

MARK
for
EVERYONE

20TH ANNIVERSARY EDITION WITH STUDY GUIDE

N. T.
WRIGHT

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NEW TESTAMENT FOR EVERYONE
20TH ANNIVERSARY EDITION WITH STUDY GUIDE

N. T. Wright

Matthew for Everyone, Part 1

Matthew for Everyone, Part 2

Mark for Everyone

Luke for Everyone

John for Everyone, Part 1

John for Everyone, Part 2

Acts for Everyone, Part 1

Acts for Everyone, Part 2

Romans for Everyone, Part 1

Romans for Everyone, Part 2

1 Corinthians for Everyone

2 Corinthians for Everyone

Galatians and Thessalonians for Everyone

Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians and Philemon for Everyone

1 and 2 Timothy and Titus for Everyone

Hebrews for Everyone

James, Peter, John and Judah for Everyone

Revelation for Everyone

*For
Sister Mary Magdalene SLG
with gratitude for the love, support and prayers
of over fifty years*

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INTRODUCTION TO THE ANNIVERSARY EDITION

It took me ten years, but I'm glad I did it. Writing a guide to the books of the New Testament felt at times like trying to climb all the Scottish mountains in quick succession. But the views from the tops were amazing, and discovering new pathways up and down was very rewarding as well. The real reward, though, has come in the messages I've received from around the world, telling me that the books have been helpful and encouraging, opening up new and unexpected vistas.

Perhaps I should say that this series wasn't designed to help with sermon preparation, though many preachers have confessed to me that they've used it that way. The books were meant, as their title suggests, for everyone, particularly for people who would never dream of picking up an academic commentary but who nevertheless want to dig a little deeper.

The New Testament seems intended to provoke all readers, at whatever stage, to fresh thought, understanding and practice. For that, we all need explanation, advice and encouragement. I'm glad these books seem to have had that effect, and I'm delighted that they are now available with study guides in these new editions.

N. T. Wright
2022

INTRODUCTION

On the very first occasion when someone stood up in public to tell people about Jesus, he made it very clear: this message is for *everyone*.

It was a great day – sometimes called the birthday of the church. The great wind of God’s spirit had swept through Jesus’ followers and filled them with a new joy and a sense of God’s presence and power. Their leader, Peter, who only a few weeks before had been crying like a baby because he’d lied and cursed and denied even knowing Jesus, found himself on his feet explaining to a huge crowd that something had happened which had changed the world for ever. What God had done for him, Peter, he was beginning to do for the whole world: new life, forgiveness, new hope and power were opening up like spring flowers after a long winter. A new age had begun in which the living God was going to do new things in the world – beginning then and there with the individuals who were listening to him. ‘This promise is for *you*,’ he said, ‘and for your children, and for everyone who is far away.’ (Acts 2.39) It wasn’t just for the person standing next to you. It was for everyone.

Within a remarkably short time this came true to such an extent that the young movement spread throughout much of the known world. And one way in which the *everyone* promise worked out was through the writings of the early Christian leaders. These short works – mostly letters and stories about Jesus – were widely circulated and eagerly read. They were never intended for either a religious or intellectual elite. From the very beginning they were meant for everyone.

That is as true today as it was then. Of course, it matters that some people give time and care to the historical evidence, the meaning of the original words (the early Christians wrote in Greek), and the exact and particular force of what different writers were saying about God, Jesus, the world and themselves. This series is based quite closely on that sort of work. But the point of it all is that the message can get out to everyone, especially to people who wouldn’t normally read a book with footnotes and Greek words in it. That’s the sort of person for whom these books are written. And that’s why there’s a glossary, in the back, of the key words that you can’t really get along without, with a simple description of what they mean. Whenever you see a word in **bold type** in the text, you can go to the back and remind yourself what’s going on.

