

Living Faith in Suffolk



Living Mark I

Images

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Living Mark 1 is one of the Living Faith in Suffolk resources produced by the Diocese of St Edmundsbury and Ipswich and available on www.cofesuffolk.org.

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Introduction

Living Mark I is a Living Faith in Suffolk course intended as an introduction to the key themes of Mark's gospel with a focus on their relevance for today. It can be used by individuals or by groups; if you are using it in a group setting then please see the information below.

For facilitators

- The material provided here should be used flexibly to suit the needs of your group. The central element of each session is the Bible reading with the related questions underneath, enabling people to reflect on the passage and make decisions about its application. The additional material in boxes can be used as much or as little as is appropriate to your setting. It may provide useful background information for you as facilitator or further reading for those who wish to go deeper after each session. Some or all of it could be used to inform the discussion of the central questions or as additional discussion points. The important thing to remember is that there is no need to try to cover everything.
- The session opens by reading the Bible passage[s] given. When meeting as a group there are a number of different ways of reading a Bible passage:
 - read it more than once, from different versions of the Bible as used by different members of the group
 - allow everyone in the group to take a turn at reading, each reading just one sentence before the next person takes over
 - read slowly and meditatively
 - read imaginatively; that is, allowing people to enter into the story in their imagination, to picture themselves present at the scene (either as themselves or by identifying with a character)
 - read the passage and then allow a time of silence during which people can reflect, before reading the passage for a second time.

Session I

Looking Forward

An instruction to keep watch

Read Mark 13:24-37

- As you read this passage, what do you notice? What stands out for you?
- The passage tells people to “keep watch”: what kind of watchfulness is this? How urgent is it? What emotions does it trigger (excitement, fear....)? How passive or active is it?
- How is the call to watchfulness helped by the analogies of the fig tree and the house owner?
 - What do you think we are to keep watch for?
- If you knew Jesus might return in a month, how would you prepare? What might you do differently? How might your priorities change?
 - What is the most important change you could make to your life, now, to help you to wait more effectively for Jesus’ return?

THE BIGGER PICTURE: MARK 13

Although it comes towards the end of the gospel, Mark 13 sets the tone for the whole of Mark’s gospel in that it emphasises his focus on the importance of being ready for all that is to come. For the people hearing the gospel being read (it would have been a “heard” gospel rather than one people would read for themselves), links would have been made with the suffering of their current context, living in occupied territory where it wasn’t always safe to profess their faith.

The reference in verse 14 to the “abomination that causes desolation” would cast minds back to the book of Daniel, in which the term is used to refer to the desecration of the Jerusalem temple (Daniel 9:27). The warning being heard, then, is that next time the temple is desecrated the end will be very near.

There is a note of reassurance, however: even when the world is falling apart, there is comfort: Jesus will return. In our waiting, therefore, we are not abandoned.

- What might this have to say to us in our present context?

ADVENT AS A TIME OF WAITING

We usually think about Advent as a time for getting ready for Christmas, celebrating Jesus' arrival as a baby. Advent calendars recount the nativity story and the symbolism of the candles in the Advent wreath tells of God's preparation for the sending of His Son.

Although the name comes from the Latin for "arrival" (adventus), Advent was originally a time for new Christians to prepare for baptism. Traditionally Advent did not so much look back to Jesus' first arrival but forward, to the anticipated second coming of Jesus. The focus on waiting and preparation was not about preparing for Christmas, but rather about waiting and preparing for Jesus' return.

Ever since the fourth century Advent preparation was traditionally marked by penitence and fasting. Nowadays few people in the Western Church fast at all during Advent, but the focus on preparing for Jesus' return continues.

- In what ways might your experience of waiting and preparing be changed by fasting?

ADVENT CANDLES

Candle 1:
the Patriarchs

Candle 2:
the Prophets

Candle 3:
John the Baptist

Candle 4:
Mary

If you have time, you will find it useful to read through Mark's gospel as a whole, to help you to get a sense of its key themes and picture of Jesus.

SON OF MAN

Mark records Jesus as repeatedly referring to himself as the "Son of Man". This was a term used of the prophets when they were being addressed by God (see, for example, Ezekiel 2:1). It was also used by Daniel for the one who would receive dominion, glory and a kingdom after God's judgement (see Daniel 7:13-14). When Jesus used the term it was mainly in connection with the need for him to suffer and be vindicated in order to bring about this Kingdom.

- What is the sense of hope that comes from seeing Jesus as the "Son of Man"?

OTHER RELATED PASSAGES

- ❖ Matthew 24 records Jesus' call to watchfulness at greater length. It includes another analogy, that of the unmissable nature of lightning (v.27), to demonstrate how all will know when the Son of Man comes. The story of the flood at the time of Noah is used to point to the suddenness of the event (v.37f).
 - ❖ Instead of using cryptic language, the parallel passage in Luke 21:5-36 talks plainly about the fate to befall Jerusalem (v.20, 24).
 - ❖ St Paul also warns of the need to be ready because of the suddenness of this event when it occurs (1 Thessalonians 4:16-5:11).
- How do these passages shine further light on how to wait effectively?

