

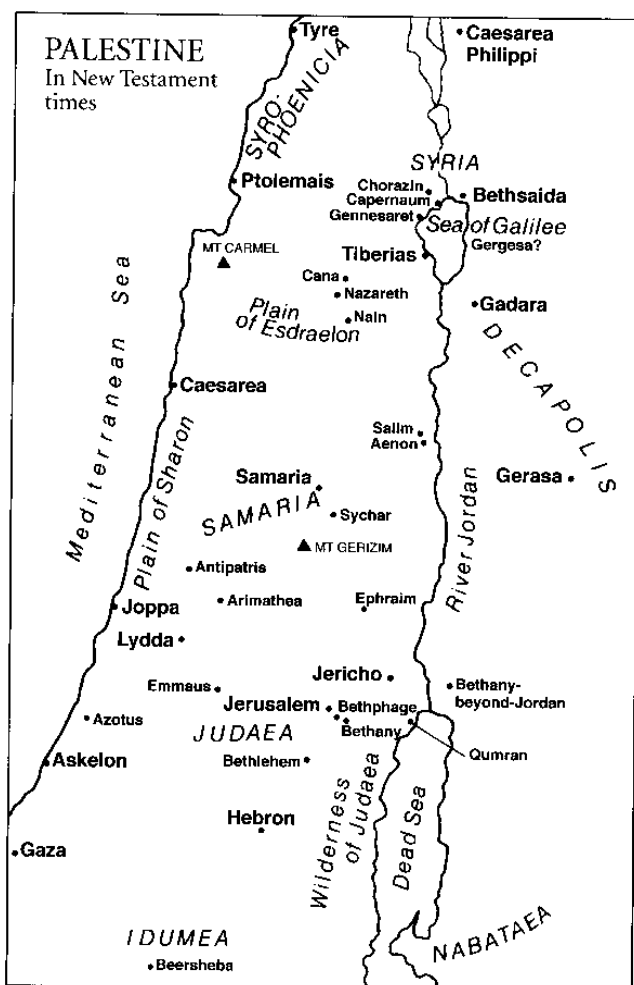
THE WEEK THAT CHANGED THE WORLD

INTRODUCTION

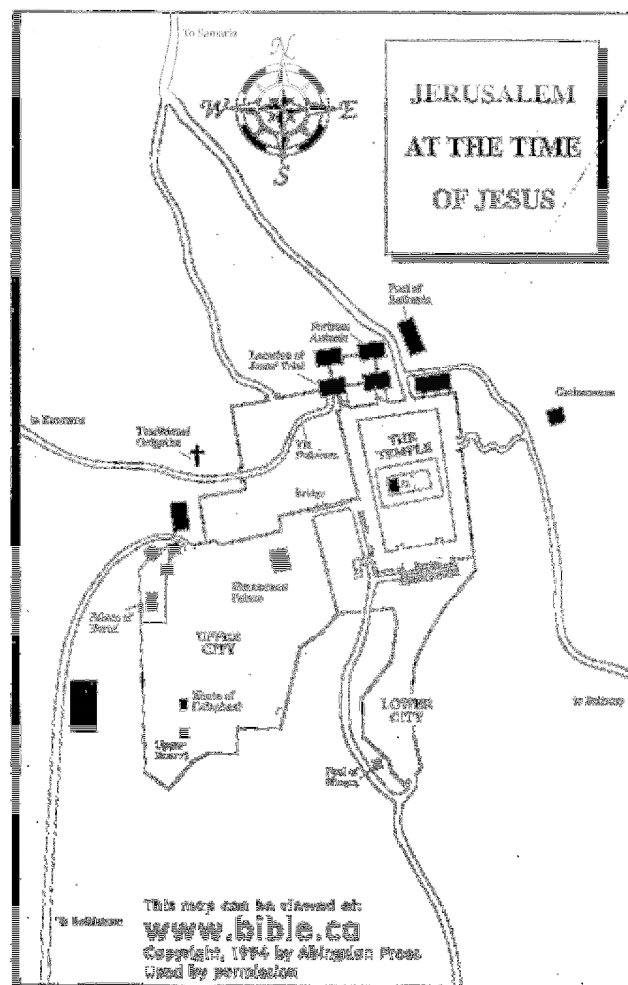
Mark's Gospel is the shortest of the four Gospels – just 16 chapters long. It was probably the first to be written, sometime between 60 and 70 AD. Some commentators have called it a Passion story with an introduction, because such a large proportion of it – about a third - is taken up with the events of the last week of Jesus' life. We will be looking at that story and exploring its themes together during this four week course.