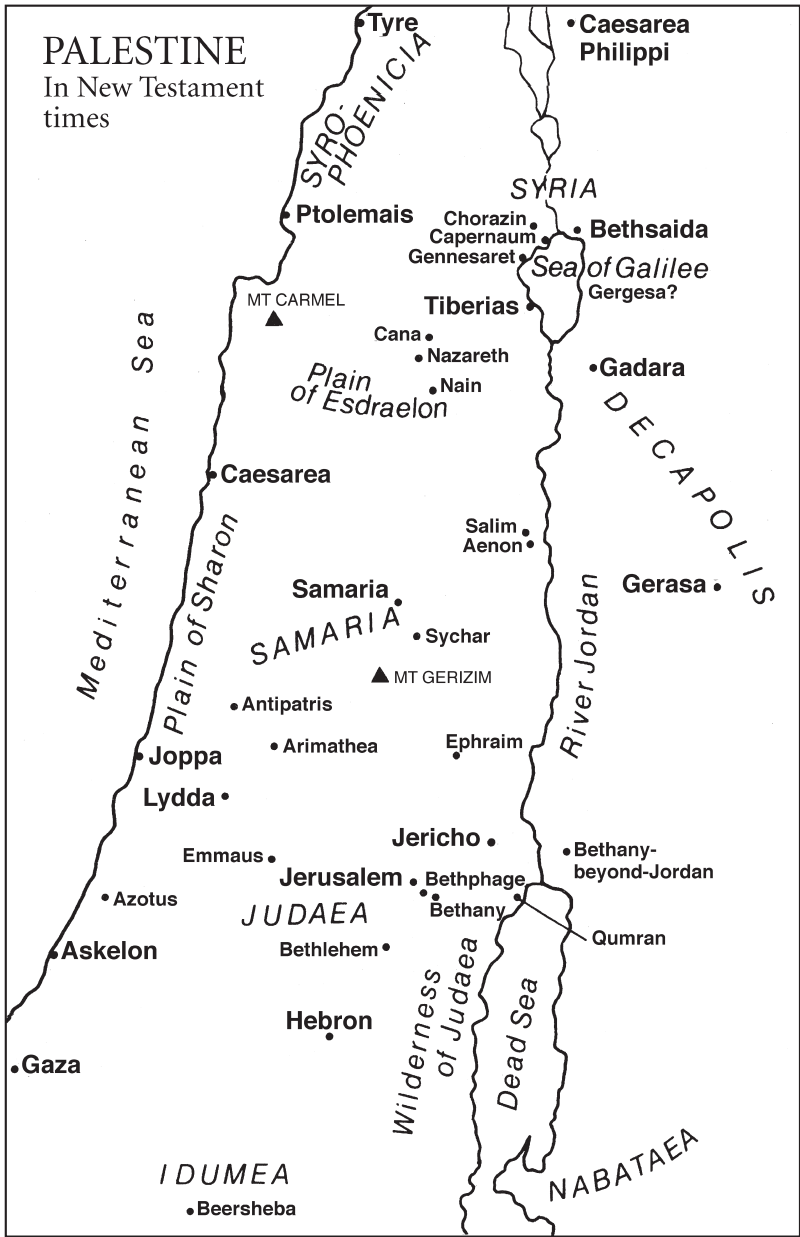
INTRODUCTION

There are of course many translations of the New Testament available today. The one I offer here is designed for the same kind of reader: one who mightn't necessarily understand the more formal, sometimes even ponderous, tones of some of the standard ones. I have of course tried to keep as close to the original as I can. But my main aim has been to be sure that the words can speak not just to some people, but to everyone.

Let me add a note about the translation the reader will find here of the Greek word *Christos*. Most translations simply say 'Christ', but most modern English speakers assume that that word is simply a proper name (as though 'Jesus' were Jesus 'Christian' name and 'Christ' were his 'surname'). For all sorts of reasons, I disagree; so I have experimented not only with 'Messiah' (which is what the word literally means) but sometimes, too, with 'King'.

This particular volume introduces you to the shortest and sharpest of the stories about Jesus. Many people think Mark's gospel was the first to be written, and certainly it has all the zip and punch of a quick, hasty story that's meant to grab you by the collar and make you face the truth about Jesus, about God and about yourself. So here it is: Mark for everyone!

