SACRED – *simply a chapter read each day*

This is the beginning of a forty-month journey that will, by the end, have taken us through the whole Bible. Volume 1 contains the study notes for the first six months of that journey, covering a variety of books in both the Old and the New Testaments. In this first month we will read Mark, shortest of the gospels, and the two letters penned by Jesus' disciple, Peter. We will also read the first six psalms.

Each day, I recommend that you set aside a period of around ten minutes. Begin with a short prayer. Then read the chapter of the Bible, read the notes, and spend the rest of the time in quiet reflection.

Days	*Readings*
1 - 16	Mark
17 - 19	Psalms 1 to 3
20 – 24	1 Peter
25 – 27	2 Peter
28 - 30	Psalms 4 to 6

SACRED Volume 1 - Foreword

The Bible is an epic book. It provides us with an extraordinary collection of stories and sayings, poems and prophecies, letters and lists, covering several thousand years and written by many different authors, all inspired by the hand of the Holy Spirit. Above all it tells us about God and, supremely, points us to his Son, Jesus, inviting us into a personal relationship with him.

Mahatma Gandhi once said this about the attitude of Christians to the Bible: "You look after a document containing enough dynamite to blow all civilisations to pieces, turn the world upside-down, and bring peace to a battle-torn planet. But you treat it as though it were nothing more than a piece of literature." It's actually an understatement. Surveys repeatedly find that even practicing Christians rarely take the time to read it. We expect the rest of the world to respect a book that we ourselves neglect!

How about you? How well do you know God's Word?
Would you like to know it better?

There are many daily reading schemes that seek to cover the whole Bible. Most of them have three significant shortcomings. First, the amount to read each day is too much to really engage with the content. This is especially true of those schemes which aim to read through the Bible in one year. Second, they often start on page one of the Old Testament and work through in sequence until the end of the New. Readers' enthusiasm can easily wane where successive books are from too similar a genre. And third, there is often little in the way of explanation or application.

The SACRED approach is different! SACRED stands for *'simply a chapter read each day'*, and it does what it says on the tin! One chapter of the Bible is read every day for thirty days each month. This means that seven months of the year will include a rest day, though it does mean that in February you will need to double up on two days.

In this way the whole book is covered over forty months – itself a good biblical number as you'll discover. Individual books of the Bible are read from start to finish with the exception of the 150 Psalms (spread out over the forty months) and Isaiah, longest of the Old Testament prophets (read in two parts). Variety is maintained by moving between the Old and New Testaments reasonably regularly, and by separating out similar genres of literature.

In addition, each day there will be a page of accompanying notes. These notes offer explanations, anecdotes and stories as well as some life application ideas that are helpful for personal or group reflection. Remember, though, the main objective is to immerse yourself in God's word, and see what he might be saying to you through it. The notes are a companion to the Bible designed to facilitate this rather than a detailed or definitive commentary on it.

SACRED will be published in six volumes, each containing either six or seven months readings. I recommend that you use a modern translation of the Bible such as the New International Version, the New Revised Standard Version or the Good News Bible. Before you begin each day, pray that God will speak to you. Then read the passage, read the notes, and reflect quietly and prayerfully for a short time.

Ideally, you might also try to join with a few other people who are making the same journey through the Bible. Perhaps you could meet once a month for an hour or two to enable you to share with one another how you found the previous month's readings – which parts were helpful and uplifting, and which were particularly challenging.

However you approach SACRED, though, my prayer is that through it you may grow spiritually, day by day.

Mark – an Introduction

The SACRED Bible study scheme begins with the Gospel of Mark. It's a good place to start: the story of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Mark's very first verse declares, "The beginning of the gospel about Jesus Christ, the Son of God." Mark declares his intention straight away that not only will this be the story of Jesus, but that Jesus is not just an ordinary person. He's the Son of God.

Further, this is 'gospel' – literally 'good news' – it makes a difference to those who believe. Indeed, probably this is the primary purpose of the gospel – to encourage faith amongst its readers, both then and now, and lead them into a relationship with Jesus that brings salvation.

Of the four gospels in the New Testament, the majority opinion among scholars is that Mark is the earliest one, dating back to somewhere between 60 and 70 AD. They argue there is compelling evidence to suggest that Matthew and Luke had access to Mark's gospel, or a document very similar to it, in compiling their own accounts; there are many parallels in terms of content, sequence and the choice of words with which events are recorded.

The gospel is thought to have been heavily influenced by the disciple, Peter. Papias, Bishop of Hierapolis, writing around 140 AD, and quoted by Eusebius, notes: "And the Elder said this also: 'Mark, having become the interpreter of Peter, wrote down accurately whatever he remembered of the things said and done by the Lord'." Thus, the tradition of Peter's influence dates back to an even earlier authority than Papias, namely this 'Elder'. In support of the idea that Mark relied substantially on Peter, as we read through the gospel, we'll discern several places where vivid descriptions do suggest an eye-witness account.

One thing to which the gospel doesn't bear witness, however, is the identity of its author. Another tradition dating back to the early church is that it was actually written by a man named John Mark. We know that John Mark's mother, Mary, owned a house in Jerusalem where the Christian community used to meet, and where Peter went following his dramatic escape from prison (see *Acts 12:12*). This may have also corresponded to the location of the 'upper room' where Jesus and the disciples celebrated the Last Supper (*Mark 14:15*), and perhaps to where they returned after Jesus' death (see, for example, *John 20:19*), but this is conjecture rather than something directly attested. Furthermore, several scholars have suggested that Mark added a personal touch to his account; that he is actually the young man who fled naked from the scene of Jesus' arrest (*Mark 14:51-52*). While certainly possible, though, again there is no direct evidence for this.

Mark is the shortest of all the gospels. It's an action-packed account of Jesus' life, which is heavily skewed towards the events leading up to his death and resurrection – the final six of its sixteen chapters are concerned with the last week of his life. For this reason, Mark's Gospel has been described as 'a passion narrative with an extended introduction.' There are none of the stories surrounding Jesus' birth, for instance, that we find in both Matthew and Luke.

But remember, always at the forefront of Mark's mind is a yearning for readers to come to know Jesus for themselves, and to put their faith in him. As such, a key theme in the gospel that unfolds as we read through it is the identity of Jesus. Who exactly *is* this person?

The same question is meant to be wrestled with by any who read the gospel today … and that, of course, includes you. Who do you say this Jesus is?

It's quite a beginning!

By the end of these 45 verses, Jesus has driven out a demon (v.25), healed Simon's mother-in-law (v.31) as well as many others at her house (v.34), driven out more demons throughout Galilee (v.39) and healed a man with leprosy (v.42). And all that is apart from John the Baptist, the temptations and the calling of the first disciples. It's a striking feature of Mark's gospel that we aren't given much time to catch our breath.

Notice the first words of Jesus' ministry (v.15): "The time has come. The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news." Try to memorise them. Jesus is announcing that God is intervening in world history – his kingdom is near at hand. We immediately see evidence of this with all those healings, and we shall see more of it in terms of Jesus' miracles, and in his teaching, that seeks to break down religious, cultural and social barriers. God's kingdom is real and it is for all; all, that is, who repent and believe the good news.

