

Day 0 Tuesday - a test message

Joel 2:1 Watch out!

Sound the trumpet on Zion, the LORD's sacred hill. Warn everyone to tremble! The judgment day of the LORD is coming soon.

It will be dark and gloomy with storm clouds overhead. Troops will cover the mountains like thunderclouds. No army this powerful has ever been gathered before or will ever be again.

You will get this text on Wednesday. If you see different colours in your email then you will be able to see the different sections quite clearly. This section is the commentary where I will say a few words about the reading above.

In the following section I will pose some questions. These questions are meant for you to think about, as there may not always be a straight or easy answer to them.

The last section will be a short prayer - perhaps it's one that you could read out aloud a couple of times and then look at again later on.

You are invited to add your thoughts or ask questions on a private online forum that we will remove once Lent is over. You'll be able to see what other people are thinking or asking and you can respond to any item or just add your thoughts.

If your email can do web links then you should be able to click on "Click here for the forum" below and be taken to the web forum.

[Click here for the forum](http://wtandw.org.uk/forum/viewforum.php?f=25) or go to <http://wtandw.org.uk/forum/viewforum.php?f=25>

Can you see that this question is in green text?

Could God allow foreign forces to attack our nation?

Father God, challenge me to commit myself daily to follow and take part in this course. Amen.

Home Lent Course

In this daily series of messages I hope to offer you the opportunity for a daily involvement through Lent, a season of the Church's annual calendar. The messages are similar in structure to daily Bible reading notes, comprising a short reading, some commentary, a question or two for thinking about, and a short prayer. The added feature is that you can discuss the questions posed each day online on the secure web forum so that you are not working in total isolation.

Lent can sometimes be seen as a bit dreary and we want to avoid the idea that the only way to do Lent is to endure it. I hope that this course allows you to share in the excitement of looking again at Jesus' ministry on earth, what he did and how he trained up his disciples.

The messages will be delivered daily, so there's no looking ahead! You are encouraged to check your emails daily although stacking up batches is possible.

With blessings

Paul

Day 1 Wednesday

Joel 2:1 Watch out!

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It will be dark and gloomy with storm clouds overhead. Troops will cover the mountains like thunderclouds. No army this powerful has ever been gathered before or will ever be again.

What a way to start Lent! Joel is warning the people of Israel that God is about to unleash something quite terrible on them. Foreign armies are about to overpower Israel, and God has allowed them to come close to his people's land.

Joel knew this was going to happen. How? God told him. Joel was a prophet, and God gave this warning through Joel.

God is clearly angry with his people. We might wonder whether God could ever be upset, annoyed or plain angry with his Church. There might be a distinction, of course, between the Church of Christ and the local, national or global church we happen to be a member of. As it's the beginning of Lent we shall ask that question of ourselves, too, and ponder that as we go.

So here are a few questions (more than you will usually have) to think about.

Is our nation conforming to the ways of God?

Could God allow foreign forces to attack our nation?

Was 9/11 such an attack on the US?

Are forces, powers, influences, call them what you will, at work in our country or our neighbourhood today?

Are you living the life God has planned for you?

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[Click here for the forum](#)

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Father God, we do not want to cause you to be displeased with us. Show us who you are, and who we are in you, so that we are able to be your people and live the way you have called us to live. Amen.

Day 2 Thursday

Joel 2:12 A second chance

The LORD said: It isn't too late. You can still return to me with all your heart. Start crying and mourning! Go without eating.

Don't rip your clothes to show your sorrow. Instead, turn back to me with broken hearts. I am merciful, kind, and caring. I don't easily lose my temper, and I don't like to punish.

I am the LORD your God. Perhaps I will change my mind and treat you with mercy. Then you will be blessed with enough grain and wine for offering sacrifices to me.

Sound the trumpet on Zion! Call the people together. Show your sorrow by going without food.

Make sure that everyone is fit to worship me. Bring adults, children, babies, and even bring newlyweds from their festivities.

Tell my servants, the priests, to cry inside the temple and to offer this prayer near the altar: "Save your people, LORD God! Don't let foreign nations make jokes about us. Don't let them laugh and ask, 'Where is your God?' "

God is gracious. His anger is justified, and if he'd blown Israel away completely he would have been just and right in doing so. He nearly did that quite a few times.

Think of how God would be angered by the Israelites building a golden calf to worship when they were out in the desert; by the people of Sodom and Gomorrah when they chose to live in a depraved way; by King Saul who consulted spiritualists in order to talk to a dead prophet; by the great king David, when he stole another man's wife and had him killed.

A nation that falls out of favour with God will become a laughing-stock among other nations. Do you bewail the fact that Britain may have lost its greatness? Then bewail for real.

Yet God has given his people a chance to get right with him. Start wailing – tear your hearts, not your clothes.

Does my Church need to respond to this call?

Father God, reveal to me and to your Church the things that you find repugnant about us. My desire is that you will come close to me as I approach you. Give me boldness to speak out within my fellowship so that everyone hears what you are saying. Amen.

Day 3 Friday

Mark 1:1 The Prophet announces

This is the good news about Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

It began just as God had said in the book written by Isaiah the prophet, "I am sending my messenger to get the way ready for you.

In the desert someone is shouting, 'Get the road ready for the Lord! Make a straight path for him.' "

So John the Baptist showed up in the desert and told everyone, "Turn back to God and be baptized! Then your sins will be forgiven."

We may like to think of John as a wild and rough person. He may have dressed strangely and he had a crazy diet, but he was a man of God. The angel Gabriel told his prospective parents:

He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He is never to take wine or other fermented drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even from birth. Many of the people of Israel will he bring back to the Lord their God. And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous—to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.

John did not just show up in the desert. This time had been prophesied by God through Isaiah many generations beforehand. The whole story was meticulously planned by God. The books of our Old Testament contain history, prophecy, wisdom and truth to lead people to the promised Messiah, who came in Jesus of Nazareth.

Does our Church have anything to say about detached fathers and the disobedient?

Father God, you do nothing by chance, and I am created on purpose. I have seen your story unfold and cannot help but wonder what my part is in it. Reveal who I am. Amen.

Day 4 Saturday

Mark 1 continued...

From all Judea and Jerusalem crowds of people went to John. They confessed their sins, and he baptized them in the Jordan River.

John wore clothes made of camel's hair. He had a leather strap around his waist and ate grasshoppers and wild honey.

John also told the people, "Someone more powerful is going to come. And I am not good enough even to stoop down and untie his sandals.

I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit!"

Forget the crunchy locusts dipped in honey and a very sticky beard. John came to bring reconciliation within families and to get people ready for the arrival of Jesus. He spoke strong words but drank no strong drink. This man was the last and one of the greatest of the Old Testament prophets, but even one as great as John was not worthy enough for Jesus.

John preached a message that touched people's hearts. He offered baptism, a symbolic act in which the repenter would be submerged in the water of the Jordan, to represent a closure of the old life, and lifted out of the water to signify a new birth.

What would God be saying through a prophet today?

Father God, do I still see you as a distant figure, Father by name but with little sense of your nature? You came to me in Jesus, and I did not deserve it. I crucified my Lord, and yet you forgive, restore and invite me to come before your presence. Am I, too, a joy and delight to you, my parent?

Day 5 Sunday

Luke 3:10

The crowds asked John, "What should we do?"

John told them, "If you have two coats, give one to someone who doesn't have any. If you have food, share it with someone else."

When tax collectors came to be baptized, they asked John, "Teacher, what should we do?"

John told them, "Don't make people pay more than they owe."

Some soldiers asked him, "And what about us? What do we have to do?"

John told them, "Don't force people to pay money to make you leave them alone. Be satisfied with your pay."

Everyone became excited and wondered, "Could John be the Messiah?"

People were genuinely moved by John's preaching. No examples of what he had said to the people survive, but they looked to him for guidance – "What shall we do?"

John's answers seem quite obvious when we read in hindsight, but remember how God through Joel called people to wail and to fast. John had taken people through that already. They had confessed their sins and had been baptised, and now John tells them to show how they have changed by treating people fairly and being generous to those in need.

What could I say, and to whom, to make a difference in our nation?

What would John say to today's business leaders?

Father God, what should I do...?

Day 6 Monday

Mark 1 Arrival

About that time Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee, and John baptized him in the Jordan River.

As soon as Jesus came out of the water, he saw the sky open and the Holy Spirit coming down to him like a dove.

A voice from heaven said, "You are my own dear Son, and I am pleased with you."

While old religious paintings depict John standing alongside Jesus in the river pouring water over his head Mark says quite clearly that Jesus rose up out of the water. He was well and truly baptised. John's work was complete, and his story comes to an abrupt and sad end.