Tom Wright



MARK 1.1-8

The Preaching of John the Baptist

¹This is where the good news starts – the good news of Jesus the Messiah, God’s son.

²Isaiah the prophet put it like this (‘Look! I am sending my messenger ahead of me; he will clear the way for you!’):

³‘A shout goes up in the desert: Make way for the Lord! Clear a straight path for him!’

⁴John the Baptizer appeared in the desert. He was announcing a baptism of repentance, to forgive sins. ⁵The whole of Judaea, and everyone who lived in Jerusalem, went out to him; they confessed their sins and were baptized by him in the river Jordan. ⁶John wore camel-hair clothes, with a leather belt round his waist. He used to eat locusts and wild honey.

⁷‘Someone a lot stronger than me is coming close behind’, John used to tell them. ‘I don’t deserve to squat down and undo his sandals. ⁸I’ve plunged you in the water; he’s going to plunge you in the holy spirit.’

You are sound asleep and dreaming, when suddenly the door bursts open and a bright light shines full in your face. A voice, breaking in on your dream-world, shouts, ‘Wake up! Get up! You’ll be late!’ And without more ado, the speaker splashes your face with cold water to make the point. Time to stop dreaming and face the most important day of your life.

That’s what the opening of Mark’s **gospel** is like. It’s a great way to start, because what Mark is telling us is that that’s what **John the Baptist** was like to the Jewish people of his day. John’s ministry burst in upon the surprised Jewish world. Many had been looking for a sign from God, but they hadn’t expected it to look like this. Many had wanted a **Messiah** to lead them against the Romans, but they weren’t anticipating a prophet telling them to repent.

John was a voice, shouting across the dreams, and perhaps the nightmares, of the Judaism of Herod and Caiaphas, the Judaism that told again and again the story of freedom but had no idea what freedom would look like when it came. Some thought John was mad, that it was him who was dreaming; but here he was, splashing cold water all over them and telling them to get ready for the greatest moment in Jewish history, in world history.

The bright light he was shining in their faces was the story they all knew very well, but with a new twist. Every year, at Passover time, they recited the story of the **Exodus** from Egypt, telling over and over how God rescued Israel from Pharaoh, bringing them through the Red Sea

and away across the wilderness to their promised land. Along with the creation story, it's the most important story in the whole Old Testament, and John's hearers would have known it well. But instead of simply hearing the words and remembering the story, John was turning it into a drama, a play, and telling his hearers that they were the cast. They were to come through the water and be free. They were to leave behind 'Egypt' – the world of sin in which they were living, the world of rebelling against the living God. They, the Israel of the day, were looking in the wrong direction and going in the wrong direction. It was time to turn round and go the right way (that's what '**repentance**' means). It was time to stop dreaming and wake up to God's reality.

The challenge had a sharp edge to it. Someone was coming, coming very soon, and John was getting people ready. If someone came into your town and told you that the President, or the Princess, or some other great person, was on their way to pay you a visit, you'd quickly rush around smartening things up. In Britain it's a standard joke that wherever the Queen goes she smells fresh paint. John was like the messenger going ahead of royalty, getting everywhere ready for the 'stronger one' who was coming after him. Israel as a whole needed smartening up. Each individual within Israel needed to smarten up. Someone was coming who would put even John in the shade.

Who did John think this 'someone' was? It's not clear, and perhaps it wasn't clear even to him. He may well have thought it would be **YHWH** himself, Israel's God in person. Or he may have thought it would be the Messiah. Or he may have thought it would somehow be both. But what this figure would do was quite clear. What John had done with water, the Coming One would do with spirit – the **holy spirit**.

This promise – it's a warning, too, of course, but basically it's a promise – picks up some more of the Jewish freedom images from the Old Testament. Mark points in the same direction with the two biblical quotations, from Malachi and Isaiah, that open the story. One of the great promises that Israel had cherished for centuries was that when **YHWH** finally made the Exodus story happen all over again, setting his people free once and for all, that would be the time when he would come to live personally with his people. He would be with them; he would be their God, and they would be his people. How would he do this? In the original Exodus story God's presence lived with Israel in the pillar of cloud and fire. This time it was to be similar but different. God's spirit would live with people, in people, becoming the air they breathe, the fire in their hearts. This is the promise they had lived on. John says it's now going to come true. But are they ready for it?