Why is this called the Passion?

The English word *passion* is derived from the Latin word for suffering, *patientia*, which also gives us *patient* and *patience*.



Map from “Mark for Everyone” by Tom Wright



PLEASE BRING A BIBLE WITH YOU TO SESSIONS IF POSSIBLE

It will help if you have read the passage set for each week before hand.

You might like to mark the passage with the following symbols:

? – something that puzzles you

! – something that surprises you

SESSION 1

Celebrity and Rejection!

Read Mark 11 – 12.12 in advance of the meeting if possible

INTRODUCTION (20 mins)

Look at the following pictures of leaders, past and present. Whether we consider them to be heroes or villains, they are all people whom others have followed.



- What do you think their followers saw or see in them? What leadership qualities do you think they displayed?
Make a list of these qualities
- What do you look for in a leader? Talk about some of the people who are or who have been an inspiration to you.

WATCH the "Entry into Jerusalem" chapter from The Passion (Episode 1. Chapter 3) from 11 mins to 14 mins.

SOME BACKGROUND (10 mins)

In the Old Testament, we can find many examples of prophets "acting out" their message. Ezekiel is told to build a model of the city of Jerusalem as if it is under siege and lie beside it in public as a warning that this is what will shortly happen to it. (Ezekiel 4) Jeremiah is sent to buy an earthenware jug and smash it in the sight of the senior priests. Jerusalem too will be smashed like this, he is to tell them. (Jeremiah 19)

The events around Jesus' entry into Jerusalem and the cleansing of the Temple can be seen as acted messages like this. He draws on common expectations of what the arrival of the Messiah would be like, but also manages to subvert and change those expectations.

What did people expect?

It is hard to give a simple answer to this question. There were many different Jewish groups, all with their own ideas and expectations about the Messiah. Some looked for a religious teacher who would call people back to holiness. They focused on keeping the laws. Some groups moved out into separatist communities in the desert, like the Essenes who wrote the Dead Sea Scrolls, so that they could maintain what they thought was a higher standard of purity. They were trying to build a community that would be the base for the new kingdom the Messiah came to bring. Others, like the Zealots, expected a military leader who would defeat their oppressors, as previous national heroes like King David had done.

Most probably didn't know what they expected. They just wanted someone who would be a strong figure to rally around.

Cleansing the Temple

The problem Jesus reacted to when he drove the money changers and traders from the Temple was not simply that they were using the Temple as a commercial base. The real issue was that they were doing so in the Court of the Gentiles, the only part of the Temple accessible to non-Jews. The original vision of the Old Testament was that the Jewish people's relationship with God was meant to help them show God's light to the world, not to keep it for themselves. In turning the Court of the Gentiles into a market-place, they have effectively excluded the Gentiles from even their little toehold in this place of worship. Jesus calls it a "den of robbers". The Greek word Mark uses for "robbers" is not simply the word for a common criminal but also, in the view of many Biblical commentators, has political or ideological overtones. The nearest parallel for us might be those low-level thugs on the fringes of groups like the BNP who stir up violence and trouble. Jesus is accusing those who exclude others from worship of stealing from them their right to worship.

DISCUSSION (30 mins)

Look back at the passage (Mark 11.12-12) for this session. Remind yourself of the events that happen within these chapters. There was obviously a lot of action going on behind the scenes among the Jewish leaders.