John was born with the Holy Spirit. It appears that Jesus may have spent thirty years without, as it is at this moment that the Holy Spirit came down to him. Were he already filled with the Holy Spirit then perhaps the Holy Spirit could not really come down to him.

The Bible does not say much at all about Jesus' early life. His time spent in the temple when he was 12 may be the only pointer to him being someone special. At some point in his life he must have realised who he was.

Could Jesus have been born just like us, with no special favours?

When did you first realise you were special to God?

Father God, let me see how special I am, and the only way I can do that is to grasp the truth of what you did for me in Jesus Christ. Amen.

Day 7 Tuesday

Luke 4:1 Time in the desert

When Jesus returned from the Jordan River, the power of the Holy Spirit was with him, and the Spirit led him into the desert.

For forty days Jesus was tested by the devil, and during that time he went without eating. When it was all over, he was hungry.

Here we are in Lent at last. Forty days of hunger. Did Jesus really go without food for that long? He did. Should I give up something for Lent, too? It depends on the reason for doing it. Giving up chocolate for forty days (does that include the Sundays, officially not Lent?!) may make you feel a little more holy but if all it does is make you bad-tempered and unpleasant to live with then there really isn't much point to it.

Jesus' fasting was part of his devotion to God. Remember that in Matthew's account Satan did not appear on the scene until after the forty days. I prefer that account. Prayer is made more effective by fasting. Prayer and fasting appear together in many places in the Bible.

Jesus uses this time to come before his Father God. "This is my Son", the voice from heaven said. Jesus was already known by those he lived amongst for his knowledge of the scriptures. The Holy Spirit, indwelling in him, breathed understanding to him.

Could you manage forty minutes alone with God?

One whole day?

Father God, the time Jesus spent with you alone in the desert must have been amazing. I desire to spend time with you. Inspire me to step out of the world and sit at your feet. Amen.

Day 8 Wednesday

Luke 4 Hunger

The devil said to Jesus, "If you are God's Son, tell this stone to turn into bread."

Jesus answered, "The Scriptures say, 'No one can live only on food.' "

Three temptations. Satan comes before Jesus to tempt him away from his mission. Jesus is hungry. He is very weak.

Satan seems to know his enemy intimately. "If you are God's Son?!" Of course he's God's Son! And yes, he can turn stones into bread, or command food to be brought to him by angels or ravens, or for cakes and a jug of water to appear, or manna to fall from heaven, or olive oil to flow. Jesus, rather The Word, had seen those very things happen before.

And he is worth it. He alone. Remember that next time you see a celebrity on the telly advertising expensive cosmetic preparations.

Food is vital – we'll die eventually if we don't eat. The word of God is vital. We are dead if we do not consume it. Take your pick – earthly death or eternal death.

Heb 4:12

What God has said isn't only alive and active! It is sharper than any double-edged sword. His word can cut through our spirits and souls and through our joints and marrow, until it discovers the desires and thoughts of our hearts.

How well does Satan know me?

What words from Scripture sustain you in difficult times?

Father God, my relationship with you is built on what I know and understand of you. Inspire me with a longing to consume the Bible so that I may come to know you more. Amen.

Day 9 Thursday

Luke 4

Then the devil led Jesus up to a high place and quickly showed him all the nations on earth.

The devil said, "I will give all this power and glory to you. It has been given to me, and I can give it to anyone I want to.

Just worship me, and you can have it all."

Jesus answered, "The Scriptures say: 'Worship the Lord your God and serve only him!' "

How can Satan give all this to Jesus? Because he can! Satan would not even attempt to tell Jesus a lie. Satan was speaking deadly and earnest truth to Jesus.

Satan was able to stand before Jesus as the ruler of this dark world. Jesus will take total command when he returns. Until that time Satan is a roaring, but wounded lion.

Is Satan a person? Jesus thought so. God thought so. A rebel angel, a spiritual being. One who has been given authority over the earth. What on earth (heaven) was God thinking when he allowed that? Same question Job faced.

Jesus puts Satan in his place. Resist the devil and he will flee from you. Open up a crack in your armour and he'll be in there before you can say, "Oh, I seem to have a crack in my armour", every time.

What in heaven was God thinking when he gave Satan his authority?

Where do you get caught?

Father God, you are Spirit and I am called to worship you in spirit and in truth. Open my eyes to the spiritual nature of this world, and surround me with your full armour that I may be defended from Satan's tricks.

Day 10 Friday

Luke 4 Testing God

Finally, the devil took Jesus to Jerusalem and had him stand on top of the temple. The devil said, "If you are God's Son, jump off.

The Scriptures say: 'God will tell his angels to take care of you. They will catch you in their arms, and you will not hurt your feet on the stones.' "

Jesus answered, "The Scriptures also say, 'Don't try to test the Lord your God!' "

After the devil had finished testing Jesus in every way possible, he left him for a while.

The effrontery of Satan. He now tries quoting scripture at Jesus! Yes, God would send his angels to protect Jesus, but Jesus is already preparing himself for the day when angels cannot bear to look at the wounded man hanging on a cross, and Father God is unable to gaze upon him who had become sin for us.

Satan left for a while. In his ministry Jesus confronted Satan's co-rebel angels – evil or unclean spirits that had possessed people – and drove them out. He could not destroy them as his mission was not yet complete. Satan was still active.

How active is Satan today?

Where is his influence and authority evidenced?

Father God, never let me test you by attempting to force your hand. I want to trust you for who you are, and because Jesus alone is worth it. Amen.

Day 11 Saturday

Mark 1:21 A fresh teaching

Jesus and his disciples went to the town of Capernaum. Then on the next Sabbath he went into the Jewish meeting place and started teaching.

Everyone was amazed at his teaching. He taught with authority, and not like the teachers of the Law of Moses.

Here is a man teaching with authority. This was not someone who knew and could quote the scriptures: this was a man who understood the scriptures. Through his unique position as God's Son he could pull together strands to weave a tapestry of God's work that people had never seen before. Authority comes from ownership. From the Holy Spirit's inspiring he could shine light onto passages and reveal truths that had lain hidden.

The teachers of the law would have known every single word by heart, but the sum total of their knowledge did not hold a candle to Jesus. His ownership trumped their rote learning.

When was the last time a light went on when you read the Bible?

Father God, your word in the Bible is a lantern to my soul. I seek your Holy Spirit's indwelling so that I may see, understand and own the truth, the wisdom, the exciting promises that are stored up within its pages. Amen.

Day 12 Sunday

Mark 1 Satan's army

Suddenly a man with an evil spirit in him entered the meeting place and yelled,

"Jesus from Nazareth, what do you want with us? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are! You are God's Holy One."

Jesus told the evil spirit, "Be quiet and come out of the man!"

The spirit shook him. Then it gave a loud shout and left.

The evil spirit was one of Satan's crew, the angels that chose to go with Lucifer the Light-bearer when he rebelled against God. That spirit knew who Jesus was. He'd seen him before, elsewhere, in a place where one of them could never return. He was terrified, and shouted out through the person he'd possessed.

He'd been spoken into existence by the Word. Angels are created beings. There were none before the Word spoke them into being. Satan was created, and he was beautiful. The Hollywood/Hammer Films representation of Satan and his crew, and those paintings that you can see in places like Wenhaston Church come largely from wild or fevered imaginations. The horned beast mentioned in Daniel and Revelation is more symbolic than real – even the Lamb in Revelation has horns! What remains true, however, is the notion of evil, that which sets itself against the purposes of God.

Does Satan know more about who Jesus is than you do yourself?

Was I spoken into existence by the Word? If so, then could God make anything less than perfect?

"..when evil crouches near.." (it's from a hymn), what should we do?

Father God, I don't claim to understand how you have made this world as it is. I want to trust in You as my creator, in Jesus Christ as my redeemer, and your Holy Spirit as your life in me. Amen.

Day 13 Monday

Mark 1

Everyone was completely surprised and kept saying to each other, "What is this? It must be some new kind of powerful teaching! Even the evil spirits obey him."

News about Jesus quickly spread all over Galilee.

One of my favourite words in prayer is "Wow!" I don't get to say it every day, but when I do it's mouthed out loud. That exclamation must have been on the lips of the people who witnessed what Jesus did that day.

The people were amazed at what had happened and how Jesus rebuked an evil spirit (and restored the unnamed man) with power. They had probably never seen anything like it. News would have travelled and the "what is this" may well have turned into "who is this".

Have you ever seen anything like that? If you haven't, then have you wanted God to do something special so that your faith could grow?

We may spend long periods in spiritual despair or depression if we work like that. Faith does not wait on miracles – miracles wait on faith.

Mat 8:13 Then Jesus said to the officer, "You may go home now. Your faith has made it happen." Right then his servant was healed.

Spend today chewing over that.

What has wowed you recently?

Dear Father, open my eyes to the wow! Just make sure I see it and I can handle it when it comes.