They certainly weren't ready – and perhaps John wasn't either – for what they got. Mark's opening verse tells us what to expect; all this is

the beginning of the good news of Jesus the Messiah, God's son ('God's son,' in the Judaism of the day, was a title for the Messiah). But things weren't that clear at the time. What they had was the voice and the water: they were now to get ready for the human figure who would make sense, but very disturbing sense, of it all.

The main thing Mark gets us to do in this opening passage is to sense the shock of the new thing God was doing. If you're sick, and unable to sleep much, sometimes the night seems to go on for ever. But then, just when you're dozing a bit, suddenly the alarm clock goes off: it really is morning. That's the mood here. It raises the question for us too: where are we asleep today, in our churches, our communities, our personal lives? What might it take to wake us up?

MARK 1.9–13

Jesus' Baptism

⁹This is how it happened. Around that time, Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee, and was baptized by John in the river Jordan. ¹⁰That very moment, as he was coming out of the water, he saw the heavens open, and the spirit coming down like a dove onto him. ¹¹Then there came a voice out of the heavens: 'You are my son! You are the one I love! You make me very glad.'

¹²All at once the spirit pushed him out into the desert. ¹³He was in the desert forty days, and the satan tested him there. He was with the wild beasts, and angels waited on him.

A famous moviemaker had a huge legal wrangle with his long-time mentor and guide. The younger man simply couldn't handle criticism, and ended up rejecting the person who had helped him so much. When it was all over, a close friend summed up the real problem. 'It was all about an ungenerous father,' he explained, 'and a son looking for affirmation and love.'

It happens all the time, in families, businesses, all over. Many children grow up in our world who have never had a father say to them (either in words, in looks, or in hugs), 'You are my dear child,' let alone, 'I'm pleased with you.' In the Western world, even those fathers who think this in their hearts are often too tongue-tied or embarrassed to tell their children how delighted they are with them. Many, alas, go by the completely opposite route: angry voices, bitter rejection, the slamming of doors.

The whole Christian **gospel** could be summed up in this point: that when the living God looks at us, at every baptized and believing Christian, he says to us what he said to Jesus on that day. He sees us, not as

we are in ourselves, but as we are in Jesus Christ. It sometimes seems impossible, especially to people who have never had this kind of support from their earthly parents, but it's true: God looks at us, and says, 'You are my dear, dear child; I'm delighted with you.' Try reading that sentence slowly, with your own name at the start, and reflect quietly on God saying that to you, both at your **baptism** and every day since.

How does this come about? It will take the whole story, particularly Jesus' death and **resurrection**, to explain. But this is what the Christian gospel is all about.

It is true for one simple but very profound reason: Jesus is the **Messiah**, and the Messiah represents his people. What is true of him is true of them. The word 'Messiah' means 'the anointed one'; and this story tells how Jesus was anointed with the **holy spirit**, marked out as God's son. The Messiah is called 'God's son' in a few biblical passages, including the one that the heavenly voice seems to be echoing here (Psalm 2.7). Though the early Christians realized quite quickly that Jesus was God's son in an even deeper sense, they clung on to his messiahship for dear life. It was because Jesus was and is Messiah that God said to them, as he does to us today, what he said to Jesus at his baptism. And without that word from God all we often hear, in our mind's ear, is doors being slammed.

Mark tells the story in quite solemn language, echoing the Old Testament: 'This is how it happened'; 'he saw the heavens open'. If we go back to the biblical roots we will realize what 'seeing heavens opened' means. It doesn't mean that Jesus saw a little door ajar miles up in the sky. '**Heaven**' in the Bible often means God's dimension behind ordinary reality. It's more as though an invisible curtain, right in front of us, was suddenly pulled back, so that instead of the trees and flowers and buildings, or in Jesus' case the river, the sandy desert and the crowds, we are standing in the presence of a different reality altogether.