- **Looking at the list of leadership qualities you made earlier, which of these do you think Jesus displayed?**
- **What kind of leader do you think he wanted to be?**
- **Imagine you are a member of the Sanhedrin, the Jewish "council" of rulers. You have seen Jesus enter Jerusalem and empty the Temple of traders. You have heard him preach. A meeting of the Sanhedrin has been convened to discuss Jesus and what should be done about him.**
 - **What sorts of concerns do you have?**
 - **Why do you think you should get rid of him?**
 - **What justification will you give for doing so?**
 - **How do you feel about the parable he told of the Wicked Tenants? (12.1-12)**
- **How far do you sympathise with the position of the Jewish leaders?**

REFLECTION (20 mins)

DON'T FOLLOW ME – I'M LOST TOO! (as the well known bumper sticker puts it)

- **We are all leaders in different ways, because we all have an influence on others. Who is looking to you for a lead?**
- **How do you feel about the idea of being a leader?**
- **Looking back at the list of leadership qualities you made at the beginning, which have you got and which do you need to develop?**

SESSION 2

Friendship and Betrayal!

Read Mark 14.1-51 before the session if possible

INTRODUCTION (30 mins)

This week's session looks at the themes of friendship and betrayal.

- Think of friends you have or have had in the past. Talk about those relationships and what they have meant to you.
- “That’s what friends are for...” we say – but what do you think friends are for?
- Most of us will have had the experience of being let down by friends, or of times when we feel we have let them down ourselves. What sorts of things get in the way of friendship or cause it to falter?

WATCH the Passion Episode 2 Chapter 5 (“Find a man” around 23 mins, through to the end)

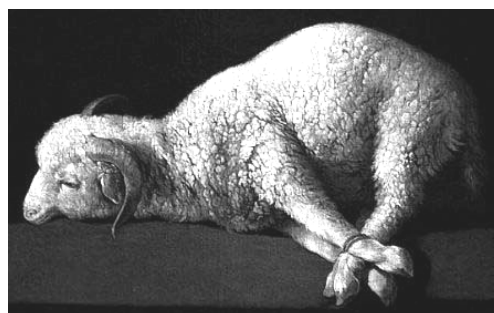
- What is going on in the relationships portrayed in this episode (between Jesus and the disciples, Judas, the High priest...)? What stresses are those relationships under?

SOME BACKGROUND

The Passover

Mark, along with Matthew and Luke, has the Last Supper as the Passover meal; in John's version, Jesus is crucified on the Eve of the Passover. We don't know which version is accurate, but the association with Passover is important, whatever the detail of the timing. The Passover meal commemorated the Israelites escape from slavery in Egypt. It was a feast of liberation, but it was liberation that was hard won, preceded by 10 plagues. The final plague involved the death of every first-born male in Egypt, with the exception of the Israelites who had smeared their doorposts with the blood of a lamb to signal their obedience to God. The angel of death “passed over” these houses, and the people were able to escape and eventually form themselves into a new people in the land God gave them. Through their wandering in the wilderness, they forged a relationship with God – a covenant – which shaped them as individuals and as a nation.

In Jesus, say the Gospel writers, there is a new Passover, a new liberation, one that is not just for the Jewish people but for all who want to be part of it. There is a new “covenant”, made this time through the sacrifice of Jesus – it is his blood that is the sign of this covenant, not the blood of the Passover lamb. Those who are part of his new people are called to make a new kingdom.



Agnus Dei (The Lamb of God)
Francisco de Zurbarán (1598-1664),

“as though I were a bandit” (vs 48)

The Greek word which is translated “bandit” here is the same as that used in the story of the Cleansing of the Temple, which I referred to last week. Jesus is being treated as if he is simply a thug, intent on disturbing the peace of Jerusalem.

The man in the linen cloth (vs 51)

It has long been suggested that the man who ran off naked into the garden leaving his linen cloth behind was the author of the gospel, mainly on the grounds that there appears to be no very good reason for mentioning him otherwise. Traditionally the gospel is ascribed to Mark, who was a travelling companion of St Paul for a while, (Acts 12.12 and 12.25). Tradition says that he eventually became a friend and helper of Peter and wrote down what were essentially Peter's reminiscences in his gospel. It is an attractive theory, though there isn't any evidence to back it up. It reminds us that the people in the story were real people. Although we can't be sure of the historical accuracy of the Gospels we do know that Jesus really existed and was crucified and that he had followers – people whose stories may well have been known to the Gospel writers.