Day 14 Tuesday

Isaiah 58:1

Shout the message! Don't hold back. Say to my people Israel: You've sinned! You've turned against the LORD.

Day after day, you worship him and seem eager to learn his teachings. You act like a nation that wants to do right by obeying his laws. You ask him about justice, and say you enjoy worshipping the LORD.

You wonder why the LORD pays no attention when you go without eating and act humble. But on those same days that you give up eating, you think only of yourselves and abuse your workers.

You even get angry and ready to fight. No wonder God won't listen to your prayers!

Do you think the LORD wants you to give up eating and to act as humble as a bent-over bush? Or to dress in sackcloth and sit in ashes? Is this really what he wants on a day of worship?

God is not satisfied with any worship if it is false. The people of Israel seem to be making the right noises in their worship, doing it by the book. They are even fasting and praying, but out of the worship arena they are selfish and abusive. After fasting they quarrel.

We can fall into the same traps in our relationship with God. Does worship still spill out from our lives once we've left the building on a Sunday? Worse, does worship not spill out when we're still in the building? Do relationships with others take a hit when we dredge up the bad attitude, talk them down, judge them? No amount of justification can cover a selfish attitude or ungodly treatment of others.

What sort of people does God want?

Father God, send me turbulent storms when I am flying on autopilot with you. Smite me with your love when I slip into disobedience, arrogance or pride. Put me gently back in my place when I start up, because the place you have for me is your presence.

Day 15 Wednesday

Isaiah 58 Grit in the worship

I'll tell you what it really means to worship the LORD. Remove the chains of prisoners who are chained unjustly. Free those who are abused!

Share your food with everyone who is hungry; share your home with the poor and homeless. Give clothes to those in need; don't turn away your relatives.

Then your light will shine like the dawning sun, and you will quickly be healed. Your honesty will protect you as you advance, and the glory of the LORD will defend you from behind.

"I'll tell you what I want, what I really, really want. I want worship that's made real in action."

These words are tough, because they take us away from our favourite worship songs and feel-good surroundings of comfortable Sunday worship.

Does God really want us to become political, to get messy with victims of child abuse or to go near the drug addicts or prostitutes? Does he really want us to open our homes up and share our food with any hungry person? Don't I pay for social work already through my taxes, and in my church financial giving?

He does. There's no other answer.

Rather than finding excuses for not doing we might perhaps instead start exercising faith by trusting in the words from God that follow the reprimand.

What does your Church need to do to do Isaiah 58 worship?

Father God, I want to shine like the morning sun. I want healing in every part of me and within my fellowship of worshippers. Honesty and integrity to the fore, and your glory my following defence. Amen.

Day 16 Thursday

Isaiah 58

When you beg the LORD for help, he will answer, "Here I am!" Don't mistreat others or falsely accuse them or say something cruel.

Give your food to the hungry and care for the homeless. Then your light will shine in the dark; your darkest hour will be like the noonday sun.

The LORD will always guide you and provide good things to eat when you are in the desert. He will make you healthy. You will be like a garden that has plenty of water or like a stream that never runs dry.

You will rebuild those houses left in ruins for years; you will be known as a builder and repairer of city walls and streets.

The blessings go on. It seems that all God wants to do is bless us. Opening ourselves to those in need is to reveal the loving Father's heart to them. If these poor ones are loved by God, then how can we delay carrying Father's love to them?

God promises not only health to his people, but restoration. Israel had and continues to have a special place in God's heart, and He has blessed Israel out of all proportion to what they deserved.

The same blessing is extended to those who trust in Christ.

What can I do, here where I am, to show God's love to people?

What needs rebuilding in our neighbourhood?

Father God, I look around and see broken and hurting lives. Pump my heart to bursting with a compassion that drives me to respond in love to rebuild, to restore.

Day 17 Friday

Isaiah 58 One day in seven

But first, you must start respecting the Sabbath as a joyful day of worship. You must stop doing and saying whatever you please on this special day.

Then you will truly enjoy knowing the LORD. He will let you rule from the highest mountains and bless you with the land of your ancestor Jacob. The LORD has spoken!

Is Sunday a special day to us as the Sabbath is to the Jews? Do you look forward to Sunday all week? Do you let anything stop you from worshipping with the fellowship of brothers and sisters in Christ?

God calls for his people to come together in worship. A day of worship. A joyful day of worship. There's no getting away from it. We can pray and worship by ourselves and have a deep personal relationship with God but He has made Christ head of the Church – that is how important the Church is.

And here's the rub. When God's people cut down on their worship God cuts down on his blessings... How can God bless his people if they are not standing/prostrate together before him? How can the work of our churches have an impact on their neighbourhoods if the members seldom come together as one to seek Him?

God talks about land and territory. His people Israel were promised and given special lands, and that geographical area is still in contention today.

As with the Israelites, so with Christians. We are a holy nation. We have spiritual territory.

What are my excuses for not worshipping on a Sunday?

Has modern Israel a right to take back land from the Palestinians?

Father God, I want to be so fully grafted into the Body of Christ that it hurts to take myself away. Amen.

Day 18 Saturday

Isa 61:1 Our Parish

The Spirit of the LORD God has taken control of me! The LORD has chosen and sent me to tell the oppressed the good news, to heal the brokenhearted, and to announce freedom for prisoners and captives.

This is the year when the LORD God will show kindness to us and punish our enemies.

God spoke these words to Isaiah, and being an obedient prophet, Isaiah wrote them down. He may have wondered who the words were meant for, as it certainly was not Isaiah! The Spirit of God came upon very few people in those times, and even less often with power like this.

These words would be the manifesto for someone special, someone who cared not only about the disadvantaged but also the broken-hearted. This strange mix of justice and compassion might not be just anyone's signature.

God's heart is for the people who are hurting.

Who takes priority before God, the oppressed or the oppressor, the heart-breaker or the broken-hearted, the prisoner or the jailer?

Father God, I pray again for a compassionate heart that overrides my laziness or unwillingness to act for you. Amen

Day 19 Sunday

Luke 4:14 Who is this man?

Jesus returned to Galilee with the power of the Spirit. News about him spread everywhere.

He taught in the Jewish meeting places, and everyone praised him.

Jesus went back to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and as usual he went to the meeting place on the Sabbath. When he stood up to read from the Scriptures, he was given the book of Isaiah the prophet. He opened it and read,

"The Lord's Spirit has come to me, because he has chosen me to tell the good news to the poor. The Lord has sent me to announce freedom for prisoners, to give sight to the blind, to free everyone who suffers, and to say, 'This is the year the Lord has chosen.' "

Jesus closed the book, then handed it back to the man in charge and sat down. Everyone in the meeting place looked straight at Jesus.

Then Jesus said to them, "What you have just heard me read has come true today."

Jesus came back home to Nazareth. There will have been a buzz about him. He'd been away for a few weeks and news was just coming back ahead of him that he'd been up to something.

There may have been a few more people in the synagogue that day. But is that just a twenty-first century notion, that you would choose whether to go to worship or not?

Jesus picks the passage from Isaiah. Quotations from the Hebrew Old Testament recorded in New Testament Greek (never mind the Aramaic that Jesus spoke) tend to muddy things a little, but the words are the same. Good news, freedom for prisoners, healing, release and restoration, favour.

Jesus then lit the blue touch paper. It's true today.

Is going away and coming back later the only way of making an impact?

How important are these words from Isaiah today?

Father God, I want your Holy Spirit, not for my own joy, but to enable me to do as Jesus did. Amen.

Day 20 Monday

Luke 4:22 Just who does he think he is?

All the people started talking about Jesus and were amazed at the wonderful things he said. They kept on asking, "Isn't he Joseph's son?"

Jesus answered: You will certainly want to tell me this saying, "Doctor, first make yourself well." You will tell me to do the same things here in my own hometown that you heard I did in Capernaum.

But you can be sure that no prophets are liked by the people of their own hometown.

Once during the time of Elijah there was no rain for three and a half years, and people everywhere were starving. There were many widows in Israel,

but Elijah was sent only to a widow in the town of Zarephath near the city of Sidon.

During the time of the prophet Elisha, many men in Israel had leprosy. But no one was healed, except Naaman who lived in Syria.

When the people in the meeting place heard Jesus say this, they became so angry that they got up and threw him out of town. They dragged him to the edge of the cliff on which the town was built, because they wanted to throw him down from there.

But Jesus slipped through the crowd and got away.

Jesus has just announced that a scripture whose meaning had been clothed in mystery had just been revealed – it's about me! This is my manifesto, prepared for me by my Father, recorded by the prophet. All these years it has been going through birthpangs, now to be delivered by Jesus to the people he'd grown up with.