A good deal of Christian **faith** is a matter of learning to live by this different reality even when we can't see it. Sometimes, at decisive and climactic moments, the curtain is drawn back and we see, or hear, what's really going on; but most of the time we walk by faith, not by sight. One of the things Mark is saying to us, in the way he's written his gospel, is that when we look at the whole life of Jesus that's how we are to understand it. Look at this story, he says, look at this life, and learn to see and hear in it the heavenly vision, the heavenly voice. Learn to hear these words addressed to yourself. Let them change you, mould you, make you somebody new, the person God wants you to be. Discover in this story the normally hidden heavenly dimension of God's world.

Any early Christian reading this passage would also, of course, believe that their own baptism into Jesus the Messiah was the moment when, for them, the curtain had been drawn back and these words had

been spoken to them. We need to find ways, in today's church, of bringing this to life with our own practice of baptism and teaching about it.

When we do this, we will be equipped, as Jesus was, to be sent out into the desert. Jesus is acting out the great drama of Israel's **Exodus** from Egypt, Israel's journey through the wilderness into the promised land. The road Jesus must tread, precisely because he is God's dear son, is the road that leads through the dry and dusty paths, through temptation and apparent failure. So it will be for us as well. If we start the journey imagining that our God is a bully, an angry threatening parent ready to yell at us, slam the door on us, or kick us out into the street because we haven't quite made the grade, we will fail at the first whisper of temptation. But if we remember the voice that spoke those powerful words of love we will find the way through.

Mark tells us that Jesus was 'with the wild beasts'. He doesn't say whether they're threatening, or whether this is a sign of new creation (with Jesus as the second Adam in a new garden of Eden?) or maybe both. But the angels were there, too. They were not to keep Jesus from being tested by **satan**, just as finally they would not keep him from Calvary itself, but to assure him that his beloved Father was watching over him, was there with him, was loving him, acting through him, pouring out his spirit all the time in and through him. Jesus went the way that all his people must go; and he could do it because he had heard the words of love, the words of life.

MARK 1.14–20

The Calling of the Disciples

¹⁴After John's arrest, Jesus came into Galilee, announcing God's good news.

¹⁵'The time is fulfilled!' he said; 'God's kingdom is arriving! Turn back, and believe the good news!'

¹⁶As he went along beside the sea of Galilee he saw Simon and his brother Andrew. They were fishermen, and were casting nets into the sea.

¹⁷'Follow me!' said Jesus to them. 'I'll have you fishing for people!'

¹⁸Straight away they left their nets and followed him. ¹⁹He went on a bit, and saw James, Zebedee's son, and John his brother. They were in the boat mending their nets, ²⁰and he called them then and there. They left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired servants, and went off after him.

The poet John Betjeman describes in his verse autobiography how his father put pressure on him to follow him into the family business. The

young John had no desire to do so; he wanted to be a poet. That's just a stupid dream, said his father; you've got to enter the family business, not only to make money, but for the family honour. You're the fourth generation. You've got to carry it on. The young man refused, and followed his own vocation, ending up as Poet Laureate, with a memorial in Westminster Abbey.

We have no idea how many generations the Zebedee family had been fishing on the sea of Galilee, but it was quite likely a lot more than four. In that country and culture, as in many countries and cultures to this day, a small family business can be handed on not only through generations but through centuries. It's safe and secure; people know what they're doing. If times are hard, the usual answer is simply to work a bit harder.

But then along came the young prophet from Nazareth, and told James and John, and their neighbours Peter and Andrew, to drop it all and follow him. And they did. Today I happened to take a walk in the evening sunlight by a Scottish harbour, and to my surprise I came upon a man, about my own age, sitting outside his harbourside front door mending a lobster pot. I asked myself how he would have responded if I had told him to give it all up and follow me – or even to give it all up and follow Jesus. (The town was, appropriately enough, St Andrews.) Only when you think a bit about the sort of life Peter, Andrew, James and John had had, and the totally unknown future Jesus was inviting them into, do you understand just how earth-shattering this little story was and is. Leave everything you've known, all your security, your family (and family solidarity was hugely important in that culture), and follow Jesus. Some people, maybe some people reading this, face that call today.