Turning to the question of Jesus' identity, already we see several important clues. Did you spot them as you were reading through? Let's take another look: John the Baptist prophesies about the one who would come after him, and who would baptise with the Holy Spirit (v.8). Then, at Jesus' own baptism, the voice from heaven declares, "You are my Son whom I love" (v.11). An evil spirit addresses Jesus as "the Holy One of God" (v.24), while other demons also seemed to know who he was (v.34).

The four fishermen leave everything to follow him (vv.16-20). Itinerant rabbis were a common feature of Jewish life, so I wonder what it was they saw in Jesus to induce so radical a response? What do *you* see in him so far?

The news of Jesus spreads quickly, even without the benefit of our modern communication technologies, and people flock to him from everywhere. It's a pattern that will continue.

A man had been marooned on a desert island for 20 years. At last a ship came to his rescue. Just as he was about to leave, he said to the crew, "Look, I've been here a long time. I need to say goodbye to the three buildings I made with my own bare hands. They meant such a lot to me."

He turned to the first one. "This was my home," he said. "It was where I ate and drank and slept. Goodbye, home."
He then turned to the second one. "And this was my church, where I worshipped and prayed to God. Goodbye, church."
Then he turned to the crew again and said, "OK, let's go."
"But what about that third building?" they asked. "You haven't said goodbye to it yet. What did you do there?"
"Oh that," he replied dismissively, "That was the church I used to go to!"

We can be a fickle lot. We seem to find it easier to criticise our church for the few things that we don't like, rather than be thankful for the many that we do – even to the point of 'church hopping' in pursuit of that elusive, ideal place of worship.

Alas, this is nothing new. The extraordinary events of chapter 1 continue at the start of chapter 2 with the healing of the paralysed man. Notice the role of the four friends in bringing him to the feet of Jesus, overcoming the obstructions that stood in their way. It's an example, surely, to us all. However, Jesus soon finds himself in the midst of conflict. The authorities are not happy! They criticise Jesus for blaspheming (v.7), for eating with 'tax collectors and sinners' (v.16), for not requiring his disciples to fast (v.18) and for their acting 'unlawfully' on the Sabbath by picking some ears of corn to eat (v.24). It all seems so sad.

Again it's something for us to learn from. We need to be on our guard lest *we* lose sight of the amazing things Jesus has done and become caught up in negativity and criticism.

Chapter 3 brings more controversy as Jesus heals a man with a shrivelled hand on the Sabbath. The man would have been overwhelmed with joy – perhaps he had expected to come away from the synagogue spiritually restored; but now he was physically restored too. Once again the Pharisees were rather less ecstatic, and incredibly they begin to plot how to kill Jesus (v.6)! Contrast this with the reaction of the people. Vast crowds follow Jesus, witnessing many healings and exorcisms.

It is still the demons, however, that recognise who Jesus really is, declaring boldly, "You are the Son of God" (v.11). Curiously Jesus gives them strict orders not to reveal this to others. This is part of what has been called Mark's 'Messianic Secret' motif whereby the revelation of his true identity is not something that is asserted with loud-speakers and banners (as it were) but must gradually dawn on people through faith. This remains true for us. Knowing Jesus and who he is for ourselves gives our relationship with him a firmer footing than if our knowledge comes second-hand.

Jesus then appoints the twelve apostles (vv.13-19). They're an interesting bunch - fishermen, tax collectors, and zealots. Some are highly ambitious, one will doubt him, one will betray him, most will run away or at least make themselves scarce at the first sign of trouble. Yet these are the ones Jesus chooses to continue his work and, in the end, most of them would die for their faith in Christ. Being a good disciple is not about theological qualifications and personality profiling but about a heartfelt willingness to follow Christ wherever it may lead.

So it is today. Sometimes the most unlikely people play a significant part in the life of the church. I recently visited a parishioner in hospital who was very ill. Despite his own problems, he took the time to pray for me! I was deeply touched by this. God needs you too to play your part in his church.

Chapter 4 opens with the Parable of the Sower. So what exactly is a parable? One dictionary defines it as 'a short story about everyday things which is told to make a moral or religious point.' This was often Jesus' style of preaching. Here, as he told this parable, we read that he taught from a boat a little way out into the lake, because the crowd was so large (v.1). Maybe you can imagine the hills stretching up behind the crowd, with a farmer sowing seed in the distance as Jesus spoke. He tended to use the immediate landscape around him or stories about everyday family life to communicate something very important about God.

Although Mark is relatively sparing in his selection of Jesus' parables, the ones that he does include show us that Jesus was interested in telling the good news of the kingdom of God in a way that people could identify with – assuming their hearts and minds were open to him rather than hostile. This is a model that all modern-day preachers would do well to consider: stories and illustrations may be much more easily heard and applied than complex theological discourses. The parables of the growing seed (vv.26-29) and the mustard seed (vv.30-34) are especially encouraging for new Christians. Once we come to believe in Christ and accept him into our lives, that 'life-force' will continue to grow within us, day-by-day. Jesus will never abandon us.

The parables aim to instil faith in their hearers, but Jesus was well aware of the many distractions that can lead us away from a life of discipleship. This issue is addressed in the parable of the sower (vv.1-20). I wonder what are the "rocks" and "thorns" in your life that so easily seem to choke your everyday spiritual walk and enthusiasm?

The chapter closes with Jesus and the disciples leaving by boat, only to be caught in a furious squall. Jesus sleeps! On waking he simply tells the elements, "Be still!" and they are. Wow! "Who is this?" the disciples ask. "Even the wind and the waves obey him." Who indeed?

Jesus crosses into the region of the Gerasenes where he is met by the demon-possessed man. The details of the story emphasise how the evil spirits were bent on destroying the well-being of this poor individual. The man "had often been chained hand and foot, but he tore the chains apart and broke the irons on his feet" (v.4). Night and day "he would cry out and cut himself with stones" (v.5). He was in a bad way. And then Jesus comes along … and everything changes. The evil spirits go into the pigs, and the man is healed, "dressed and in his right mind" (v.15). Of course, it's not such good news for the pigs, which drown, but this stresses just how ruthlessly bent on destruction the evil spirits were. Note the presence of swine at all would have been surprising in Jewish territory (Jews are not permitted to eat pigs) but this was an area of predominantly Gentile (non-Jewish) population. The dramatic deliverance, though, was not received well by the locals, who pleaded with Jesus to leave (17). Perhaps they thought he might destroy more of their pigs. They'd rather give up on Jesus than lose a source of income and security. Is this a challenge for you?

We then read about the raising of Jairus' daughter. Another great story, and one of contrasts in terms of the characters involved. Note the subtle interplay in some of the details about the old woman and the little girl. For example, the girl was 12 years old, the same length of time the old woman had been suffering; and Jesus refers to the latter as "daughter" (v.34), a fact that wouldn't have been lost on Jairus, increasingly anxious for his own daughter's well-being. And what of Jesus? Clearly, his reputation goes before him. Jairus risks his status as one of the synagogue rulers by falling at Jesus' feet and pleading earnestly with him (vv.22-23). The woman, who would have been considered unclean, risks the disapproval of the crowd by coming up behind Jesus and touching his clothes (v.27). Both anticipate a healing miracle. Both experience one. And both witness Jesus' tenderness as well as his power – read again his words to them (vv.34,41).

Chapter 6 is another action-packed chapter - teaching and preaching, the feeding of the five thousand, Jesus walking on water, not to mention the scandalous slaying of the Baptist.