How did Jesus feel as he walked up to read? He knew what he was going to say. And what more tricky place to do it, right among your elders and betters? So, better not upset them, especially when they are impressed so far?

No way. "You won't like me! No-one likes a local prophet." And Jesus reminds them of the times when the whole of Israel was passed over by God for favour. New boy rubs elders' noses in it!

I don't expect that being driven out of town is a pleasant experience. God was not ready for Jesus to die, so they didn't get to throw him over the cliff, but they would have done if they could.

How do we start to be different?

Are you ready for the cliff top?

Father God, protect me not so much from those who would ill treat me for being a Christian, but from my ill-treatment of those who offend my religion when they speak your truth. Amen.

Day 21 Tuesday

Mark 1:29 Sickness goes, too.

As soon as Jesus left the meeting place with James and John, they went home with Simon and Andrew.

When they got there, Jesus was told that Simon's mother-in-law was sick in bed with fever.

Jesus went to her. He took hold of her hand and helped her up. The fever left her, and she served them a meal.

Jesus has the power to heal people. It was in his manifesto. This aspect of Jesus' ministry does not seem to be reflected in quite a few churches' manifestos. Some churches omit it deliberately - only Jesus could heal. In other churches it is not mentioned because it does not happen.

If the power to heal were for Jesus alone, then how can his Church function as he did? Healing was on the list Jesus gave to the disciples when he left this earth. Was it a time-limited offer? Does modern medicine take the place of healing and psychiatry the place of casting out of evil spirits?

Do we avoid the issue of healing because of fear of failure? There are many ways of avoiding or watering down the issue. Successful healing depends on God, you and the person seeking healing. If one of the three is missing, that's it. You can look such a fool. Best avoid it.

God calls us to heal broken hearts, broken lives and broken bodies. If you have faith for any one of these you have faith for all of them.

Healing is outrageous. It flies in the face of natural laws that are based on decay.

Are we meant to share in Jesus' healing ministry?

Mark says that the sickness "left her". Is he implying something here?

Father God, I believe that you can heal people, and that you want to involve your Church in this. Help my unbelief and put me where I might serve you in being outrageous. Amen.

Day 22 Wednesday

Mark 1 Wildfire

That evening after sunset, all who were sick or had demons in them were brought to Jesus.

In fact, the whole town gathered around the door of the house.

Jesus healed all kinds of terrible diseases and forced out a lot of demons. But the demons knew who he was, and he did not let them speak.

This healing power is attractive. One healing sets off a chain reaction, like the firework set alight in the firework box. The whole town turned up where Jesus was staying. The Gospel writer makes a point of differentiating between healing of disease or malformation and casting out evil or unclean spirits from people. Anyway, whatever they had or didn't have enough of, they were to be found outside the house. Who needs Twitter?

As is so often the case it's the one event that sets it all off. Behind closed doors Peter's mother in law was healed. Word soon got out. There were people with all sorts of awful diseases and possessions all the way up the street and Jesus put them all right.

The numbers of people who were possessed by evil spirits seems to be quite high.

What has happened to them in today's world?

Father God, set me alight in a firework box. Amen.

Day 23 Thursday

Mark 1

Very early the next morning, Jesus got up and went to a place where he could be alone and pray.

Simon and the others started looking for him.

And when they found him, they said, "Everyone is looking for you!"

Jesus replied, "We must go to the nearby towns, so that I can tell the good news to those people. This is why I have come."

Jesus refused to run on an empty tank. He got up at unearthly, unnatural hours, often while it was still night, and spent time alone with Father God. When he did not necessarily want his disciples around they found him, and when he wanted them to stay near, alert, they fell asleep.

When the woman who suffered from bleeding touched his cloak he sensed that power had gone out of him. After God created the universe he rested. Power is expended in healing and spiritual batteries need recharging in time spent before Father God. If we run on next to empty we limit what God can do through us by His Holy Spirit.

For what proportion of your day do you run on empty?

Father God, I don't go far on empty. Hold me in your presence long enough to charge me up fully for what you have planned for me today. Amen.

Day 24 Friday

Mark 1 Jesus at work

Then Jesus went to Jewish meeting places everywhere in Galilee, where he preached and forced out demons.

A man with leprosy came to Jesus and knelt down. He begged, "You have the power to make me well, if only you wanted to."

Jesus felt sorry for the man. So he put his hand on him and said, "I want to! Now you are well."

At once the man's leprosy disappeared, and he was well.

Forced out demons. Mark doesn't specify the number – just another day in Galilee. When Jesus performed miracles people took notice and started listening. Jesus' authority in words was backed up by signs and wonders and vice versa.

Jesus was also intensely personal. Every single face that came before him was one he had spoken into existence. As a human he might not have knowledge to the extent that he could recognise each and every face, but the Holy Spirit within him gave him knowledge for the occasion.

How much did Jesus love that leper?

Should preachers be given a licence to preach only if they also perform signs and wonders?

Father God, you make all things well. I am created in your likeness. As I come to understand what that means about you as much as about me I hand over to you my imperfections, my inadequacies, my disease. Make me as you see me. Amen.

Day 25 Saturday

Mar 2:1 The religious empire strikes back

Jesus went back to Capernaum, and a few days later people heard that he was at home.

Then so many of them came to the house that there wasn't even standing room left in front of the door. Jesus was still teaching when four people came up, carrying a crippled man on a mat.

But because of the crowd, they could not get him to Jesus. So they made a hole in the roof above him and let the man down in front of everyone.

When Jesus saw how much faith they had, he said to the crippled man, "My friend, your sins are forgiven."

Some of the teachers of the Law of Moses were sitting there. They started wondering,

"Why would he say such a thing? He must think he is God! Only God can forgive sins."

Right away, Jesus knew what they were thinking, and he said, "Why are you thinking such things?"

Is it easier for me to tell this crippled man that his sins are forgiven or to tell him to get up and pick up his mat and go on home?

I will show you that the Son of Man has the right to forgive sins here on earth." So Jesus said to the man,

"Get up! Pick up your mat and go on home."

The man got right up. He picked up his mat and went out while everyone watched in amazement. They praised God and said, "We have never seen anything like this!"

Authority to forgive sins, too. The teachers of the law had been listening to Jesus. It's possible that they were listening with an open mind, but then Jesus says something astonishing – "your sins are forgiven". The teachers think something astonishing– "he must think he is God". They'd stumbled upon the greatest truth of the Gospel but they didn't see it.

Jesus then does something astonishing. He replies to their unspoken thoughts. He astonishingly asks a question that he does not allow them to answer and then he astonishes everyone by ordering the man to get up and go home. Personally I'd have asked him to stay so everyone could get a real good look - I'm astonished he didn't!

They watch in amazement (amazement now, as they were full up with astonishment) as the man weaves his way through the crowded room and leaves. The teachers haven't even spoken a word. Drooped jaws all around the room engaged with rest of mouth to praise God. Probably best to send him away, after all.

Did Jesus plan this little test of the teachers?

Father God, in forgiveness is healing. Let me never again accept forgiveness without the healing that accompanies it. Amen

Day 26 Sunday

Mark 3:7 Jesus shapes up his team

Jesus decided to ask some of his disciples to go up on a mountain with him, and they went.

Then he chose twelve of them to be his apostles, so that they could be with him. He also wanted to send them out to preach and to force out demons.

Simon was one of the twelve, and Jesus named him Peter.

There were also James and John, the two sons of Zebedee. Jesus called them Boanerges, which means "Thunderbolts."

Andrew, Philip, Bartholomew, Matthew, Thomas, James son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus were also apostles. The others were Simon, known as the Eager One, and Judas Iscariot, who later betrayed Jesus.

Jesus decides to select and train up a band of apostles from among those who were already following him. Some of these had had personal invitations to follow Jesus. He took a number of people up to a mountain and selected twelve from among them.

Rock, Thunderbolts and Eager - sounds like some tag wrestling team. A mixed bunch if ever there were one.

Did Jesus deliberately choose Judas?

Have you ever felt like the other disciples who went up the mountain and came down still disciples?

Father God, is your work finished, so that I can say I'm excused from service? Not until your message of salvation has reached every ear. Am I called to be an apostle, too? Amen

Day 27 Monday

Mar 4:35 A sleep on the ocean wave

That evening, Jesus said to his disciples, "Let's cross to the east side."

So they left the crowd, and his disciples started across the lake with him in the boat. Some other boats followed along.

Suddenly a windstorm struck the lake. Waves started splashing into the boat, and it was about to sink.

Jesus was in the back of the boat with his head on a pillow, and he was asleep. His disciples woke him and said, "Teacher, don't you care that we're about to drown?"

Jesus got up and ordered the wind and the waves to be quiet. The wind stopped, and everything was calm.

Jesus asked his disciples, "Why were you afraid? Don't you have any faith?"