Session 2

Looking Back

A meeting with the Messiah

Read Mark 1:1-11

- As you read this passage, what do you notice? What stands out for you?
 - What do you think Mark is telling us by quoting from the prophets (verses 2 and 3)?
- John announces Jesus' arrival; how might people have responded to hearing this? Why do you think Mark describes it as "good news"?
 - Looking at the picture, in verse 10, of heaven "being torn open", what does this say to you?
- John speaks of Jesus baptising with/in the Holy Spirit: what does this mean to you?
 - How does the image of God we see here in Jesus illuminate your experience of God?
 - In what ways might your response to Jesus be different now that you have reflected on this passage?

JOHN THE BAPTIST

Luke 1:5-25, 57-80 tells the story of the birth of John the Baptist and the surrounding circumstances. Malachi 4:5 speaks of Elijah coming before the Messiah, and Luke identifies John as having this role (see verse 17). This is mirrored in John's appearance (Mark 1:6) which matches that of Elijah in 2 Kings 1:8. John's message is that people need to repent ("repent" = to turn around and go the right way), to leave behind all that has gone before and move in a new direction.

- In what ways might the people who came to hear John have needed to repent? How might this be necessary now? Where do you need to change direction?

GOOD NEWS

The word translated as "Good news" or "Gospel" is the word used for the announcement of a military victory. In this context it refers to the victory God has won in Christ: Jesus' coming was seen as bringing in the time when God's ancient promises are fulfilled. The prophets had a range of divergent expectations which converged in Jesus.

JESUS THE MESSIAH

“The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah...” (Mark 1:1).

“Messiah” (Hebrew) or “Christ” (Greek) is the title given to the special person from God who, it was promised, would come to lead God’s people into a world of freedom. The title means “anointed one” – one specially chosen and set apart for this role.

The Jewish people experienced a lot of persecution at different points in their history, and saw the Messiah as having a political role in leading them to victory against their enemies. They also expected him to bring people back to a true understanding of their faith, and to bring about justice and peace.

- What do you think it might be like to be waiting for such a key figure?
- Why might Jesus’ coming be seen as “good news”?

HOLY SPIRIT BAPTISM

In Mark 1:8 John says that Jesus will baptise with, or in, the Holy Spirit. Jesus then taught His disciples that He would send the Holy Spirit to them (and us, as later disciples) – see John 14:15-27. He described the Spirit as an advocate, to be with us and help us; as truth; as teacher; as living in us. The story of Pentecost describes the arrival of the Holy Spirit (see Acts 2:1-4); and Paul’s letters give further teaching about the role of the Spirit in changing our character (Galatians 5:22-25) and in equipping us to live as disciples (1 Corinthians 12:4-11).

- How does this understanding of the role of the Holy Spirit help us in working out how to live as disciples of Jesus?
- What difference could it make to your faith to know that the Spirit has this part to play?

Some Christians talk about “baptism in the Holy Spirit” as a specific event which takes place once during their Christian journey, during and following which they have a greater awareness of God and are more able to develop some of the gifts listed by Paul in 1 Corinthians.

- How useful do you find it to think of landmarks in your spiritual journey?

These passages will give you a flavour of the expectations surrounding the Messiah:

- Isaiah 9:2-7
 - Isaiah 11:1-5
 - Jeremiah 23:5-8
 - Jeremiah 33:15-16
 - Zechariah 9:9-12
 - Malachi 3:1-4
- What did the prophets expect the Messiah to be like?

A NEW BEGINNING

The picture painted by the image of heaven being torn open, the Spirit descending and Jesus with the wild beasts and angels, is reminiscent of the harmony between God and creation in Genesis. This is perhaps a picture of the awaited new creation, in harmony once again.

Session 3

Looking Now

An introduction to a new world

Read Mark 2:1-17
and Mark 9:33-37

- As you read these passages, what do you notice? What stands out for you?
- The first passage shows Jesus behaving in a number of unconventional ways (forgiving sins, associating with tax collectors and sinners): how do people react to Jesus' behaviour? Which reactions do you find it easiest to relate to?
Where are you in this story?
- What do you understand, in the second passage, by the idea of being "last, the servant of all"? How does Jesus' use of a child, who would have no status, illustrate this unusual idea?
- If Jesus is the clearest picture of God that we have, what do these passages say to us about the values and way of life in God's kingdom?
 - What challenges do Jesus' pictures of the kingdom present to you in your daily and church life? How could you begin to address these challenges?

THE KINGDOM OF GOD

Mark's gospel makes it clear that Jesus came with a specific mission: to bring in God's kingdom (Mark 1:15) (Matthew's gospel uses the equivalent term "kingdom of heaven"). This term isn't meant to refer to a geographical place, but to a way of being in which God rules and life is lived accordingly. The kingdom will not be fully realised until Jesus returns - until that point there is still struggle between God's kingdom and other ways of being - but Jesus' teaching, both verbal (in his stories and discourses) and practical (in his miracles and behaviour) gives tasters of what this kingdom looks like.

- John's gospel has Jesus speaking of having come "that they may have life, and have it to the full" (John 10:10). How do you understand life in all its fullness?