Two particular features stand out. The first is that when God's word is preached, while for some it is like the seed of chapter 4 sown on the good soil where it flourishes, others are less receptive. Indeed there can be outright hostility. We see this in Jesus' home town. Many who heard him were "amazed" (v.2). But others ridiculed Jesus. What could a carpenter possibly have to say to them about spiritual things? They "took offence at him" (v.3). Jesus, in turn, was "amazed" at their lack of faith (v.6).

The same sense of conflict applies to John the Baptist. The prophet who dared to speak God's truth is dreadfully silenced. This is an extreme case, but even in smaller ways speaking the truth can be costly. Are there times when you keep quiet about something in order to avoid the likely conflict? How do you feel later on?

The second feature is that Jesus never intended a one-man ministry. He trained those closest to him to carry on his work and, however apprehensive they may have felt at the outset, they clearly thrived on his encouragement. At his commissioning "they went out and preached that people should repent. They drove out many demons and anointed many sick people with oil and healed them" (vv. 12-13). Incidentally, going out two-by-two (v.7) is a good model for mission. It enables mutual companionship and support, and while one is speaking, the other can watch and pray. The disciples were involved too in the distribution of the miraculous bread; once again thereby playing a part in Jesus' ministry.

Jesus equips his church today in the same way but, like those first disciples, we need to step out in faith, trusting in his leading and his authority. Are we ready to do so?

As a response to yet more criticism from the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, Jesus teaches about inner purity. "You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to human traditions" he says (v.8). This was a direct attack on those responsible for the whole network of rules and regulations that had been super-imposed upon the Old Testament Law. There's a warning here too for us at church. We shouldn't let our traditions and preferred ways of doing things work against our calling to go and make disciples of all people. What is helpful for us, or has been helpful in the past, may not be so for others.

Later on, Jesus enters the house of a Syro-Phoenician woman whose daughter was possessed by an evil spirit. The subsequent dialogue and healing indicate that Jesus' ministry, and therefore the kingdom of God generally, stretches beyond solely the Jewish race – God's chosen people in the Old Testament. The gospel is for all people. This seems obvious to us now until, that is, we apply it to our own church community. Perhaps it's a consequence of natural social interaction that we tend to mix most with 'people like us'. We can feel uncomfortable when people of different social, educational or ethnic background also want to be part of our 'group' – in particular part of the congregation at the church we attend. We must be careful that we don't allow such superficial differences to become a barrier to the message we are entrusted with - that Jesus has come for all.

We see another example of the tenderness Jesus felt toward all in the passage that follows. A deaf and mute man is brought before him. Jesus touches his tongue and with "a deep sigh" says to him "*Ephphatha*" (v.34). This Aramaic expression supports the idea of an eye-witness (presumably Peter) treasuring Jesus' precise words and manner. Mark contains several other such Aramiac expressions: for instance, you'll recall Jesus saying '*talitha kuom'* to Jairus' little girl (5:41), again an incident witnessed personally by Peter.

Today we reach the pivotal point of Mark's gospel as Peter recognises Jesus' true identity (v.29). The 'Messianic Secret' is out – at least to the twelve disciples. When we read this encounter, the dialogue seems very clear and concise. The reality may have been much more tentative. A dramatised life of Christ is presented each summer at Wintershall near Guildford, split over several locations and lasting around six hours. In this key episode, when Jesus asks "Who do people say I am," two or three disciples each call out parts of the answer. Jesus then asks, "But what about you? Who do you say I am?" There is silence. Eventually, Peter, stumbling over his words, moves forward, and declares slowly, "You … are … the … Christ." It's a powerful scene, as though scales have gradually been removed from his eyes, enabling him to see spiritually. How interesting that in the previous incident Jesus brings physical sight to a blind man, but the restoration is gradual rather than immediate.

The setting is Caesarea Philippi, a city taking its name from the Roman Emperor (Caesar) and Herod Philip, son of Herod the Great – an unlikely setting for so momentous a revelation. Yet it's the place God chooses. It reminds us to seek God wherever we are; he's not restricted to a handful of special, sacred places (like our church), nor to specially designated times (like Sunday mornings).

The tone, however, quickly changes as Jesus then reveals to his disciples the outcome that awaits him – he would be rejected by the authorities and killed. This was so shocking to the disciples, that they didn't seem to hear the final part of Jesus' prophecy – that after three days he would rise again (v.31).

Jesus warns them (and us) that Christian commitment can be very challenging personally. He explains: "if anyone would come after me, they must deny themselves, take up their cross and follow me" (v.34). Discipleship is costly. On the other hand, "what good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul? (v.36).

After the revelation of Jesus' identity at Caesarea Philippi, there is further revelation about Jesus' divine nature on the high mountain as he is transfigured. It is witnessed by his inner three 'leadership team' of Peter, James and John. You may remember it was these three who were present when Jesus raised Jairus' little girl back to life. Present with Jesus on the mountain were also Moses and Elijah (v.4), Moses representing the Law, Elijah the Prophets. Jesus has come to fulfil both. Peter, no doubt blurting out the first thing that came into his head offered to put up shelters for them. There is an irony here – in Israel's past God had been thought of as being present in the tabernacle, or tent. Now he needed no 'shelter' – God had come to his people in human form. The voice from heaven - "this is my Son whom I love" (v.7) - confirms this, echoing the same voice at Jesus' baptism (1:11).

Undoubtedly the events on the mountain were a spiritual high-point. Things came back down to earth with a bump (v.14). The disciples were arguing with the teachers of the law, and there was a boy possessed by an evil spirit that had robbed him of speech and caused him to foam at the mouth. He couldn't be healed (v.18), until, that is, Jesus' return (vv.26-27).

We may recognise from our own walks with God how spiritual 'highs' are sometimes followed by times of testing or hardship. Recently a couple attended what was an uplifting service of remembrance at our church. Straight afterwards they went to visit a close friend who was temporarily resident in a nursing home while he recovered from a stay in hospital. Ten minutes later they returned with the news that he had died. We were all greatly saddened to hear it. Acknowledging who Jesus is won't immunise us from difficulties along the way but, as in the story, in the end we can have confidence that Jesus will bring restoration, in heaven if not on earth - "everything is possible for those who believe" (v.23). Try to hold on to this when you are troubled.

Different people come before Jesus. Who will follow him? The little children were welcomed by Jesus: a more positive, inclusive attitude than that of his disciples. Which of these attitudes would most closely resemble ours? As a worshipping community, how do we relate to the children in our midst – with all the 'noise' and 'mess' that may accompany them? Jesus says "the kingdom of God belongs to such as these" (v.14). God values those who are of no apparent importance, whose pride doesn't get in the way of receiving his riches as a gift.

Jesus then speaks to the rich, young man. He claimed to have kept the commandments since he was a boy. Had he genuinely been this obedient? Or does his answer display a personal arrogance that such high standards were indeed attainable? Either way, Jesus pinpoints the thing that held him back from true discipleship - his attachment to material wealth. He went away sad (v.22) for he knew the cost of following Jesus was too high.

This encounter with Jesus raises some profound questions for us.
How important is Jesus in *our* lives?
And what are the things that stand in the way of *our* relationship with him?

For James and John, it was their ambition that threatened to mar their relationship, both with Jesus and the other disciples. Jesus explains that Christian ministry is not about self-exaltation but about service. His words here are amongst the most vital in the entire gospel: "for even the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (v.45). You should memorise this. It speaks not just of Jesus' servant-hood, but of the ultimate sacrifice he would make, at a cost far beyond all the transient wealth of the rich young man.

