

21 February 2021 – Mark 4:1–6:6

READING FROM MARK 4:1–6:6

We're not going to read every verse from these chapters as we'd be here a long time. Instead, we're going to assume that you know these familiar stories from Jesus' ministry, and we're just going to give you a quick overview of these stories ...

We pick up Mark's story with Jesus teaching about the kingdom of God using a type of everyday story called a parable ...

- Jesus is teaching beside the Sea of Galilee and vast crowds gather to hear his old but new message about the kingdom of God. He begins by saying 'A sower went out to sow and some of his seed fell on the path, some fell on rocky ground, some fell among thorns and some fell into good soil where it grew and yielded a crop of thirty, sixty and as much as a hundredfold.'



Jesus shared other parables too about how grain appears to grow all by itself, about a small mustard seed that grows into a large plant and about a lamp that brings hidden things to light.

The disciples struggle to understand the meaning of the parables and also why Jesus teaches in this seemingly obscure way. Jesus responds that some people – like the disciples – are getting to know about the kingdom of God ... but the majority of the people will listen but **not** understand, see but **not** perceive, and therefore **not** turn back to God and be forgiven ... these chilling words are taken from the prophet Isaiah ... how will people respond?

- After this teaching, the disciples get in a boat with Jesus



to sail across Lake Galilee but a big storm – a whirlwind in fact – blows up and the disciples are terrified and wake Jesus up – he was asleep



– scared that they're all going to die. Jesus rebukes the storm and all is calm. Except now the disciples are more terrified of Jesus than of the storm. Who is this man?

Out of the frying pan and into the fire. On the other

side of the lake they encounter a really scary and violent man who personifies evil. He calls himself

'Legion' because he is filled up with many evil spirits and lives among the tombs of the dead. Jesus speaks with the man and negotiates with the evil spirits who



agree to leave the man and go into a herd of pigs, who rush down the hill into the lake and drown. It's a bit weird all round. The locals too are now quite afraid of Jesus and ask him to leave.

- So it's back across the lake once more to the Jewish side where the leader of a synagogue (or church) – whose daughter is very sick – begs Jesus to come and lay his hands on her. Jesus goes with him ...

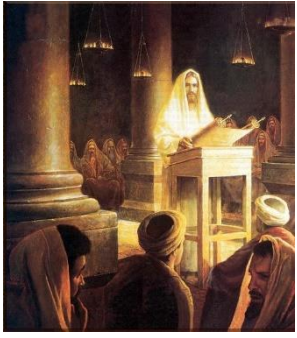
... but on the way, another chronically sick person – a woman – comes up



and touches Jesus from behind and is healed. Jesus is aware that power has gone out from him and asks 'Who touched me?'. The woman comes forward with fear and trembling and tells the whole story. Jesus praises the woman for her faith. Meanwhile the daughter of the synagogue leader has died.

'Don't be afraid, just trust' says Jesus and he goes to the house and raises up the dead girl. People are suitably amazed.





- Then it's off to Nazareth, the town where Jesus grew up. The locals there aren't at all impressed by Jesus who they see as an upstart, a tall poppy to be cut down. They mock Jesus for the wisdom and power that he apparently wields. It's Jesus' turn to be amazed – at their lack of faith.

MESSAGE Jesus and the kingdom of God

I wonder what you are making of Mark's story as we listen to the unfolding narrative? Are these just random episodes that Mark has cobbled together or is there an underlying **sense of movement**? Which characters in the story are you most drawn to and why? Are you seeing aspects of Jesus and his message that you haven't noticed before? And what does all this have to do with us in 2021, gathering together after last week's forced Covid isolation? These are some of the questions I've been grappling with this week.

As followers of Jesus, we've heard many of these stories before and we tend to interpret them through the lens of our experience of church and of the world. But as we listen do we really **hear** as Jesus implores us to do as he speaks to the crowds in parables? Is **our** central concern the relationships we have here in the Croydon and Croydon North congregations of the **Uniting Church** ... or do our activities more closely align with what Jesus seemed most concerned with, namely **building the kingdom of God**?

Let's see if we can unpack some of this as we engage with these chapters in Mark's story ...

The first part of our reading today shows Jesus teaching the crowds in parables. It's the first glimpse we get into the **content** of Jesus' teaching ... and it's not simple or straightforward. A parable can be an **illustrative story** but can also be a **riddle** or a **puzzle**. I suspect that many people in the crowd thought Jesus was teaching in riddles.





They heard a story about a sower and seed falling on different types of ground ... but what did it mean? Or the later story about what happens to a seed after it's planted ... it's all a bit mysterious!

The disciples are given private explanations of the parables – but if we need point-by-point explanations to understand a parable, then many people in the crowds would be left scratching their heads. These parables in Mark seem to be stories sketching why only some people respond to the good news message of Jesus yet also give hope that this message will gradually take root and grow and bring a harvest.

The challenge – then and now – is how are we hearing and responding to Jesus' message. With all that is going on with the pandemic and snap lockdowns and vaccines being rolled out, is God's word to us being choked by weeds and thorns? The risk – clearly spelled out in the chilling words that Jesus quotes from Isaiah – is that we listen but don't hear, look but don't see, and fail to turn to God for forgiveness and healing. During the **season of Lent** that we started this week, we are invited – as individuals and as a community – to take some time to reflect and see if there are areas in our lives where we need to turn back to God.

There are then four stories that explore different aspects of the authority of Jesus and people's response to him ...