Now they were more afraid than ever and said to each other, "Who is this? Even the wind and the waves obey him!"

Jesus knew that people would crowd in on him. He couldn't even have a quiet nap in the back of a boat without his disciples waking him up.

They woke him for the wrong reason. They were panicking. They were accusing Jesus of not caring. They were convinced they were going down, that these were their last moments together. What better way to leave this life than by making sure you've blamed and demonstrated total lack of faith in the only one who could save you?

So Jesus speaks to the elements. He could do that – he created them. He's not unique in that – he told us we can move mountains. Faith, that underdeveloped and under-exercised gift.

Did Jesus know about the storm beforehand?

What did you last accuse God of?

Father God, my faith will only become real when I find myself in helpless situations and still trust you. If I stay in comfort I'll wither. Take me whitewater boating with you. Amen.

Day 28 Tuesday

Mar 5:35 Intimacy

While Jesus was still speaking, some men came from Jairus' home and said, "Your daughter has died! Why bother the teacher anymore?"

Jesus heard what they said, and he said to Jairus, "Don't worry. Just have faith!"

Jesus did not let anyone go with him except Peter and the two brothers, James and John.

They went home with Jairus and saw the people crying and making a lot of noise.

Then Jesus went inside and said to them, "Why are you crying and carrying on like this? The child isn't dead. She is just asleep."

But the people laughed at him. After Jesus had sent them all out of the house, he took the girl's father and mother and his three disciples and went to where she was.

He took the twelve-year-old girl by the hand and said, "Talitha, koum!" which means, "Little girl, get up!" The girl got right up and started walking around. Everyone was greatly surprised.

Jairus had come earlier to Jesus, asking him to cure his daughter. She's now dead, the messengers report. This does not stop Jesus.

Just three disciples are picked to go with Jesus. They see and hear the traditional wailing, some genuine, some religious. What's he doing? Jesus kicks them all out of the house. They quietly accompany Jesus into the room where the dead girl lies. What do they think Jesus is going to do? They are there in the intimacy of the family and the Master, watching and wondering. And, at this moment, so are we.

Only one person knows what's going to happen next. That's not actually true. Jesus stepped out in faith, but others stepped out with him by following him into the room. Those who remembered Jesus' words "She's just asleep", and had faith to hold on to that statement would have had an expectation that Jesus would raise the child.

Was she dead, or sleeping?

When the breathing stops, is that the time to give up, or to hold on in faith?

What do you still hold on to, even though it's a dead horse or mockery fodder to others?

Father God, revive my faith. You germinate the mustard seed but I must feed, water and prune the tree. Amen

Day 29 Wednesday

Mark 6:7 DIY

Then he called together his twelve apostles and sent them out two by two with power over evil spirits.

He told them, "You may take along a walking stick. But don't carry food or a travelling bag or any money.

It's all right to wear sandals, but don't take along a change of clothes.

When you are welcomed into a home, stay there until you leave that town.

If any place won't welcome you or listen to your message, leave and shake the dust from your feet as a warning to them."

The apostles left and started telling everyone to turn to God.

They forced out many demons and healed a lot of sick people by putting olive oil on them.

It was time for some practical work. Jesus judged his disciples to be ready for it. They were sent out in pairs. Pairs are good. Peter and John together met the lame man (Acts 3). Paul journeyed largely with one single companion.

The six pairs he sent out were given power and authority. They didn't normally have this, but this was a special event. It was not necessarily going to be plain sailing, and they may face rejection. While they had the authority they would still have to recognise the demonic in people and not be frightened in order to cast out demons, and in order to heal they would have to trust that olive oil daubed onto a sick person would cure diseases, without exception.

Demons were cast out, people were healed and the message was preached. The disciples did as they were told.

How do you think Judas Iscariot and his partner (who would you choose?!) did?

What makes you shake the dust from your feet?

Did Jesus use olive oil? Would sunflower oil be OK?

Father God, it's not likely you'll have sent me out if I haven't yet learnt how to bring your word and authority to the place where I live. Send me out to my neighbourhood. Amen.

Day 30 Thursday

Luke 10:1 Advance Warm-up Parties

Later the Lord chose seventy-two other followers and sent them out two by two to every town and village where he was about to go.

Luk 10:17

When the seventy-two followers returned, they were excited and said, "Lord, even the demons obeyed when we spoke in your name!"

Jesus told them: I saw Satan fall from heaven like a flash of lightning.

I have given you the power to trample on snakes and scorpions and to defeat the power of your enemy Satan. Nothing can harm you.

But don't be happy because evil spirits obey you. Be happy that your names are written in heaven!

At that same time, Jesus felt the joy that comes from the Holy Spirit, and he said: My Father, Lord of heaven and earth, I am grateful that you hid all this from wise and educated people and showed it to ordinary people. Yes, Father, that is what pleased you.

My Father has given me everything, and he is the only one who knows the Son. The only one who really knows the Father is the Son. But the Son wants to tell others about the Father, so that they can know him too.

Jesus then turned to his disciples and said to them in private, "You are really blessed to see what you see!

Many prophets and kings were eager to see what you see and to hear what you hear. But I tell you that they did not see or hear."

Jesus turns up the heat on the wider group of followers. Spiritual power and authority goes further than to the apostles alone. These people are to go out with attitude. No messing with people on the road. More detailed instructions.

By the time they came back they would have blessed people and their households, cast out demons, healed the sick, proclaimed the Kingdom, and warned those who did not welcome them of coming judgement.

Jesus was aware of how they got on. He saw that Satan's power was being weakened.

Did Jesus follow up in the towns that were unwelcoming?

How many people were in that room in Acts 2?

Is Jesus aware of every move I make?

Father God, you can do a million amazing things in a flicker of an eye. Involve me in just one of them today. Amen.

Day 31 Friday

Mark 7:1 Doing things properly (religiously)

Some Pharisees and several teachers of the Law of Moses from Jerusalem came and gathered around Jesus.

They noticed that some of his disciples ate without first washing their hands.

The Pharisees and many other Jewish people obey the teachings of their ancestors. They always wash their hands in the proper way before eating.

None of them will eat anything they buy in the market until it is washed. They also follow a lot of other teachings, such as washing cups, pitchers, and bowls.

The Pharisees and teachers asked Jesus, "Why don't your disciples obey what our ancestors taught us to do? Why do they eat without washing their hands?"

It's so easy to knock the Pharisees. We love being right behind Jesus when he takes them to task - they just don't get it. They are shown so often to be abusing their power. We laugh at the silly old fools and wonder why they're so reactionary.

Of course we're not like the Pharisees. We probably don't hold that level of authority in our own church. It's actually a relief not being chosen, but that's another issue for another time.

It's also so easy to knock your fellow-Christians, especially the ones who hold responsibility in your Church. It seems there nothing Christians love more than talking about their pastors, vicars, deacons, etc (in love, of course). I suppose it helps to keep us from going out on missions and doing real damage to Satan.

Religion and tradition have no intrinsic value or worth. Only the truth counts.

The truth is not always obvious, so we also need the Bible and sensitivity to unfolding revelation from God.

Church Pharisees are more concerned with that way it was done. Church Pharisees start factions (as do insensitive new-winners). Those who personalise their complaints to the extent of saying that a change will only happen "over my dead body" are, if their attitude is wrong, prompting God to act in a way He'd prefer not to. A curse on your life is a curse on your life.

What niggles you in your regular Sunday worship?

When is it right to move away from your church to another?

Father God, you are unchanging, but we are still a long way off and our pilgrimage will continue to the end. Your word is unchanging, but you constantly reveal yourself in new ways to us. The shepherd beckons us on to new pastures, and fresh wine needs new skins. Teach us that truth is ultimately our only tradition.

Amen.

Day 32 Saturday

Mar 7:14 Grubby grub

Jesus called the crowd together again and said, "Pay attention and try to understand what I mean.

The food that you put into your mouth doesn't make you unclean and unfit to worship God. The bad words that come out of your mouth are what make you unclean."

After Jesus and his disciples had left the crowd and had gone into the house, they asked him what these sayings meant.

He answered, "Don't you know what I am talking about by now? You surely know that the food you put into your mouth cannot make you unclean.

It doesn't go into your heart, but into your stomach, and then out of your body." By saying this, Jesus meant that all foods were fit to eat.

Then Jesus said: What comes from your heart is what makes you unclean.

Out of your heart come evil thoughts, vulgar deeds, stealing, murder, Unfaithfulness in marriage, greed, meanness, deceit, indecency, envy, insults, pride, and foolishness.

All of these come from your heart, and they are what make you unfit to worship God.

Jesus' teachings were not always easy to understand. He tells the crowd that it's not bad food that makes bad people, but bad mouths.