Finally Jesus meets with blind Bartimaeus and restores his sight. This time healing is immediate, paralleling perhaps the disciples' more complete insight as to who Jesus is (compare 8:22-25). Bartimaeus is quick to follow him down the road (v.52).

Today's reading begins with the triumphal entry – from now on the focus will remain in and around Jerusalem. Normally, pilgrims would make the final part of the journey into Jerusalem by foot; Jesus rides in - on a donkey that had never been ridden before. This reflects Old Testament provisions that an animal which is to be set aside for some special sacred use shouldn't have already been put to normal everyday use (*Deuteronomy 21*).

It is clear that at least some of the crowd see Jesus' arrival as hugely significant: "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David!" (vv.9-10). A national king on entering his capital would expect to see signs of loyalty and obedience to himself. What will Jesus, the true king, find on coming into the holy city?

We soon find out. First the fig tree, which although out of season might have been expected to display some small buds of activity. Then there is the temple where there is too much activity of a different kind. Jesus sees both as spiritually revealing. William Lane, in his commentary, explains: "Just as the leaves of the tree conceal the fact that there was no fruit to enjoy, so the magnificence of the temple and its ceremony conceals the fact that Israel has not brought forth the fruit of righteousness demanded by God. Both incidents have the character of a prophetic sign which warns of judgement to fall upon Israel for honouring God with their lips when their heart was far from him."

This doesn't mean we should condemn all cathedrals and church grandeur – it is good to give God our best - but not at the expense of integrity, truth and mercy. Jesus' words challenge us, though, in our own church setting. What would his reaction be on entering our 'temple courts'? Would he find a warm, inviting space where people are welcomed into the worshipping community, or more of a market place where they run a gauntlet of goods for sale.

The scene follows on from chapter 11 with Jesus walking in the temple courts while the chief priests, teachers of the law and the elders question his authority. The conflict continues with Jesus speaking to them in parables, as was his custom. Listeners would have known immediately he was referring to Israel, and their part in its downfall, for a 'vineyard' was a common Old Testament euphemism for Israel (*Isaiah 5:1-7*). Jesus' vineyard was well prepared. There was a wall, a pit for the winepress and a watchtower (v.1). The owner had gone to a lot of trouble and the vineyard proved fertile. God had provided well for his people. At harvest, though, rather than share the produce, the farmers wanted to go their own way. How often it is that the God we turn to in times of need, we turn away from in times of plenty. The farmers kill the servants who come – many of the prophets were ignored or maltreated - and finally they do the same to the owner's son and heir. It's a further prediction of what will shortly befall Jesus himself.

The authorities were livid. They send the Pharisees to try to catch out Jesus with the question about taxes (vv.13-17), followed by the Sadducees with one about resurrection life (vv.18-27). As ever, Jesus answers with clarity and authority. Outwardly astute, inwardly he must have been saddened that those charged with the responsibility of communicating God's ways by word and deed seemed to have fallen so far from grace (see vv.38-40).

But not quite all of them. One teacher of the law asks Jesus which is the most important commandment. His answer is one we would do well to learn and seek to apply in our own daily lives: "love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength. The second is this: Love your neighbour as yourself" (vv.30-31). The teacher sees that these matter more than any number of sacrifices and burnt offerings (v.33). Jesus commends him, for any who seek to live this way are not far from the kingdom of God (v.34).

Chapter 13 is rather different! This isn't quite the Jesus we're used to, as he warns about wars and persecution, earthquakes and the 'end-times'. It's an example of 'apocalyptic' literature which we will meet elsewhere in the Bible, for instance in the book of *Revelation* and in the second half of *Daniel*. In some ways it makes uncomfortable reading and we might prefer to gloss over it but the content is important enough to warrant Jesus' attention and Mark's inclusion. Jesus counsels his followers to be careful not to put too much trust in formal religious structures (v.2) - the temple would indeed fall in 70AD - not to be overwhelmed by calamitous world events (vv.7-8), and not to be taken in by false teachers who appear at first to speak in the name of Christ (v.22).

Jesus' intention is *not* to foster an obsession with the 'end-times' that borders on paranoia, but to encourage us to be spiritually discerning. He emphasises this repeatedly, saying: "watch out" or "keep watch" (vv.5,35,37), "be on your guard" (vv.9,23,33), "do not worry (v.11), and "stand firm" (v.13).

Nonetheless these verses do also point to Jesus' return at a day or hour unknown. There *will be* a second coming of Christ and it will be very unlike the first. JC Ryle, Bishop of Liverpool in the 19th Century nicely contrasts the two: "He came the first time in weakness, a tender infant, born of a poor woman in the manger at Bethlehem, unnoticed, unhonoured, and scarcely known. He shall come the second time in royal dignity, with the armies of heaven around him, to be known, recognised, and feared, by all the tribes of the earth. He came the first time to suffer, to bear our sins … he shall come the second time to reign."

The question for each one of us to take time to consider is this:
'If Jesus were to return unannounced tomorrow, would he find *us* ready to meet him?'

It's a long and momentous chapter. Jesus is anointed in Bethany, and condemned in Jerusalem. Meanwhile, after he has instructed the disciples to keep watch and stand firm, we witness how quickly they fall away, and we're reminded how easy it is for us to do the same, like the seed that fell on rocky soil (4:16-17).

We can give in to the temptations of the world or the three 'g's as someone once put it – gold, glory and girls. For Judas it was 'gold' as he negotiated betraying Jesus into the authorities' hands, enabling them to arrest Jesus without risk of adverse crowd reactions. Perhaps he'd been indignant at the extravagance of the anointing, perhaps he had other reasons – but the damage was done.

Or we can give in to our physical needs. How many times have I resolved to stop eating chocolate only to find myself reaching for the cupboard. For the disciples it wasn't food or alcohol, but weariness. They were unable to stay awake in the Garden of Gethsemane at a time when their master "was overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death" (v.34).

Or there's the threat of persecution for our faith – only too real for some in our world. Last autumn our TV screens reported new outbreaks of persecution effecting Christians in India. Alas it's a familiar picture, albeit in changing locations. We face less direct threats in the UK, but even we don't always find it easy to say what we believe, to stand firm in our faith. Peter, the number one disciple, feared he too would be arrested. Three times he denied that he knew Jesus, just as his master had foretold (v.30).

But the chapter also reminds us who we serve. The theme we've been tracking in Mark has been who exactly is this person? Now, when the high priest asks him, "Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed One?" Jesus responds "I am" (v.62). They say it's blasphemy (v.64). What do you say?

Jesus is taken to Pilate. The Sanhedrin had many powers but usually the death sentence had to be delivered by the Roman court under its governor. "Are you the king of the Jews?" Pilate asks (v.2). "Yes, it is as you say," Jesus replies - then he falls silent. The chain of events the authorities had sought is set in place. Jesus is mocked, tortured, crucified and killed.

And what of the disciples? The close, faithful band of friends who'd been his companions for the last three years. In Mark's account, the final hours of Jesus' life are witnessed by several women including Mary Magdalene. There's no mention of the men. Perhaps they'd fled for fear of facing the same fate. Undoubtedly they were extremely dispirited. After all the healings, all the miracles, all the teaching, all the love he'd given out to those who came to him, had it all come to this, a bloodied body breathing its last on the cross?