1. The disciples crossing the lake at night and being caught in a storm
2. Confronting the wild man Legion who is afflicted by unclean spirits
3. Jairus and his dying daughter and the woman with bleeding
4. The townsfolk in Nazareth where Jesus grew up

In each story, Jesus enters situations that cause people to **fear**. He addresses each situation with **compassion** of course but also with **power** – a power that is beyond normal earthly power – power over nature, power over unclean spirits, power over sickness and even power over death. In each case, we're asked to consider **who is this Jesus?** In the first and second stories, fear chokes off a response of faith while in the last story it is over-familiarity. But in the third story we see responses of **faith overcoming fear**. Each story, then, says something important about Jesus but

also about our response.

First up, then, Jesus decides to cross Lake Galilee to the eastern or non-Jewish side. It's night and so it's dark. A sudden storm blows up and the disciples – including the four fishermen who knew these waters well – are overwhelmed. Meanwhile, what's Jesus up to? He's asleep at the back of the boat.



The disciples panic and wake Jesus and beg him to save them.

We're told that Jesus rebukes the storm, and then rebukes the disciples for their lack of faith. While the disciples had been afraid of the storm, our text reads that now they **feared a great fear** – a fear of who Jesus might be that even the wind and the sea obey him. **Who, indeed, is this Jesus?**

The disciples land on the far side of the lake. It's time for **story 2**.

A wild looking man greets them. He is so strong that chains can't control him. He lives among the tombs of the dead and is afflicted with many unclean spirits. He is, I imagine, a terrifying figure to confront. And he apparently knows Jesus ... 'What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God?'



Jesus shows that he is the stronger one, stronger than Satan, and commands the unclean spirits to come out of the man and go into a nearby herd of pigs who rush into the lake and drown. The swineherds are now very afraid – afraid of Jesus even more than they were afraid of Legion – who has been restored to wholeness. Here Jesus demonstrates the **power** of God's kingdom – and again the response is **fear**.

Then it's back across the lake to the Jewish side for **story 3**. A synagogue leader comes to Jesus and begs him to lay hands on his sick daughter. Jairus clearly has faith that Jesus can help and can bring healing.

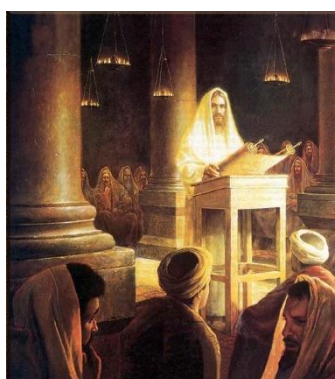


Along the way, another person of faith also seeks out Jesus for healing. She thinks



that just by touching his clothes she will be made well, which is what happens. Jesus – aware that power has gone out from him – stops in the middle of the crowd. We're told that the woman courageously comes forward and shares her whole story. Jesus commends her for her **faith**.

Meanwhile, Jairus' daughter has died. The worst fear of Jairus has come to pass. People are weeping and wailing. They mock Jesus for suggesting that the girl is only sleeping. But he goes to her and raises her up and she too is restored. As earlier in the Gospel, Jesus shows compassion and power to heal, but here **faith** and **courage** seem to be crucial components.



Then there is **story 4** at Nazareth, the home town of Jesus. The people here are not afraid of Jesus but are dismissive of his growing reputation. Jesus is no-one special. They've known him a long time. They are **too** familiar with Jesus.

Who is Jesus for them? He's just a local lad with a way too big ego. Jesus is amazed by their **lack** of faith.

This section of the Gospel is all about Jesus and poses the question '**Who is Jesus?**'

Is he in fact the **king** of the kingdom of God he keeps speaking about?

And if Jesus is the powerful and strong figure that Mark portrays, how devastating it will be for the disciples when everything goes pear shaped! But I'm probably jumping ahead too far at this point ...

But the other side of these stories is the various **responses to Jesus** ...

Are we **perplexed** by Jesus' teaching like many in the crowd?

Are there **fears** in our lives – about Covid, or about growing old and losing our abilities, or about members of our family or the struggles of friends? How could faith in Jesus help us overcome our fears?

Or do we think we **already know all about Jesus**, or all we need to know? Are we tempted, like the folk at Nazareth, to put Jesus in a box. Or are we prepared to let Jesus blow through our lives, leading us where he will?

One reading of these stories that we've heard today is that if we just muster up enough faith in Jesus – then all will be well ... we will sail through the storms of life untouched, our sicknesses will be healed and our life will be peaceful and without problems. ... **But that's not how life is for most of us!**

Sometimes sick people **don't** get better – and they die.

Storms – whether physical or metaphorical – do impact our lives and cause considerable distress and damage – often long lasting damage.

Sometimes life is chaotic and far from peaceful.

So what exactly is the place and role of faith in Jesus then?

Not every situation in our lives will have a happy outcome. But when we face difficulties and storms, I think Mark challenges us to take a closer look at Jesus who seemingly had no fear.

Why was this? Because Jesus had strong trust in the faithfulness of God ...

- in the God who brings life and wholeness and healing
- in the God who provides for our needs
- in the God who has compassion for us

In short, Jesus had faith in the power of God's kingdom to bring life and to bring positive change to people's lives.

As we nurture our faith in a similar way – trusting in God's goodness and grace – we will overcome our fears and see God's kingdom grow among us here in Croydon and Croydon North, as it is in heaven. Jesus points us to the God who can bring peace in the midst of storms, and hope in the face of sickness and even death.