The way Mark tells the story sends echoes ringing back through the scriptures, the larger narrative of God's people. 'Leave your country and your father's house,' said God to Abraham, 'and go the land I will show you.' Abraham, like Peter and the others, did what he was told, and went where he was sent. Mark is hinting to his readers that the old family business of the people of God is being left behind. God wants a new poetry to be written, and is calling a new people to write it.

And the name of the poem is 'the **kingdom** of God'. This was what all Israel had been waiting for. It wasn't a new piece of good advice. It wasn't a new political agenda. It wasn't a new type of spirituality. It might eventually lead to advice, agendas and certainly to prayer, but it was itself something more than all of these. It was the good (and extremely dangerous) news that the living God was on the move, was indeed now coming into his kingdom. And it demanded a definite response. It was 'God's **good news**'.

Notice how Jesus picks the moment to act. As long as **John** was announcing the kingdom, down by the Jordan, Jesus could bide his time. But when John is put into prison he knows it's time to act. Everything we know about Jesus suggests that he would have prayed and waited upon his Father for the sense that the moment had arrived. But God speaks through situations and events as well as through the still, small voice in the heart, and God was now saying that if this kingdom-movement was to go forwards rather than backwards, it was time for Jesus to go public with his own vocation. So he came to the Galilean villages as a wandering prophet, not a stationary one like John: a messenger urgently needing to tell people what was going on. And his message was that God's time had come. The moment had arrived.

If you were to walk down the street of any town or village with any Christian background and were to call out 'Repent and believe the **gospel**', people would think they knew what you meant: 'Give up your sins and become a Christian.' Of course, Jesus wanted people to stop sinning, but '**repentance**' for him meant two rather different things as well. First, it meant turning away from the social and political agendas which were driving Israel into a crazy, ruinous war. We can imagine someone saying that today in a country where ideologies are driving half the population into violent behaviour. Second, it meant calling Israel to turn back to a true loyalty to **YHWH**, their God. And, as anyone with a smattering of knowledge of the Bible would recognize, this was what had to happen before God would redeem Israel at last. The call to repent is part of the announcement that this is the time for the great moment of freedom, of God's rescue.

That's why it goes with the call to believe. Jesus' contemporaries trusted all sorts of things: their ancestry, their land, their **Temple**, their laws. Even their God – provided that this God did what they expected him to. Jesus was now calling them to trust the good news that their God was doing something new. To get in on the act, they had to cut loose from other ties and trust him and his message. That wasn't easy then and isn't easy now. But it's what Peter, Andrew, James and John did, and it's what all Christians are called to do today, tomorrow and on into God's future.

MARK 1.21–34

Exorcism and Healings

²¹They went to Capernaum. At once, on the sabbath, Jesus went into the synagogue and taught. ²²They were astonished at his teaching. He wasn't like the legal teachers; he said things on his own authority.

²³All at once, in their synagogue, there was a man with an unclean spirit.

²⁴‘What business have you got with us, Jesus of Nazareth?’ he yelled. ‘Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are: you’re God’s Holy One!’

²⁵‘Be quiet!’ ordered Jesus. ‘And come out of him!’

²⁶The unclean spirit convulsed the man, gave a great shout, and came out of him. ²⁷Everyone was astonished.

‘What’s this?’ they started to say to each other. ‘New teaching – with real authority! He even tells the unclean spirits what to do, and they do it!’

²⁸Word about Jesus spread at once, all over the surrounding district of Galilee.

²⁹They came out of the synagogue, and went at once (with James and John) into Simon and Andrew’s house. ³⁰Simon’s mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they told Jesus about her right away. ³¹He went in, took her by the hand, and raised her up. The fever left her, and she waited on them.