Perhaps they'd regrouped in the upper room, and were reflecting on the last three years, searching for some signs of meaning, searching for some signs of hope. What was it he'd said? "This is my blood of the covenant which is poured out for many" (14:24). And earlier, "The Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many" (10:45). And then there was the rumour going around Jerusalem by now that the temple curtain had been torn in two (v.38). This curtain, that served as a barrier to the holy-of-holies through which only the high priest could enter on the Day of Atonement, had been destroyed – was access to God no longer restricted?

And what about those times he'd predicted his death? Hadn't he said that three days later he would rise? But that's impossible! No-one can do that. No, Jesus had died. After all the euphoria of the triumphal entry into Jerusalem earlier that week everything had gone wrong.

Or had it?

Eight verses. Although many translations continue for a further twelve, most early manuscripts do not include these additions and, in any case, they do appear to be a hastily written synopsis of a handful of stories found in the other gospels. So we're left with eight verses. That's all. Yet these eight, short verses describe an event that changed the world, for they attest to resurrection – something unique in the history of humankind.

I wonder what the women were really thinking as they made their weary way to the tomb very early on that first Easter morning. The horrific events of the Friday would still have been terribly fresh in their minds. Whatever hopes they secretly harboured regarding Jesus' claim that he would rise again on the third day (8:31,10:34), it seems they didn't entirely believe it, given that they were bringing spices to anoint his body (v.1), which had been left, lifeless, in the cold tomb. There'd been no time to anoint him earlier due to the start of the Sabbath, during which such work was forbidden. Now, the women's main preoccupation was a practical one - how they were going to be able to roll away the stone (v.3) that guarded the entrance to Jesus' tomb? Were they hoping a gardener would help them? Or the soldier if he was still around?

Whatever their expectations may have been, when they arrived the tomb was open, the body gone, and an angel sat in its place. It left them "alarmed" (v.5), "bewildered" and "afraid" (v.8), but over the coming days, as all that had happened gradually began to sink in, the mood would lift from the darkness of despair to the joy of new life. Jesus had risen. He had power over life and death.

As our journey through Mark's Gospel comes to a close, this was the final proof of his identity. Jesus was no mere mortal do-gooder but the immortal Son of God, come to rescue a fallen world. This was good news for the women and his followers all those years ago. And it's good news for us today, for it tells us the grave need not be the last word for us either. There *is* a future. Believe it.

Psalms – an Introduction

The Psalms are unlike any other book in the Bible. They do not tell a story from beginning to end: generally, each one stands alone to be considered on its own merits. Nor do they offer a systematic doctrinal treatise, though Basil, in the fourth century, described the psalms as 'a compendium of all theology'. And yet this collection of poems, songs and prayers has been much loved by God's people through the generations. The Old Testament people of God sung them at the major festivals, or on pilgrimage as they made their way to them, or in exile when everything was lost. They have equal value for Christians today – as expressions of praise, prayer, petition, thanksgiving, sorrow and loss.

For the psalms speak divinely and humanly, historically and prophetically, privately and publicly; they speak words of hope and words of despair; they speak *to* us and the speak *for* us. No wonder they have been so valued by so many people – indeed, many of the spiritual 'giants' of the past would seek to memorise them. The story is told of St. Cuthbert, for example, reciting them with his pupil while travelling on foot from the monastery. David Adam writes: "Cuthbert knew them all, one hundred and fifty of them, by heart, and expected a young monk to be able to do the same in time. As they journeyed, he would recite a verse of a psalm and expect his travelling companion to respond with the next verse. By this method, they would work their way through the psalter, or at least part of it. If the youth faltered, Cuthbert would recite the verse with him. Then they would go back to the beginning of that psalm, or section, and start again."

In our modern world, with the wide availability of written material, the discipline of memorising large chunks of scripture is one that seems to have fallen out of favour. The prospect of reciting all the psalms would leave us all feeling very daunted. Well maybe this is something we can seek to rectify. As you read through the psalms with these notes, why not pick out a few to memorise – for instance Psalm 1 or 23 or 100 or 130 – you'll be surprised what a difference it will make to you.

There are several different types of psalm. Scholars have long sought to develop classification schemes, one of the earliest being that of Gunkel in 1904. He suggested five major categories – hymns, communal laments, individual laments, songs of thanksgiving, royal psalms – and a few minor categories. Others have adapted this further, but Brueggemann has offered an alternative approach. He sees some as psalms of 'orientation' – reflecting seasons of well-being; gratitude for constancy of blessing. Then there are psalms of 'disorientation'. These are more anguished seasons; times of hurt, suffering and alienation. Finally, there are psalms of 'new orientation' – here the speaker has witnessed God's intervening action; he has been rescued from previous adversity. We shall see several examples of each type in the months ahead.

We shall also see stylistic patterns in the way individual psalms are structured. In particular, there is often a deliberate balance between the two halves of a verse or a line. This is referred to as parallelism. So sometimes the second half repeats the sentiment of the first half, sometimes it extends it with a new thought, and sometimes it may express the opposite point of view. This feature lends itself to worship settings when a psalm is sung or said aloud by the congregation. Thus, a psalm may be recited antiphonally with one section of the congregation saying the first half of the line, and another section saying the second half.

In terms of specific content, be warned. You may find some of the ideas and language shocking, possibly even un-Christian, but remember these are honest, heartfelt appeals to a loving God who is holy and just, and who hears us when we call.

We shall study the psalms a little differently to every other book in the Bible. Rather than read them all in one go (which would take five months!) we shall take a few at a time, spreading them out over the course of our 40-month journey. So read and enjoy!

This is a lovely psalm, short, succinct and simple, and deeply personal. It is fitting that the book of Psalms starts with this one as it lays a foundation for the one hundred and forty-nine others that will follow. The psalm sets out two alternative ways of living and invites readers to choose between them. It's a choice that runs through the whole Bible.

The first way is the way of contemplation of, and obedience to, God's law; the second is the way of wickedness. There is no middle ground. The outcome of each approach is also starkly contrasted; the former will prosper (v.3), but the latter will perish (v.6). Of course, this doesn't imply that things will always be this straightforward: that what we experience in life is always a direct function of the choices we make. Many of the later psalms will reveal the psalmists' anxiety and confusion when such principles do *not* seem to operate quite so smoothly. But even then, there is a foundational faith that in the long-term the Lord will indeed watch over the way of the righteous (v.6).

Centuries later, the teaching here would be echoed by Jesus himself in the Sermon on the Mount as he told the parable of the wise and foolish builders (*Matthew 7:24-27*). Again it was a question of right foundations – the wise builders were those who built on the rock. So the wise person is one who hears God's word and puts it into practice in their life. Or, at least, tries to do so, for none can fully succeed. Hence, the blessed man "who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked" (v.1) may actually be referring to a specific individual - the one, perfect man who was to come.

Return now, though, to verse 3 – the "tree planted by streams of water." Imagine yourself in that scene, and stay there a while. Can you sense God's presence with you? How does it feel? Thank him that no matter how you may be feeling, his love and his care for you are constant. He will never abandon you.

This psalm has often been thought of as a 'royal' or 'coronation' psalm. That is, it was originally recited at the enthronement of David or one of his successors as king of Israel. In support of this, we read that a king has been installed in Zion (v.6), and the use of the word 'today' (v.7) may refer to the moment when this king formally takes over as the new ruler. He is expected to reign with wisdom (v.10), and to serve the Lord with fear and trembling (v.11) – sound advice surely for all leaders of nations.

