money. We can be slow to acknowledge this in contemporary Western culture, but the present crisis has helped us to focus harder on things that are ultimately more valuable – the practice of ‘loving our neighbour’, and putting the protection of life and health ahead of the drive for economic growth.

“She has done a beautiful thing to me.” First and foremost, Jesus wants our *love*, our total submission to him. And that’s not just for his benefit – it’s primarily for ours, because that’s the way we can find the peace and joy that the Easter story brings, the way we can ourselves experience the ‘beautiful thing’ that *he* has done for us.

Jesus then goes on to say how “wherever the gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has done will also be told”. This is a promise we can all take note of as we seek to respond to yesterday’s challenge to share the ‘good news’ we have received, because the best testimony we can give is the depth and sincerity of our very own relationship with Jesus.

Prayer: Thank you, Lord Jesus, for the amazing love you have shown to us. Please help us to respond to that love with our own unconditional loving obedience, and may the strength of our relationship with you be a powerful witness to others of the good news that is ours. Amen.

Today’s music: *What a beautiful name*, recording available here <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nQWFzMvCfLE>. You’ll probably want to click on ‘Skip Ads’ if that comes up when the recording begins...

Day 5: Maundy Thursday, 9th April

Take this cup

Mark 14:12-72, particularly focusing on 14:22-24 & 32-42



A day or so after striking his deal with the chief priests, Judas joins Jesus and the other disciples for Passover – the great celebration of the Jews’ deliverance from slavery in Egypt 1500 years before.

Jesus gives the celebration a new meaning as he anticipates what is about to happen. His body will be broken and his blood poured out as he dies on the cross to bring deliverance from the slavery of sin. Then Judas leaves, and the rest of the group make the short walk across to a garden on the Mount of Olives.

Gethsemane was one of Jesus’ favourite places (see John 18:2) – but not on this night. He was “deeply distressed and troubled”: *“Abba, Father... Take this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will”* (v.38).

What was behind such anguish? It wasn’t the fact that he was about to die, nor in particular that the manner in which he would die was to be excruciatingly painful. The really big horror for Jesus was the *burden* he was being asked to carry as he died – the ‘cup’ of God’s wrath, the penalty for all our sins, sins which were as abhorrent to him (as the sinless Son of God) as they were to God the Father.

He would have to bear that burden completely alone, cut off from his Father as he breathed his final breaths (Mark 15:34, tomorrow). And now, in the garden, he’s already feeling alone and unsupported, as his closest friends fall asleep around him, and then later desert and deny him.

The ‘Coronavirus crisis’ will be particularly hard for those who live alone (and even die alone, with no family allowed at their bedside). But let us take heart that ‘God has been there too’, and he “will never leave you nor forsake you” (Deuteronomy 31:6 & Hebrews 13:5).

Prayer: Thank you, Lord Jesus, that you endured all that pain and grief as you took the penalty for our sin – all alone. We pray especially today for those who feel isolated and alone at this time, that they may know that you are still present with them, holding their hand. Amen.

Today’s music: *Surely, He hath borne our griefs* (from Handel’s ‘Messiah’), recording available here <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=63tsdDnJtdQ>. [There may be an ‘Ad’ at the beginning which you’d prefer to ‘skip’.] Words are from Isaiah 53:4-5:

Surely, He hath borne our griefs and carried our sorrows. He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities, the chastisement of our peace was upon Him.

Mark 15:1-47 particularly focusing on 15:25-39



Roman ‘justice’ was swift and decisive. The religious elite – the chief priests, the elders and the teachers of law – were quickly assembled and sat through the night to hasten Jesus’ conviction. By early morning they’re ready to send him off to Pilate to be condemned to death, and within a few hours he’s been brutally beaten, spat upon and mercilessly mocked before being sent on his way to his place of execution.