³²When the sun went down and evening came, they brought to Jesus everyone who was ill, including the demon-possessed. ³³The whole town was gathered around the door. ³⁴Jesus healed many people suffering from all kinds of diseases, and cast out many demons. He didn’t allow the demons to speak, because they knew him.

Not long ago there was a great disaster at sea. A tourist boat, loaded with cars and holidaymakers, had failed to shut its doors properly; the water began to pour in; the boat began to sink, and panic set in. People were screaming as the happy, relaxed atmosphere of the ship turned in minutes into something worse than a horror movie.

All at once one man – not a member of the crew – took charge. In a clear voice he gave orders, telling people what to do. Relief mixed with the panic as people realized someone at least was in charge, and many managed to reach lifeboats they would otherwise have missed in the dark and the rush. The man himself made his way down to the people trapped in the hold. There he formed a human bridge: holding on with one hand to a ladder and with the other to part of the ship that was nearly submerged, he enabled still more to cross to safety. When the nightmare was over, the man himself was found to have drowned. He had literally given his life in using the authority he had assumed – the authority by which many had been saved.

Take that picture to a different sea coast, that of Galilee. A hundred yards inland, in the little town of Capernaum (the Bible sometimes calls these places ‘cities’, but we would think of them more as villages), was the synagogue. Here is a man, not one of the recognized

teachers, who begins on his own authority to tell people what God's will is, how the **kingdom** is coming. The usual teachers – **priests** and **scribes**, the literate ones, with in some places **Pharisees** as well, the self-appointed scrupulous guardians of Jewish ancestral traditions – didn't teach like that. They always said 'as Moses said', or 'as **Rabbi** so-and-so said'. Jesus spoke with a quiet but compelling authority all of his own.

And with the same authority he spoke words of healing. Sometimes people for whom life had become a total nightmare – whose personalities seemed taken over by alien powers – confronted Jesus; indeed, they seem to have had a kind of inside track on recognizing him, knowing who he was and what he'd come to do. He'd come to stop the nightmare, to rescue people, both nations and individuals, from the destructive forces that enslaved them. So whether it was shrieking **demons**, a woman with a fever, or simply whatever diseases people happened to suffer from, Jesus dealt with them, all with the same gentle but deeply effective authority.

This is how Mark begins to tell us both about how Jesus became so popular so quickly and of how the course of his public career pointed inexorably to its dramatic conclusion. There is no doubt that Jesus quickly attracted huge crowds, and that his authoritative healings were the main reason. That in itself would have been threatening to the authorities; but, as we shall discover soon, there was more. Jesus had joined in a struggle against the forces of evil and destruction, forces that, like the dark, cruel sea pouring in on top of frightened and helpless travellers, seemed sometimes to be carrying all before them. Jesus came to be the human bridge across which people could climb to safety. And if, in the process, he himself paid with his own life the price of this saving authority, a human bridge with outstretched arms carrying people from death to life, that was simply part of the integrity of his action. The demons had their final shriek at him as he hung on the cross, challenging and mocking for the last time the validity of his authority. On the cross he completed the healing work he began that day in the synagogue.

When the church learns again how to speak and act with the same authority, we will find both the saving power of God unleashed once more and a similar heightened opposition from the forces of darkness. Similar, but not the same. The demons knew Jesus, and knew he had come to defeat them once and for all. They can still shriek, but since Calvary they no longer have authority. To believe this is the key to Christian testimony and saving action in the world that, despite its frequent panic and despair, has already been claimed by the loving authority of God in Jesus.

MARK 1.35-45

The Healing of a Man with a Skin Disease

³⁵Very early – in the middle of the night, actually – Jesus got up and went out, off to a lonely place, and prayed. ³⁶Simon, and those with him, followed. ³⁷When they found him, they said, ‘Everyone is looking for you!’

^{38c}‘Let’s go off to the other towns around here,’ Jesus replied, ‘so that I can tell the news to people there too. That’s why I came out.’

³⁹So he went into their synagogues, throughout the whole of Galilee, telling the news and casting out demons.

⁴⁰A man with a virulent skin disease came up to him. He knelt down and begged him, ‘If you want to, you can make me clean!’