But there is an additional, deeper interpretation of this Psalm. It points forward, prophetically, to the 'Anointed One' (v.2) who will be installed as the true king – it points forward, that is, to Jesus. For that reason, psalms such as this one are known as 'Messianic' psalms. There are three reasons for viewing Psalm 2 in this light. First, the words "you are my Son; today I have become your Father" (v.7) remind us, uniquely, of Jesus. Twice we recall the voice from heaven commending him as the Son whom the Father loved – at his baptism and his transfiguration (*Mark 1:11, 9:7*). Second, early Jewish and Christian traditions saw these first two psalms as being joined together. Notice, for example, how the end of Psalm 2 mirrors the start of Psalm 1 with the allusion to the one who is "blessed" or "happy". Thus, if the opening psalm is referring, at least in part, to Jesus as the one who was without sin, then its second 'half' (that is, Psalm 2) also likely refers to him. And third, the disciples clearly believed the psalm was messianic. Peter and John quote from it in their prayer of *Acts 4:24-30*, seeing it as being fulfilled in the cross, with Herod and Pilate representing the 'kings' and 'rulers' who gathered together against him (v.2).

The psalm is more than just prophetic, though; it also counsels us how we should respond to this anointed one. We are to "kiss the Son" (v.12), to kiss the pierced hands held out to us in invitation, to accept his gift of grace, and to take our refuge in him (v.12).

This is the first Psalm to be ascribed – it's "a Psalm of David when he fled from his son Absalom." In time to come in our SACRED journey through the Bible, we will read the full account of this episode (*2 Samuel 15*), but for now we just need to understand that, for David, this was an extremely testing time. He is despondent, his enemies are rising up against him (v.1), and they are jeering that even God will abandon him (v.2).

But whenever events threaten to overwhelm him, he reminds himself of God's ultimate protection. The Lord is a 'shield' (v.3), he sustains (v.5) and he will once again lift up David's head (v.3). We may not like the direction David's prayer then takes: "strike all my enemies on the jaw; break the teeth of the wicked" (v.7), but we need to remember it was spoken in the midst of warfare and treachery – perhaps it was a natural, knee-jerk reaction in those circumstances. In any case, it's helpful for us to know that God is gracious enough to hear our cries from the heart even if on reflection they're a little over the top! David ends by recognising that without God there is no lasting resolution (v.8).

The psalm may be every bit as applicable to us today. We need to honestly reflect on whether there are modern-day 'Absaloms' who are threatening us and making our lives difficult. Perhaps we have been involved in a bitter family dispute which remains unresolved, or we've been badly let-down by a close friend or a business partner. J.M. Boice suggests the following exercise in his commentary on the psalms, "I want you to think about whatever distress you may be having, or whatever danger you may be in, before going on with your study of this psalm, because it is in the midst of precisely that danger that God will appear to you and deliver you. The text urges us to do this when it interrupts the poem by the word *selah*." Try re-reading the psalm, this time pausing at each *selah*, and praying that God's presence with you will bring a deep peace into the midst of your current difficulties.

1 & 2 Peter – an Introduction

The New Testament comprises four categories of writing. There are the four gospels: accounts of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Then there are the Acts of the Apostles, which is a history of the early church, and the Book of Revelation. The remaining 21 'books' are the epistles, letters written to various churches or individuals to encourage or rebuke or set out correct doctrine and practice. 1 and 2 Peter are our first encounter with such letters.

The title and first line of each letter makes it pretty clear that both were written by the apostle Peter himself. Scholars, however, are not so sure. The educated Greek of the first letter suggests to some that it is not so likely to have been the work of a former fisherman. This may be confirmed in 5:12 which suggests that Silas (or Silvanus) may have written down Peter's ideas. In the same way there are some question marks about the second letter. Whatever the truth of the matter, though, it should not concern us in our study. Nothing that is said would have met with Peter's disapproval. And it is the content that is important rather than the style. In his study *Project Peter* my friend and colleague Reverend Ian Kitchen offered this summary:

> "In both letters, Christians are urged to think through and live out their faith in the context of a surrounding culture which does not understand them and is frequently hostile to them. The suffering about which 1 Peter constantly speaks almost certainly comes in an informal way from this surrounding culture rather than from organised 'official' persecution. And in 2 Peter pagan teaching and behaviour are seen to be weaselling their way into the Church itself. These are relevant letters for us today."

They are indeed. These and other themes contained in these two short letters will be explored over the next eight days.

The first two verses are typical of most New Testament epistles – they set out who the letter is from, who it's being sent to, and a general greeting of grace and peace. Here the letter is addressed to believers scattered across several areas of Asia Minor. Delivery would not have been via Royal Mail; rather a messenger would have carried the letter personally from one place to the next. Indeed if he landed on the Black Sea coast of Pontus, he would probably have visited the provinces in the order they are listed here, around a well-travelled, circular route.

The key message of this chapter is resurrection hope. Peter emphasises that whatever suffering and trials the believers might be experiencing, nothing can take away the promise of salvation - "an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade; kept in heaven for you" (v.4).

Life is not always easy for *us*: there can be hardship, there can be loss, there can even be persecution for our faith when people try to marginalise or demean it. But the fact of Jesus' resurrection gives us the ultimate hope of eternal life with him in heaven. This provides a perspective on everything else that fills us with "inexpressible and glorious joy" (v.8).

When Pam and I used to live in Ilkley, we knew a young lad called Andy. After studying at university, Andy went out to work at a church in Chile. He told us about Carlos Samaieen, an 84-year old man at the church there. Carlos was a natural evangelist. If anyone ever asked him, "How are you?" his response would always be the same - "I'm in Christ!" When he was in hospital because he wasn't so well physically, he'd still wear a huge smile on his face. "Are you worried about death?" a doctor might ask him. "Death?" Carlos would reply. "*Death*? What do I care about dying? Jesus Christ is Lord. Do *you* know that Jesus is Lord?" And Carlos would see another opportunity to tell the good news. His faith filled him with an inexpressible and glorious joy.

I recently finished reading Ken Follett's novel *Pillars of the Earth*. It's an epic saga of love and passion, treachery and vengeance, hard-work and dedication, triumph and despair, set in the 1100's. And the book has more than a passing interest in matters spiritual, as several of the key characters are monks, priests or bishops – though not all of them behave with the kind of holiness Peter advocates here (v.1). The background context is an abbey that needs reforming at a place called Kingsbridge, and the subsequent building of a cathedral there. This project takes many years to complete, as thousands of stones have to be quarried, cut and laid to a carefully planned design. Even then some of the stones would be rejected as unsuitable for their required purpose.

Peter, the 'rock' on whom Jesus would build his church uses this building imagery in vv.4-8: "you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house," that is, the Church. Christ is the capstone, the key stone that holds it all together, "precious" yet "rejected" by many. We have already met this language in the parable of the wicked tenants (*Mark 12:10*). The building Peter has in mind, however, is rather different. The stones are "living stones" with an active part to play. They are "a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ" (v.5); "a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God" (v.9). These spiritual sacrifices are thanksgiving, praise and practical loving service, as opposed to the physical animal or food sacrifices of the Law. They are the responsibility of all believers not just the privileged few.