By 9 o’clock the nails had been hammered in and the crosspiece raised. The taunts and scorn continued – “not much good to anyone now, eh?” (highly ironic, as Jesus was actually doing more ‘good’ to more people than anyone at any other time in history...). At noon, a mysterious darkness descended and carried on for three long hours, until Jesus cried out his dying words and “breathed his last”.

Jesus the man may have spoken his final words, but God had most certainly not. And, remarkably, the mouthpiece he immediately found was the Roman centurion on duty at the foot of the cross: “*Surely this man was the Son of God!*” (v.39) – echoing the declaration Mark makes at the very beginning of his Gospel.

Jesus is *both* ‘man’ and ‘God’ – fully human and fully God. As such, he is the *only* person who can bridge the gap between sinful humanity and a holy God, the only one who was able to tear down the curtain that separated us from God.

The women (and Joseph of Arimathea) who took Jesus’ body away for burial must still have been very sad, like the family and friends of those who die during this virus outbreak will be very sad. We cannot know precisely how much these disciples understood at the time of their grief, but there was hope for them to find in the life and words of the man who had just died.

Prayer: Thank you, Father, that you sent your Son down to earth to live and die as a man, to repair our broken relationship with you and rescue us from our own death. We pray especially today for the bereaved, that you would bring them hope in your gift of eternal life. Amen.

Today’s music: *Were you there*, recording available here <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fpSSclCWJ9M> .

Day 7: Saturday, 11th April

He will rise

Mark 10:32-45



Mark says nothing at all about the Saturday. Neither do the other three Gospel-writers, other than Luke's passing comment that the women who had prepared spices for Jesus' body "rested on the Sabbath in obedience to the commandment" (Luke 23:56).

So what were Jesus' followers doing as they 'rested'? We're not told. But it's likely that, as Jesus' body lay in the tomb, they were thinking back over what had happened, trying to make sense of it.

Perhaps they would have been recalling Jesus' earlier words, like those he had repeated a week or so ago as they made their way to Jerusalem: "*The Son of Man will be betrayed... they will mock him and spit on him, flog him and kill him. Three days later he will rise*" (10:33-34). What could Jesus possibly have been meaning by this?

If they had recalled those particular words, then they might also have remembered the conversation that followed shortly afterwards – the dispute about who should have the best seats alongside Jesus "in his glory". Jesus gave short shrift to that, *his way being to serve, and not to be served*. Had they learned that lesson? And, in consequence, were they now seeking to meet others' needs rather than their own as they faced this new and uncertain situation?

'Easter Saturday' is not quite the same for us, when we know what came next on the first Easter Day. But it's still a day on which we can take stock, and be conscious of living in an 'in between' world where the Kingdom of God has arrived, but not yet arrived in full. Thus we have to hold in balance our trust in a faithful God who has control over all things, and the reality of what is happening in a world in the grip of a global pandemic.

Prayer: Lord, as we long for the day when there will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, help us know how to live in a world that is still imperfect. And as we do, please help us to be people who do not seek to be served, but to serve others and to meet their needs. Amen.

Today's music: *The Servant King*, recording available here

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A0FSZ_iSYO8

[There may be an 'Ad' at the beginning which you'd prefer to 'skip'.]

Day 8: Easter Sunday, 12th April

He has risen!

Mark 16:1-20, particularly focusing on 16:1-8



The Sabbath is over, the spices have been bought, the corpse (it is presumed) would soon be starting to decay. So, at the crack of dawn, three women make their way to the tomb to anoint Jesus' body.

Their love for Jesus, combined with their grief that he has been so terribly taken from them, seems to have overruled their logical minds, because the journey looks destined to be pointless – there's a massive stone at the grave's entrance and no-one to open it for them. But then comes the first shock – the stone's already been rolled away.

Then, hard on its heels, the second shock – there's no *body* in there, but instead a strange young man, robed in white. And what's he telling us? "Don't be alarmed"? Of course we're 'alarmed', wouldn't anyone be? Whatever is going on?