⁴¹Jesus was deeply moved. He reached out his hand and touched him, and said to him, ‘I do want to: be clean!’ ⁴²The disease left him at once, and he was clean.

⁴³Jesus sent him away at once, with this stern warning: ^{44c}‘Mind you don’t say anything to anyone! Just go and show yourself to the priest, and make the offering Moses commanded, to purify yourself and to give them a sign.’

⁴⁵But the man went out and began to spread the news far and wide. He did this so effectively that Jesus couldn’t any longer go publicly into a town. He stayed out in the open country, and people came to him from all around.

Oscar Wilde said he could resist everything except temptation. In rather the same way, some people can keep anything except a secret. However much you say ‘You won’t tell, will you?’, and however much people say ‘Oh no! Not a soul!’ somehow the news leaks out, and we often have a good idea who it was who leaked it. It happens at the highest social levels, too. Governments, presidents and royal families are plagued by ‘leaks’ of information. Sometimes they simply learn to go with the flow and arrange some ‘leaks’ themselves, in the vain hope that this will keep people happy, not least in the media.

But why on earth did Jesus not want anything to leak out about his having healed a **leper**? If he was going around telling people the **good news** of the **kingdom**, surely more publicity was what he wanted? Why did he tell the poor man so fiercely (the word ‘warned him sternly’ is a very strong one in the original Greek) not to say anything? And are there any times when we, today, should be silent, however much we want to speak about Jesus and what he’s done for us?

The answer seems to lie in what Jesus then told the leper to do. The sort of disease he had – the word ‘leprosy’ in those days covered a wide range of skin complaints, of which what we call ‘leprosy’ today is only

one – was feared as highly infectious. That's why lepers had to live outside the towns, in special colonies.

Of course, if Jesus cured a blind person, then it was obvious that they could see. If he cured a cripple, anybody could tell that they were now able to walk. But if someone who had had leprosy showed up in their original town claiming to have been cured, people would be deeply suspicious. So Jesus told him to go through the official system. He should show himself to the priest; apart from the chief priests, who were based in Jerusalem, the priests lived all over Judaea and Galilee, acting as the religious and often scribal officials in local communities. And the next time the man was in Jerusalem, he would have to make the required sacrifice, thanking God officially, as it were, for his cure, and coming away with a proper public clean bill of health. The leper needed to keep the command of Moses, not in order to become clean, but in order to be seen to be clean.

Perhaps what Jesus was worried about, then, was news leaking out that he was doing things which seemed to challenge the authority of the **Temple** itself. As we shall soon see, there was more of this to come. It wasn't just that if news of spectacular healings got round, he soon wouldn't be able to move for the crowds (this is more or less what happened). It was that he might be attracting the wrong kind of notice. People would get angry. He was bypassing the system. And soon the question would be asked: is he really a loyal Jew? Can his message about the kingdom of God be real? Can we believe him? Isn't he dangerous? Hasn't he gone too far?

Behind the public activity and controversy lay Jesus' life of total dependence on the one he called Abba, Father. His praying habits were remarked on by his closest followers; this, obviously, was the source of his authority and power. On this occasion, after a day of intense excitement, with the news of God's kingdom going public with a bang, Jesus knew his need of a God-given sense of direction and inner strength, both to build on the apparent success of the previous day and to take things forward in the right way.

As we Christians pray today, especially when this prayer is costly and sacrificial, not merely a perfunctory few minutes now and then, the presence of this same Jesus is promised, by his **spirit**, to guide and encourage us. Part of this guidance will be the discernment to know when to speak and when to be silent, when what we are called to do should be kept secret and when it should be celebrated publicly. Sometimes, in some countries and in certain situations, some Christians will know, in prayer, that it is better not to attract too much attention to themselves. This isn't cowardice; it's wisdom. But if, as in Jesus' case, word leaks out anyway, we can remain confident, especially through

MARK 2.1–12 The Healing of the Paralytic

prayer, that this same Jesus is with us as we face the cost of being kingdom-people, bringing the news and power of Jesus' healing love to the world.

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