Notice finally that Peter speaks of believers as a community together. Just as one stone cannot make a cathedral, so one isolated Christian cannot make a church. Remember this if ever you are tempted to give-up on your local church congregation, and to go your own way.

"In your hearts set apart Christ as Lord" (v.15).

A married couple were taking a short break at the seaside to celebrate their 60th birthdays. As they were walking along the beach they found an old bottle. They picked it up (to recycle it, naturally!), loosened the cork, and whoosh, a genie appeared!

The genie said, "Because you've been such a loving couple all these years, I will grant you one wish each." The wife said, "Well, in our marriage we've always been fairly poor. We couldn't afford to do the things we wanted, we've not seen much of the world. I wish we could go travelling."
The genie clapped his hands, there was a puff of smoke, and suddenly … there was a pair of round the world air tickets.

Next, it was the husband's turn. He paused for a moment, looked at his wife, and said, "What I really want is to be married to a woman 30 years younger than me." She was speechless! The genie clapped his hands, there was a puff of smoke, and suddenly … the husband became 90 years old!

When we make decisions, big or small, we so often act out of self-interest. Admittedly the outcome isn't necessarily quite as stark as for the man in the story, but experience suggests self-interest doesn't usually lead to contentment.

"In your hearts set apart Christ as Lord." It is one thing to believe in Jesus with our minds: an intellectual commitment. Peter is advocating a deeper commitment from the heart that shapes all our decisions, everything we do. Without it, Peter's readers would not have been able to withstand suffering and persecution. With it, they could act with love, compassion and humility (v.8) following the example that Jesus had already set.

Peter's words are for us too. Wherever you are right now, ask God to help *you* set apart Christ as Lord in *your* heart.

Peter's readers were suffering, persecuted for their faith. There are (at least) three aspects to this that are very applicable today. First, there is full-blown persecution where individuals might be imprisoned, tortured and even killed for their faith. It was the fate that would befall most of the disciples; it was the fate that would befall Peter. Thankfully, we in the UK are sheltered from such treatment, but it continues elsewhere. For a modern example of this extreme persecution read *The Heavenly Man*, the true story of Brother Yun, a Christian who became one of China's house-church leaders, but at a very high personal cost.

Second, there is the more subtle kind of persecution, mental and emotional rather than physical - the ridicule that we can feel for standing up for the person of Jesus, or for a Christian standpoint on some ethical issue. We can feel marginalised by friends or family; we can be made to feel stupid. It can occur on a national level too – witness, for example, the decision of the Girlguiding organisation to drop any reference to God from their promises.

Third, there is the persecution from being taken advantage of because we are Christians. I knew a builder who used to add an extra 10% to his bill if he saw his customers had a Christian fish sign, reckoning they'd be too nice to query it! Then he became a Christian and to make good, he used to deliberately undercharge clients he'd previously ripped off!

In our reading, one of the issues is hospitality. Travelling Christians would be offered free board and lodging. Such generosity was abused to the point where according to *Davids'* commentary, "by AD 100 in Asia … food and housing would be provided for a maximum of 3 days, after which the person was expected to move on or get a job!"

Peter urges his readers to "rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ" (v.13), to "love each other deeply" (v.8) and to "offer hospitality … without grumbling" (v.9)!

Sometimes, the real servants of God are not those we expect, for they carry themselves with genuine humility. There was a man who once went to a Greek island to see a holy monk based at the monastery there, so that he could receive spiritual direction. He was welcomed at the monastery and given a cell to occupy during his stay on the island. The next day he was reading a book on the life of a medieval Greek saint and was completely absorbed in it. There was a knock on the cell door and a wiry, bright-eyed little monk put his head round it. The monk asked if he'd like to go for a walk. The man was a little irritated: "No thanks," he said, "I'm studying." Then, realising he might have appeared rude, he added, "Maybe you could come back later?" - not really meaning it! After an hour or so, there was another knock on the door. Once more the wiry, bright-eyed little monk was there; "Would you like to go for a walk?" The man, still irritated, was on the point of excusing himself for a second time, when he suddenly had a thought. Sure enough, it turned out that this unassuming, rather strange looking person was the holy monk he'd come all that way to see! We should be careful not to judge by appearances.

As Peter wraps up his letter, he wants his readers to embrace this characteristic of humility in the midst of their suffering. He stresses this repeatedly: be "eager to serve, not lording it over those entrusted to you" (vv.2-3), "clothe yourselves with humility because God gives grace to the humble" (v.5), and "humble yourselves under God's mighty hand" (v.6). This doesn't mean being wimpy. On the contrary, an attitude of submissiveness, not insisting on rights or status, enables God to work with us and through us – to make us "strong, firm and steadfast" (v.10).

One application of this is to say sorry to those we've argued with; not necessarily because our reasoning was wrong, but because insisting on our own point of view can lead to a breakdown of relationship. I recommend you try it!

The believers to whom Peter writes are struggling again. This time it is not from the threat of persecution from the surrounding culture, but from false teachers. As we shall see, the centrepiece of the letter is the strong attack Peter makes on these false teachers in chapter 2. To set the scene for this, though, Peter starts by re-establishing some basics.

First, he stresses the person of Jesus. In these 21 verses Peter refers to the "Lord Jesus Christ" 3 times (vv.8,12,16) and once each to "Jesus Christ" (v.1), our "Saviour Jesus Christ" (v.1), "Jesus our Lord" (v.2), and "our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ" (v.11). That's seven times in total, reminding readers that everything they say and do in terms of their spiritual outlook needs to be rooted in Jesus. Whenever we are struggling spiritually or emotionally, or if we have doubts about our faith, we too need to return to the life and ministry of God's only Son.

Second, he stresses his own credentials in comparison with those who might be undermining the Christian faith. "Simon Peter, a servant and apostle of Jesus Christ" (v.1); "we were eye-witnesses of his majesty" (v.16); and "we ourselves heard this voice that came from heaven when we were with him on the mountain" (v.18). Peter was there; therefore his words can now be trusted. He will not "follow cleverly invented stories" (v.16) or create skewed interpretations of ancient prophecies.

Third, he stresses that for disciples to be effective and productive (then and now), they need to be seeking to cultivate qualities such as goodness, knowledge, self-control, perseverance, godliness, brotherly kindness and love (vv.5-7). The point is not that such characteristics can in any sense earn a person their salvation, but that in the absence of growth in Christlikeness, it is much easier to fall away (v.8). Being rooted in a vibrant church community is an important way of helping to guard against this.

Chapter 2 is not for the faint-hearted! Peter delivers a sustained attack on the false teachers who it would seem are having an adverse influence on ordinary believers.

Most commentators are agreed that the essence of the problem was a form of Gnosticism. The title comes from the Greek words *gnosis* meaning 'knowledge', and *gnostikos*, meaning 'good at knowing', but it actually covers a large number of different sects and belief systems. Generally, though, all these have two aspects in common. First, as the name suggests, 'knowledge' is highly valued. Indeed while faith was for everyone, the true way to enlightenment, the teachers claimed, was through the greater and deeper knowledge that Christianity might endow. On the surface this might seem quite attractive, especially when espoused by a charismatic speaker, but it needs to be seen for the heresy it is – Christ is the gateway to salvation, not our own intellects.