FURTHER TEACHING ON THE KINGDOM

- ❖ Mark includes a wide range of "tasters" of the kingdom, through examples and stories:
 - Mark 1:21-28 - authority over evil spirits
 - Mark 4:35-41 - authority over nature
 - Mark 4:30-32 - how the kingdom grows
 - Mark 7:24-30 - the importance of faith
 - Mark 9:14-29 - the importance of prayer
- How does each of these examples develop your understanding of what the Kingdom of God is like?
- What examples could you give of the kingdom breaking in to today's world?
- In what ways do your answers to these questions encourage, challenge or inspire you?

SICKNESS AND HEALTH

In the ancient world, with no great understanding of the complexities of disease and disability, illness was seen as a punishment for sin, either one's own, or one's ancestors (see, for example, John 9:1-2). In addition to this stigma, illness cut people off from ordinary life: there were limits on who they could associate with, and they were not allowed to enter the Temple.

Not only did Jesus refuse to reinforce these beliefs, but by healing people he also enabled them to rebuild relationships and to be welcomed back into society.

- What does this tell you about Jesus' view of health and wholeness?

TAX COLLECTORS AND SINNERS

Tax collectors were unpopular people in Jesus' time, because they worked for the Romans (the occupying force in Israel) and collected far more money than the basic taxes, thus being labelled as greedy traitors. They were categorised alongside other sinners who deliberately and persistently broke religious laws and behaved immorally (prostitutes, for example). They were the members of society with whom respectable people didn't associate and they were regarded with suspicion.

- Which groups of people today are regarded with suspicion, inside or outside of the church?
- In Jesus' culture, to eat a meal with someone was a sign of acceptance. In what ways might Jesus' behaviour towards the "tax collectors and sinners" challenge our responses to these groups?

FORGIVENESS

Forgiveness often gets a bad press: seen as unrealistic, it is often coupled with forgetfulness ("forgive and forget") to suggest that it disregards the severity of what has gone before and requires the forgiver to become inappropriately vulnerable. This is not the picture of forgiveness presented in the Bible, however. Forgiveness is about letting go; forgiveness by God continually removes the things in us that get in the way of relationship with God.

- What does this have to say to us about the way we view forgiveness? What challenges does this hold for you?

Session 4

Looking Thoughtfully

An invitation to follow

Read Mark 8:31-38

- As you read this passage, what do you notice? What stands out for you?
- Peter rebukes Jesus for his plain-speaking about his suffering, death and resurrection. What concerns do you think might motivate his rebuke? What did Jesus mean by his response that Peter has in mind not the concerns of God but human concerns (verse 33)?
- In what ways might discipleship involve denying ourselves and taking up our cross? Jesus mentions his resurrection (verse 31) but the disciples don't seem to hear this. How might we read these verses in the light of the resurrection?
 - To what extent do you think it is important to "count the cost" before following Jesus? What has it cost you?

THE COST OF DISCIPLESHIP

A number of Jesus' teachings illustrate the idea that following Jesus is not easy.

- Consider what these teachings tell you about the cost of following Jesus: Mark 10:17-31, Matthew 13:44-46, Mark 9:35.
- What do you feel about this cost?

"Be covered with the dust of your rabbi" is an ancient Jewish blessing.... Following a Jewish rabbi involved trying to become like him, following him so closely that you metaphorically became covered by the dust kicked up by his feet. Jesus made it clear that his role included rejection, suffering and death, and that following him involved the possibility of experiencing the same (see, for example, Matthew 24:9, John 15:18-19, John 16:1-3).

- What examples are there of modern-day persecution and suffering for the faith? Remember that suffering need not be physical - in what other ways do people suffer for being Christians?
- How do you feel about the possibility of suffering for your faith?

REACTIONS TO JESUS

As Mark tells his story, he presents a range of reactions to Jesus' living out of the kingdom:

- amazement (Mark 1:27)
- attraction (Mark 1:33)
- criticism (of blaspheming: Mark 2:6; of being demon-possessed: Mark 3:22)
- hatred (Mark 3:6)
- fear (Mark 5:17)
- offence (Mark 6:1-4)
- testing (Mark 8:11-13)

- What does this range of reactions tell you about people's hopes and expectations of Jesus? Why do you think he provoked such a range of emotions?
- Which of these do you identify with most?

WATCHING; MEETING; A NEW WORLD; FOLLOWING

- What have you learnt from these key themes in Mark's gospel about being a disciple of Jesus today?

RENEWAL AND REVOLUTION

At the time of Jesus many of the people were uneasy about being ruled by Rome. Whilst a minority of Jews worked alongside the Romans, the majority did not, and some groups pushed for armed revolution. In his desire to renew God's people, Jesus kept his distance from such groups (Mark 10:42-45). Whenever groups rose up against the Romans they were seen as a threat to peace and quickly quelled, their leader disposed of so that the group would disperse. Perhaps this is what Peter was afraid of (Mark 8:31-32) when Jesus predicted his own death.

- How is your understanding of Jesus and his disciples changed when you consider them as a resistance group? What could this have to say to us about how we live out our discipleship?