"You are looking for Jesus the Nazarene, who was crucified. He has risen! He is not here."

It's impossible for us, born into a world where the Easter story is almost 2000 years old, to appreciate just how astonishing, bewildering and even alarming this Sunday morning (and the days that followed it) must have been to Jesus' first followers. Neither do we know why it was that Mark brought his story to such an abrupt stop at the end of verse 8, before anyone had actually seen the risen Jesus and with the women puzzled, silent and afraid. But there are a couple of important messages we can take from it.

First, it helps to emphasise the mysterious and 'awe-full' nature of this, the greatest event in history. And then secondly, it helps to remind us that very few people have come to faith through a direct vision of the risen Christ, but instead through the testimony of others. Verses 9 to 20 (added to the Gospel later) do go on to mention several of the post-resurrection appearances that are recorded in the other Gospels, but there is a big emphasis here on the importance of others believing the witness of those to whom Jesus had appeared (see v.15).

The 'good news' of Jesus' triumph over sin and death is a message for us to declare not just on Easter Sunday but every day. It's a message that the world always needs to hear – and most especially in times like the present when uncertainty and fear abound.

Prayer: Lord Jesus, we praise you that you have conquered death, and that by trusting in you we share in your victory. Help us to live out our lives in full assurance of that victory, especially in difficult times, and to be faithful witnesses to this good news to all those around us. Amen.

Today's music: *In Christ Alone*. Here is a 'virtual choir' recording, put together by separate singers in their own homes. [There may be an 'Ad' at the beginning which you'd prefer to 'skip'.]
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RY4CW5pte98> The words are at the end of the booklet.

Song Words

The Merchant's Carol

1. As we rode down the steep hillside
Twelve merchants with our fairing
A shout across the hollow land
Came loud upon our hearing
A shout, a song, a thousand strong
A thousand lusty voices
Make haste, said I, I know not why
Jerusalem rejoices.

2. As through the olives fast we rode
And louder came the shouting
Oh, such a noise must mean, said we
A king beyond all doubting
Spurred on, did we, the king to see
And left the mules to follow
Nearer, clearer rang the noise
Along the Kidron hollow.

3. Behold, a many-coloured crowd
About the gate we found there
But one among them all we marked,
A man who made no sound there
Still louder ever rose the crowd's
Hosanna in the highest
O King, thought I, I know not why
In all this joy thou sighest.

4. Then he looked up, he looked at me;
But whether he spoke I doubted
How could I hear so calm a speech
While all the rabble shouted?
And yet these words, it seems, I heard
I shall be crowned tomorrow
It filled my heart with sudden smart
And filled my bones with sorrow.

5. We followed far, we traded not
But long we couldn't find him
The very folk that called him king
Let robbers go and bind him
We found him then, the sport of men
Still calm among their crying
Well we knew his words were true
He was most kingly dying.

In Christ Alone

1. In Christ alone my hope is found,
He is my light, my strength, my song
This Cornerstone, this solid Ground
Firm through the fiercest drought and storm.
What heights of love, what depths of peace
When fears are stilled, when strivings cease
My Comforter, my All in All
Here in the love of Christ I stand.

2. In Christ alone! - who took on flesh,
Fullness of God in helpless babe.
This gift of love and righteousness,
Scorned by the ones He came to save
Till on that cross as Jesus died,
The wrath of God was satisfied
For every sin on Him was laid
Here in the death of Christ I live.

3. There in the ground His body lay,
Light of the world by darkness slain:
Then bursting forth in glorious day
Up from the grave He rose again
And as He stands in victory
Sin's curse has lost its grip on me,
For I am His and He is mine
Bought with the precious blood of Christ

4. No guilt in life, no fear in death,
This is the power of Christ in me
From life's first cry to final breath,
Jesus commands my destiny
No power of hell, no scheme of man,
Can ever pluck me from His hand
Till He returns or calls me home
Here in the power of Christ I'll stand.