Second, Gnostics tended to see a separation between body and soul, between the material and the spiritual. In consequence, followers were not typically godly people. Some believed that the body was itself evil, and so they advocated a strict ascetism, practising the denial of one's physical appetites as far as possible. Others felt the physical body was irrelevant; only the spiritual was important. So, for them, what one did with one's body didn't matter. Adherents of this philosophy tended to engage in all kinds of licentious behaviour. The evidence of chapter 2 suggests the false teachers Peter refers to were in this latter category; they seem to encourage sexual immorality (vv.13,14), greed (v.14) and wickedness (v.15).

They have led people astray, and Peter asserts there will be a reckoning (v.9). God has brought judgement on the unrighteous in the past (vv.5-7) - we'll read the stories of Noah, and Sodom and Gomorrah next month. He will do so again in the future.

After the sharp rhetoric of yesterday, Peter now closes with words of encouragement. Four times he describes his readers as "dear friends" (vv.1,8,14,17). He wants the best for them. He wants them "to live holy and godly lives" (v.11), "to be on (their) guard so that (they) may not be carried away by the error of lawless men" (v.17), and to "grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Christ" (v.18). This, the last comment in the letter, is a pointed reference to the knowledge that really matters – namely knowledge of Jesus.

Two millennia later, Jesus' right-hand man might write the same words of encouragement to us, his dear friends today. How do we respond? Living a "holy and godly" life is something we may recognise in others – the Mother Teresa's of this world – and may aspire to ourselves, but we're also aware how easily that intention comes unstuck. "But do not forget this one thing" writes Peter soothingly, "with the Lord a day is like 1,000 years, and 1,000 years are like a day. The Lord … is patient with you" (vv.8-9).

Do you remember the *Peanuts* cartoons? One time the local team is playing baseball and Charlie Brown is batting. He misses the ball – strike three. He has struck out again and slumps over to the bench. "Rats!" he complains, "I'll never be a big-league player. I just don't have it! All my life I've dreamed of playing in the big leagues, but I know I'll never make it."

Lucy turns to console him. "Charlie Brown, you're thinking too far ahead. What you need to do is set yourself more immediate goals." He looks up. "Immediate goals?"
"Yes," Lucy continues, "Start with this next inning when you go out to pitch, and see if you can walk out onto the mound without falling down!"

Even the greatest journeys of faith proceed a step at a time. So be encouraged; follow Peter's counsel, keep going and keep growing.

Psalm 4 is the first to offer musical directions in its subtitles: "For the director of music. With stringed instruments." This reminds us that originally many of the Psalms were used within a worship setting, which was just as important a part of Jewish liturgies as our own hymns and songs are today.

It's also a psalm of David but its context is very different from the last one we studied. There David was fleeing from his enemies, fearful for his life. Here, it is his reputation that is under attack rather than any physical threat: slander and lies have turned his glory into shame (v.2). Perhaps you have experienced something like this. You hear of rumours going around which cast you in a negative light. This can be very painful. When the rumours are true, it leads to embarrassment and a degree of soul searching – it often takes time to change. When the rumours are false, though, it is even more difficult. You can become angry, looking to confront those responsible and to publicly justify yourself. This is a natural reaction, but it is not how David reacts here. His response is to turn to God: "answer me when I call to you … give me relief in my distress; be merciful to me and hear my prayer" (v.1). David is aware that God knows the truth and is "righteous" (v.1), setting apart the godly (v.3). God *will* hear him and presumably vindicate him. And ultimately it is God's opinion that matters, for a relationship with him fosters far greater joy than any earthly acclaim (v.7).

The psalm is an evening psalm, one of those set in a service of Compline or Night Prayer. Things can often seem bleaker in the dark. The approach of night may lead us to dwell on all kinds of wrongs we have committed and opportunities we have lost. We should learn from David's example. Whatever concerns may have preyed upon your heart and mind during the day that's past, in the evening lay them down before God, trusting that his love for you continues unabated. And memorise v.8:

"I will lie down and sleep in peace
for you alone, O Lord, make me dwell in safety."

There's a classic episode of *Fawlty Towers* where Basil Fawlty, the owner of the Torquay hotel, has been trying to explain to his non-English speaking waiter, Manuel, that they are going to carry out a routine fire drill. Sometime later Manuel tells him that a *real* fire has broken out, but Basil refuses to believe him and locks him in the kitchen – the location of the fire. Eventually Manuel's persistent banging on the door leads Basil to unlock it, and he sees the blaze. He evacuates the guests, though not without great difficulty as Manuel is hanging on to his leg in gratitude for being released. Increasingly exasperated, Basil then tries to sound the fire alarm – but he can't find the key. He rants and raves, "Where's the key? Where is the key? I mean would you believe it? The first time we've ever had a fire here in this hotel and somebody's lost the key. Isn't that typical of this place?" He jumps up and down in frustration, and then looks up to the heavens, shakes his fist and shouts, "O thank you, God, thank you so b***** much!"

It's a feature of many psalms that the writer cries out to God from the heart, sometimes complaining of their lot, sometimes accusing him of neglect, sometimes telling him what he should do about their enemies. These heartfelt cries are not censored for political correctness. The precise context of today's psalm is unclear, but David is entreating the Lord to consider his sighing and listen to his cry for help (vv.1-2); that is, to take his side. Further he wants God to declare his enemies guilty, to "let their intrigues be their downfall" and for them to be banished for their sins (v.10). Such sentiments may seem overly harsh, and lacking in compassion.

The former Archbishop of Canterbury, Donald Coggan observes this about such heartfelt pleas: "(these people) are at the edge of disaster. They are overwhelmed, nearly destroyed, but with enough life within them to cry out to the Holy One, to bring it all before him, their own desire for the destruction of their enemies included." He asks, "isn't this real religion?"

Psalm 6 is a lament. The individual writing it (presumably David) is afflicted, perhaps with some malady, perhaps with the knowledge of some sin committed. Certainly he cries out to God, seeking his mercy. His distress is manifested in body, mind and spirit, in accordance with the more holistic, Hebrew mind-set that the three were inextricably linked. He is physically distressed: "my bones are in agony" (v.2), "my eyes grow weak" (v.7). He is emotionally distressed: "I am worn out from groaning; all night long I flood my bed with weeping" (v.6). And he is spiritually distressed: "my soul is in anguish. How long, O Lord, how long?" (v.3). How long must he continue to suffer? Has God abandoned him?

Has God abandoned us when *we* feel lost and distressed?

We note that this is another psalm of David, and although we've yet to read his story in SACRED, we may know some details about him already. It was he who slew the giant Goliath; and he who became a great king and might warrior. Here, though, this man appears almost wimpish, wallowing in his predicament. Is this really the same great man of God?

In 1962 Victor & Mildred Goertzel published a fascinating study of 417 exceptionally gifted and famous twentieth century people, selected on the basis of having had at least one biography written about them. They were looking for common threads to explain why they rose to prominence. One surprising finding was that 94% of them had overcome difficult obstacles in becoming who they were: "Suffering produces perseverance (and) perseverance character," wrote Paul in *Romans 5:3-4*. David was no wimp. His dark times helped to mould him into the great leader that he was.

Returning to the psalm, the tone changes in the final section: "the Lord has heard my cry for mercy; (and) accepts my prayer" (v.9). The situation may not have changed, but David no longer feels alone. God has not abandoned him. Nor will he abandon us.

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Footnotes

Day 24: the holy monk story is taken from Nicholl, p.71.

Unless otherwise specified, all Bible quotations used in these notes are taken from the New International Version, 1979.