He explains that unclean food does not of itself make people unclean, so any food is therefore fit to eat. This is a major review of the religious hygiene laws. Jesus did choose when he was going to have a go at the Pharisees, who would have lapped this controversy up if any of them were present when Jesus said it.

Jesus chose to explain things in greater depth to his disciples as part of their training. They would not have found it easy, either. For a Jew who had only ever eaten prescribed foods this must have come as a bit of a shock. It seemed still to be a novel idea to Peter much later when he met Cornelius the Gentile.

How do you stop bad stuff from coming out of your mouth?

Father God, you have ordained worship and festivals, but what you seek is not pomp but broken hearts. Break my heart where it is cold and rigid and substitute your love. Amen.

Day 33 Sunday

Mark 6:34 A gauntlet thrown down

When Jesus got out of the boat, he saw the large crowd that was like sheep without a shepherd. He felt sorry for the people and started teaching them many things.

That evening the disciples came to Jesus and said, "This place is like a desert, and it is already late.

Let the crowds leave, so they can go to the farms and villages near here and buy something to eat."

Jesus replied, "You give them something to eat." But they asked him, "Don't you know that it would take almost a year's wages to buy all of these people something to eat?"

The disciples are the first to be concerned that people might be getting hungry, which is good. Still, they'd never have been there so late in the day had not Jesus that afternoon felt sorry for them and their spiritual hunger.

Jesus was brewing up spiritually for another special miracle. But he is training his disciples, bringing them on, drawing them to where he is, testing them to see how they would react. They are conscientious people, and they are genuinely concerned for the crowd. They want to halt proceedings so that the people could go off to get food. This would have been a satisfactory conclusion to a busy day. They had simply no idea of what Jesus is going to do next.

"You feed `em".

The challenge is thrown down. Will they pick it up? We can at our leisure call upon Malachi 3:10, as long as the challenge is not ours:

I am the LORD All-Powerful, and I challenge you to put me to the test. Bring the entire ten percent into the storehouse, so there will be food in my house. Then I will open the windows of heaven and flood you with blessing after blessing.

But what happens when Jesus turns to you and says, "You do it"? This is the question that is placed on the edge where practicality meets faith. Do you stay on the safe side and miss the experience and the blessing, or do you step out? The disciples were not there yet, but after the event those words of Jesus may have turned again in their mind.

Were these disciples the same bunch of disciples referred to in Mark 8:4?

What challenges have you missed recently?

Father God, the miraculous is practically easier and more effective than the practical. Challenge me to challenge you. Amen.

Day 34 Monday

Mar 6:45

Right away, Jesus made his disciples get into the boat and start back across to Bethsaida. But he stayed until he had sent the crowds away. Then he told them good-bye and went up on the side of a mountain to pray.

Later that evening he was still there by himself, and the boat was somewhere in the middle of the lake.

He could see that the disciples were struggling hard, because they were rowing against the wind. Not long before morning, Jesus came toward them. He was walking on the water and was about to pass the boat.

When the disciples saw Jesus walking on the water, they thought he was a ghost, and they started screaming.

All of them saw him and were terrified. But at that same time he said, "Don't worry! I am Jesus. Don't be afraid."

He then got into the boat with them, and the wind died down. The disciples were completely confused.

Their minds were closed, and they could not understand the true meaning of the loaves of bread.

Just how big was this lake and where was this mountain? Jesus saw the disciples struggling just as he had seen Nathaniel before he met him. He walks on the water to the boat.

That is scary. In this weather a boat's frail shell is all that keeps you from going under, and you stay inside the boat if you know what's good for you.

Jesus strolls over to them, no doubt hardly even wet around the ankles, and gets in. Calm is restored. Again he shows his mastery over the elements to his disciples. They are again dumbfounded. Their experiences are building up, little by little...

How good that Jesus chose fishermen. The miracle just wouldn't work if he'd chosen cart-drivers.

Did Jesus come over straight away?

Does anyone know why Jesus made to walk on by?

Father God, if I don't get into a boat You can't walk on water to save me. Gently lift my clamped fingers from the mooring post and take me where you can reveal your glory to me. Amen.

Day 35 Tuesday

Mar 8:27 The shekel drops

Jesus and his disciples went to the villages near the town of Caesarea Philippi. As they were walking along, he asked them, "What do people say about me?"

The disciples answered, "Some say you are John the Baptist or maybe Elijah. Others say you are one of the prophets."

Then Jesus asked them, "But who do you say I am?" "You are the Messiah!" Peter replied.

There must have been no end of times when Jesus and his disciples went walking together. They covered enormous distances.

For one disciple things were beginning to gel. And Jesus may have known, and chose to ask his question for that reason.

The answer didn't come directly from Peter's brain; it came first from his spirit. Try to understand Jesus just from what you have learnt and you will not get far. Allow God's Holy Spirit to touch your spirit and reveal to you the true nature of Jesus Christ.

We do not get to hear what the other disciples had to say to Jesus' second question, and that may be just as well, since Peter got it spot on.

What do you say to people when they ask you about Jesus?

How do you bring someone to the point of asking that question?

Father God, I need your Holy Spirit to reveal Jesus to me, for all that I may learn about him in the Bible is meaningless until you breathe understanding into my spirit. Amen.

Day 36 Wednesday

Mar 9:2 Glory

Six days later Jesus took Peter, James, and John with him. They went up on a high mountain, where they could be alone. There in front of the disciples, Jesus was completely changed.

And his clothes became much whiter than any bleach on earth could make them.

Then Moses and Elijah were there talking with Jesus.

Peter said to Jesus, "Teacher, it is good for us to be here! Let us make three shelters, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah."

But Peter and the others were terribly frightened, and he did not know what he was talking about.

The shadow of a cloud passed over and covered them. From the cloud a voice said, "This is my Son, and I love him. Listen to what he says!"

At once the disciples looked around, but they saw only Jesus.

As Jesus and his disciples were coming down the mountain, he told them not to say a word about what they had seen, until the Son of Man had been raised from death.

So they kept it to themselves. But they wondered what he meant by the words "raised from death."

Peter, James and John are the disciples who get the advanced training. They had come a very long way already. They'd seen miracles, healings, castings out. They had heard teaching, prophecy and fulfilment.

They had even been out on a trial mission or two and had done most of these things themselves. They knew that they acted under Jesus' authority for that. There are some scary stories in the book of Acts about people who acted on their own or under the authority of unholy spiritual forces.

Now they were to see something that was of Jesus alone, and was not for sharing – his glory. Jesus' appearance changed, and for a short time they were able to see someone whose clothes were dazzling. But there's more. Moses and Elijah, clearly recognisable to the disciples, are there, too, signs to his glory. God's law-giver and his great prophet, talking with Jesus. And to crown it all, the voice of God. Then all went back to how it was.

This was not a dream or a vision. This was reality. A glimpse of the glory of the Son of God, the fulfilment of the Law and the Prophets. And then Jesus went and spoilt it all by talking about his death.

How do you rate your level of training?

When do we get to see Jesus in his glory?

Lord, let me see your glory, and more than Moses did. Amen.

Day 37 Thursday

Mar 9:14 Yet more demons

When Jesus and his three disciples came back down, they saw a large crowd around the other disciples. The teachers of the Law of Moses were arguing with them.

The crowd was really surprised to see Jesus, and everyone hurried over to greet him.

Jesus asked, "What are you arguing about?"

Someone from the crowd answered, "Teacher, I brought my son to you. A demon keeps him from talking.

Whenever the demon attacks my son, it throws him to the ground and makes him foam at the mouth and grit his teeth in pain. Then he becomes stiff. I asked your disciples to force out the demon, but they couldn't do it."

Jesus said, "You people don't have any faith! How much longer must I be with you? Why do I have to put up with you? Bring the boy to me."

Clearly the child is a mute with epilepsy.

A modern diagnosis (the word comes from Greek, meaning discernment) has the power and authority of medicine, science, psychology and sociology behind it. I'm no medic, but modern diagnostics will come up with something.

But in some ways it's just a label. Was the man possessed of a legion of demons just a guy suffering from a bipolar (or multipolar?) disorder, or criminally insane?

It's good to have a modern label, but the stories still pose problems:

How were these people able to recognise Jesus in a way that other people didn't, and why were they so afraid of him?

How did Jesus, labouring under the illusion that these people were possessed, and speaking to a non-existent entity, still manage to bring about their wholeness?

Do these irrational methods still work today?

Father God, I believe. Help my unbelief. Amen.

Day 38 Friday

Mark 9

They brought the boy, and as soon as the demon saw Jesus, it made the boy shake all over. He fell down and began rolling on the ground and foaming at the mouth.

Jesus asked the boy's father, "How long has he been like this?" The man answered, "Ever since he was a child. The demon has often tried to kill him by throwing him into a fire or into water. Please have pity and help us if you can!"

Jesus replied, "Why do you say 'if you can'? Anything is possible for someone who has faith!" Right away the boy's father shouted, "I do have faith! Please help me to have even more."

When Jesus saw that a crowd was gathering fast, he spoke sternly to the evil spirit that had kept the boy from speaking or hearing. He said, "I order you to come out of the boy! Don't ever bother him again."

The spirit screamed and made the boy shake all over. Then it went out of him. The boy looked dead, and almost everyone said he was.

But Jesus took hold of his hand and helped him stand up.

A major part of Jesus' ministry was in cleansing people of unclean or evil spirits. The Church today still practises a ministry of deliverance, a gentler term than "casting out", though it is a discreet and publicity-shy operation. See how when Jesus saw the crowds coming he got on with the task. People still come to the Church for this type of ministry.

A very popular series of books for young people is "Twilight", now out in film. It tells the story of a young girl and her love for a vampire. It covers similar ground to other romantic books except that the relationship takes in elements of fear and spiritual darkness. Stuff like this can have an effect on people, as can books, films and computer games that revel in spiritually dark areas that most of the people who read, view, play would claim as being non-existent. The demonic is strangely popular and influential today.

Christians need to be aware of where they lay themselves open to influence. Pornographic images and videos are all too easily available on the internet for children to find as well as adults. New age fortune-telling and spiritist wares can be viewed openly on satellite TV (astral readings are costly in more than one way). People get caught up, and their own spiritual life and relationship with God in Jesus suffers.

These questions are not for the discussion forum:

Do I depend in any way on zodiac star signs, horoscopes, fortune-telling? Has anyone ever said something that I cannot shake off, as if it were some sort of curse on me? Have I ever dabbled in things in the past that are not of God?

Are there secret areas in my life that I'd be ashamed to admit, such as wrong relationships, dependencies on wrong things, unfaithfulness, things that still hang like a millstone round my neck, though no-one else knows?

If that's the case, then the answer is simple. Repent. Go back to day one of this series. There is no other way, however much you'd like to find one.

Father God, you know me intimately. There is nothing you don't already know about me. Where I am in sin I shut you out, because you cannot look upon sin, and I break the relationship. I want to come closer to you. I repent of the things that I put in the way. I confess them before you now. Remove them and fill up the holes with your redeeming love. Amen.

Day 39 Saturday

Mark 9

After Jesus and the disciples had gone back home and were alone, they asked him, "Why couldn't we force out that demon?"

Jesus answered, "Only prayer can force out that kind of demon."

Prayer, prayer, prayer. You can't get enough of it. Jesus would get up early in the morning to pray – he'd lose sleep for it, though not over it.

Praying regularly is not easy. Even when you establish a time filling it with content is not easy, either. Concentration can be difficult, and the process can lead to despondency and a tightening circle that eventually throttles the good intentions you once had.

I'm only speaking for myself, of course.

While a little discipline is Christ-like and good for us, if it manifests itself in empty words and actions, then that's no good to anyone. Mere repetition does not make us more spiritual, and God in his love wants better. He desires a relationship with you. It is better to spend time with a nice cup of tea and a bun, perhaps some good worship music on the player, your Bible open and notebook ready for anything that God reveals to you than to work through tiresome lists of prayers. God calls people to intercession mainly because he desires our hearts. Long prayers can only come from a relationship of love and yearning for God.

We're called to spend time with God, not to talk at Him. Jesus prayed for his disciples, the world, the High Priest, the Romans, etc. but his time with Father God was primarily time spent in His presence.

The disciples were not up to dealing with the boy's condition. Jesus tells them that they need to spend more time with God before they attempt anything like that. Our Christian life is all about growing, developing and maturing in God.

What works for you?

How have I grown in the last year?

Father God, over this coming week help me turn off my tongue and open my ears, eyes and heart to you. Amen

Day 40 Sunday

Mat 16:13

When Jesus and his disciples were near the town of Caesarea Philippi, he asked them, "What do people say about the Son of Man?"

The disciples answered, "Some people say you are John the Baptist or maybe Elijah or Jeremiah or some other prophet."

Then Jesus asked them, "But who do you say I am?"

Simon Peter spoke up, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God."

Jesus told him: Simon, son of Jonah, you are blessed! You didn't discover this on your own. It was shown to you by my Father in heaven.

So I will call you Peter, which means "a rock." On this rock I will build my church, and death itself will not have any power over it.

And so to Holy Week Over the last 39 days we have looked at how Jesus prepared for his ministry and what he did. We saw how he trained up his disciples by throwing them into all sorts of situations. He was training them for a purpose, of course, and that purpose was to build his church. Jesus owns the Church, it is his church, and only he builds it. He chooses to use us in that work.

We revisit that defining encounter between Jesus and Peter. Jesus was doing his usual thing, prompting his disciples to respond so he could see whether anyone had got it yet. He may have known that Peter would respond, or perhaps he didn't, but that's not the issue. It is that Father God revealed the truth through his Holy Spirit to Peter. Peter did not figure it out.

Likewise, our understanding of who Jesus is does not come from reading the Bible but from God revealing this to us as we read. More time spent in study allows the revelation to sharpen up and develop. And reading your Bible is something no-one else can do for you.

The twentieth century sees the Church in many denominations (or demonisations?) with splits, reformations and completely new groups. There are also sects that add new revelations. Jesus, however, is clear that it is his church – his body.

Can I be a Christian and not be in a church?

Can we argue before God for the retention of denominations?

Father God, teach me about Christ's Church and my place in it. Amen.

Day 41 Monday

Mar 8:31 Trying times ahead

Jesus began telling his disciples what would happen to him. He said, "The nation's leaders, the chief priests, and the teachers of the Law of Moses will make the Son of Man suffer terribly. He will be rejected and killed, but three days later he will rise to life."

Then Jesus explained clearly what he meant. Peter took Jesus aside and told him to stop talking like that.

But when Jesus turned and saw the disciples, he corrected Peter. He said to him, "Satan, get away from me! You are thinking like everyone else and not like God."

Jesus makes his disciples uneasy because he starts to tell them about suffering and death. They had already seen some opposition, but Jesus had seemed to come out of that on top and unscathed.

Here was a man they still only partly knew, who made miracles, healed people, cast out demons, preached some hard sermons and who overflowed with love. Someone whose relationship with women was a bit dodgy; who was short with his family; who was not cowed by the religious leaders; who seemed to court danger. A man they had grown to admire, perhaps love. Someone they knew to have a surprisingly deep love for them.

Why would this young man who claimed to be so close to God start talking about his death? Most unsettling. Peter spoke what they probably all thought, and took the hit for them all.

We know the story, and can look back on it. Jesus did actually say he'd rise to life, and he did explain things to them, as the following verse says. But when Peter heard the words about suffering his vision failed him and spiritual myopia (short-sightedness) took over.

The story is not yet complete. There will be times of trouble ahead for us, too, before Christ returns in His glory. Do we, too, have trouble seeing past the suffering bit and fail to see the glory beyond?

What does your long view look like?

Father God, open up the revelation and show me the glory that lies beyond the suffering. Amen.

Day 42 Tuesday

Mar 8:34 More suffering

Jesus then told the crowd and the disciples to come closer, and he said: If any of you want to be my followers, you must forget about yourself. You must take up your cross and follow me.

If you want to save your life, you will destroy it. But if you give up your life for me and for the good news, you will save it.

What will you gain, if you own the whole world but destroy yourself? What could you give to get back your soul?

Don't be ashamed of me and my message among these unfaithful and sinful people! If you are, the Son of Man will be ashamed of you when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.

We only have a few days left, and we've managed to avoid the suffering bit, but here it comes. The prospect of taking up your own cross is not pleasant, and the reality is even less so.

I've hated this part of the Gospel story. I've wanted to have the good (and easy) bits. I've wanted to sing about God's glory and his saving grace in Christ, about victory and death of death. I was happy to recall Jesus' sufferings for me and call it done.

But now he wants me to give up my life, to stand up for him. I'm sure that wasn't what I thought I'd signed up for!

Well, let's face up to it. Firstly he signed me, not me him. With the cross, and I don't mean a symbol on my forehead. I mean the blood that flowed from a nail-pierced body. The daubed ashes of six weeks ago have nothing on the blood of Jesus that cleanses me, that avails for me.

And, would you believe it – I've done a Peter? I've stopped at the suffering and not looked beyond to the glory.

What's the thing that frightens you most about being a Christian?

Lord God, take me to the place where Jesus suffered and died for me. Let me see my sins on his shoulder, my redemption in the flowing blood. Amen.

Day 43 Wednesday

Mar 9:30 Don't ask...

Jesus left with his disciples and started through Galilee. He did not want anyone to know about it, because he was teaching the disciples that the Son of Man would be handed over to people who would kill him. But three days later he would rise to life.

The disciples did not understand what Jesus meant, and they were afraid to ask.

Jesus is trying to find some time away with his disciples. It was going to take some time for him to get the message across to them, and for it to sink in, that he was going to die soon.

The news of the impending death of a friend is not what you want to hear. We find some security in each other – but when one is threatened in that bond, both are threatened. There are adjustments to be made, and questions to ask of God. There is the struggle between faith, especially as it was displayed in Jesus himself, and cold reality. Is God cutting off his nose to spite his face? Surely Jesus could do so much more? Why allow someone to die so prematurely?

I've been in committee meetings where I haven't had a clue what they were talking about. Perhaps I'd lost concentration earlier, or had not read the minutes. The longer the discussion goes on, the less likely I am to ask what it's all about. I'm also good at avoiding asking God the sort of questions whose answers I don't want to hear. Questions about His plan for my life, for instance.

When a dear brother or sister in Christ has died too soon, or whose ministry is curtailed due to ill-health, isn't God cutting off his nose to spite his face?

Did the disciples get enough training?

What are you afraid to ask God?

Father God, you know me inside out and your plan is perfect. Amen.

Day 44 Thursday

Mar 10:17 No entry

As Jesus was walking down a road, a man ran up to him. He knelt down, and asked, "Good teacher, what can I do to have eternal life?"

Jesus replied, "Why do you call me good? Only God is good. You know the commandments. 'Do not murder. Be faithful in marriage. Do not steal. Do not tell lies about others. Do not cheat. Respect your father and mother.' "

The man answered, "Teacher, I have obeyed all these commandments since I was a young man."

Jesus looked closely at the man. He liked him and said, "There's one thing you still need to do. Go sell everything you own. Give the money to the poor, and you will have riches in heaven. Then come with me."

When the man heard Jesus say this, he went away gloomy and sad because he was very rich.

Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, "It's hard for rich people to get into God's kingdom!" The disciples were shocked to hear this. So Jesus told them again, "It's terribly hard to get into God's kingdom! In fact, it's easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to get into God's kingdom."

Jesus' disciples were even more amazed. They asked each other, "How can anyone ever be saved?"

Jesus looked at them and said, "There are some things that people cannot do, but God can do anything."

Peter replied, "Remember, we left everything to be your followers!"

Jesus told him: You can be sure that anyone who gives up home or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or land for me and for the good news will be rewarded. In this world they will be given a hundred times as many houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and pieces of land, though they will also be mistreated. And in the world to come, they will have eternal life.

But many who are now first will be last, and many who are now last will be first.

Uncomfortable words from Jesus, but unavoidable, too. Remember what John the Prophet said to the tax collectors and the soldiers. Perhaps Jesus was exaggerating when he told the rich man to give it all away. It's probable, however, that Jesus had placed his finger on that man's problem: he loved his money too much.

God uses people's wealth. After all, He has a bank account with each of us. We hold His cash. It is not ours. Parable of the talents comes to mind.

If "rich" means "what's mine is mine" then it's impossible to have riches in heaven. Peter's sacrifice was total. He was not reported to have gained a hundred fold on his housing

though we understand from elsewhere that he received the mistreatment. Eternal life still trumps all.

How does our own Church fellowship or denomination measure up?

Father God, teach me about lowliness, human discomfort and poverty so that I can learn to trust you for everything I need. Amen

Day 45 and 46 Friday and Saturday

John 3:1 Good News

There was a man named Nicodemus who was a Pharisee and a Jewish leader. One night he went to Jesus and said, "Sir, we know that God has sent you to teach us. You could not work these miracles, unless God were with you."

Jesus replied, "I tell you for certain that you must be born from above before you can see God's kingdom!"

Nicodemus asked, "How can a grown man ever be born a second time?"

Jesus answered: I tell you for certain that before you can get into God's kingdom, you must be born not only by water, but by the Spirit. Humans give life to their children. Yet only God's Spirit can change you into a child of God.

[...]

"How can this be?" Nicodemus asked.

Jesus replied: [...] If you don't believe when I talk to you about things on earth, how can you possibly believe if I talk to you about things in heaven? No one has gone up to heaven except the Son of Man, who came down from there. And the Son of Man must be lifted up, just as that metal snake was lifted up by Moses in the desert. Then everyone who has faith in the Son of Man will have eternal life.

God loved the people of this world so much that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who has faith in him will have eternal life and never really die.

God did not send his Son into the world to condemn its people. He sent him to save them!

If you have not learnt John 3:16 ("God loved the people...", or your own Bible's translation) by heart, stop now and do it. You are excused the rest of this message.

Nicodemus believes that God sent Jesus – the miracles are clear evidence. Jesus doesn't bother saying thank you, but instead speaks to Nicodemus' situation: "You must be born again". Born again as a child of God through Jesus' coming sacrifice and resurrection.

Being born again is not about happy-clappy, though it is difficult not to rejoice in the presence of Father God. It is not about being an evangelical, though a Bible-based lifestyle is essential to growing up into spiritual maturity. It is not about noisy worship, though it was only ever quiet in heaven for just thirty minutes (Rev 8:1).

It's about a relationship with the living God through Jesus Christ. The priests were cautious and reverent in the temple because it was thus decreed in the Law. The old covenant had you treating God like a bomb about to go off any moment. The new covenant ripped open the curtain of the temple and revealed the Holy Place to all, and that is where we are called to reside.

The word "spiritual" is regularly abused by new agers, popular magazines and quite a few

Christians. There is only one spirituality, and it is not to be found in a lit candle, an icon, music, poetry, anything Celtic, nor in pilgrimage or solitude. Spirituality is not a commodity, though a glance around the shelves of some cathedral shops might make you think otherwise. That sacrificial act should never be remembered only in the glow of candlelight or against the background of comfortable Latin songs. It should not be contemplated in silence alone, as if the silence itself were the object of worship. It is not found within me, through my acts of self-denial or adherence to ritual or duty. Nor will we find God with the oldest or the latest hymns unless they talk of Him and His work. No organ will ever tell of his glory, no cymbal his majesty.

Spirituality is not about a cosy relationships wrapped up in the blanket of mystery, it is about acknowledging that Christ lives in you by His Holy Spirit, enabling you to do as He did.

The cross stands high like the snake in the desert over all of this world and beyond. Above the noise of traffic, the bustle of shopping centres; above our night-time drunken town centres, the tents of the homeless; above our ambitions, our careers and families; above this nation, its government and economy; above Israel, Palestine, Syria, China, Russia and any other place in conflict. The Cross is our pathway to God.

Where are miracles (please, not flowers, not babies, etc.) today?

Do the flesh-born have a place in the Kingdom?

Father God, I can only call you Father because I am adopted as your son, and that because your son Jesus Christ died for me. Help me understand the depth of his sacrifice so that I can live in the breadth of His resurrection life and glory.

Day 47

Rev 22:13 The end

I am Alpha and Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end.

Almost seven weeks of study are coming to an end. We have covered God's call to repentance revealed through his prophets; John the Prophet and Jesus' initiation to ministry; his time in the desert; his authority in teaching and his power over sickness, death and spiritual forces. We have looked at his disciple training record – very hands-on. We have touched on his suffering.

Today we celebrate his resurrection. It is probably a personal thing, but the paschal greeting response "He is risen indeed" doesn't really grab me. I don't see in it Mary responding to her name when Jesus spoke to her, or the disciples at the tomb, or the two who sprinted back from Emmaus, or Thomas (second time round). "I know that my Redeemer lives" would be my alternative version.

He is risen. It happened two thousand years ago, of course, so every day from then is an Alleluia! (Hallelujah! if you prefer) Day, and every day is a Good Friday. It's Christmas, too

The Word was there at the beginning. He was tasked at the beginning, before even light came into existence, with the work he came to do at a point in time. Claim back Anno Domini from those who push Common Era dating. Sensitivity to other faiths or none does not need to water down what we hold to be true.

He is there at the end of all things, too. The glorious end was planned at the beginning. It will happen, but do not think for a moment that it is in any way mechanical. The oil in the machinery is made from a mixture of sacrificial love, father heart, unspeakable pain and precious blood.

The world that Christ entered is still here. New generations of people tread this ground and each and every one of them has to hear the Gospel Message. More than that they have to encounter Jesus. Jesus trained up his disciples and gave them the Holy Spirit. The awesome works of God they displayed caused people to listen and respond to the message of salvation. It's up to us to preach the Easter message to this generation. What a privilege!

When was the Church established?

**How do we start to touch the broken hearts,
The barren lives, the lonely and bereaved?
(Chris Rolinson)**

Father God, thank you for Jesus Christ. Establish me as a member of Christ's Body so that I go where He goes and do what He does, so that the world may believe in you. Amen.