Discussion (30 mins)

Look back at the passage set for this session (Mark 14.1-52). It is a mosaic of light and darkness; the plotting of the priests and the love of the woman who anoints Jesus, the closeness of the shared supper, and the failure of the disciples to live up to their promises of loyalty.

- **Look at Jesus' words – you might like to underline them or mark them out in some way or read them through as if they were one uninterrupted speech. What do his words tell you about his thoughts and feelings?**
- **List the other people in the passage. What do you think each of them is thinking and feeling? What do they think of Jesus? Who do they think he is, and what do they think he ought to be doing?**
- **Who do you most identify with of those around Jesus? How do you think you would have felt at this stage in his story?**

REFLECTION (20 mins)

The first Passover – the exodus from Egypt – led to the former Hebrew slaves being formed into a new community, bound together by the laws given to Moses in the desert. They were called into a new relationship with God and a new relationship with one another.

In the second "Passover", the death and resurrection of Jesus, those who follow him are called into a new relationship with God and one another too. We are called to live as children of God and brothers and sisters to one another. There is to be neither "Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus." (Galatians 3.28)

Just as in Jesus' time, though, all sorts of issues divide us – the Christian church does not look much like one big happy family. Instead, we mistrust and misunderstand one another.

- **What prevents Christians from having the kind of relationships we should have with one another?**
- **Do you think it is possible for people with diverse opinions to exist in one Church? How do you think we should deal with our differences?**

SESSION 3

The End of Everything!

Read Mark 14.53 -15.39 before the meeting if possible.

INTRODUCTION (20 mins)

- Disaster movies are among the most successful film genres. List some that you can recall. If you are a disaster movie fan, what is it about them that is so satisfying for you?
- Almost all disaster movies end with some sort of last minute rescue – the world is somehow saved in the nick of time. Looking at the list you made, try to imagine that this last minute rescue did not happen, that the world was destroyed by the asteroid or the city swallowed by the Volcano. What would it be like watching a movie like that? Would it have the same appeal?

WATCH The Passion **Episode 3 Ch ?** – about 31 mins – 34 mins in. (The chief priests bring Jesus to Pilate)

SOME BACKGROUND

Pilate and the Jewish rulers

Judea at the time of Jesus was under Roman control. The representative of the Emperor was Pontius Pilate, the governor. He had overall charge, but in reality, there were also local rulers and others with influence who could not be ignored. These included King Herod, the puppet ruler of Galilee, and religious rulers like the High Priest, Caiaphas. When Jesus is arrested, he is shuttled between these groups (Only Luke mentions Herod). Each Gospel has a slightly different emphasis in terms of whether they put more responsibility on the Jewish or Roman leaders for Jesus' death. Some scholars have suggested that all the Gospels probably downplay the responsibility of Rome because they were writing in circumstances where they felt they had to be careful what they said about Rome – offending the Romans was more dangerous than offending the Jewish leaders! On the other hand, perhaps we find it easier today to cast blame on Rome, a power which is long gone, than we might on the Jewish leaders, since we are aware of the bitter legacy of anti-Semitism which has sprung from ascribing responsibility for the crucifixion to all Jews. To do so is, of course, a complete misreading of the story since Jesus and all his followers were also Jewish.

Barabbas

Mark describes Barabbas as someone who was “in prison with the rebels who had committed murder during the insurrection”. He clearly expects us to know which insurrection this was – it is some widely known rebellion or riot. The other Gospels describe Barabbas as a “notorious prisoner” (Matt) or a “bandit” (Luke). He is one of those “lestes” we have heard about before in the Passion stories – a thug involved in some sort of politically motivated riot.

The name Barabbas literally means “son of the father”. The crowd are being asked to choose between one people (in early versions of Matthew's Gospel Barabbas is also given the first name Jesus) who is literally called “son of the father” and another who, he says, really is the “Son of the Father”. The parallelism of their names is probably highlighted deliberately by Mark.

Simon of Cyrene

Simon of Cyrene, who is compelled by the Romans to help carry the cross, is described as “the father of Alexander and Rufus”. They aren't referred to anywhere else in the story, but the hearers are evidently supposed to recognise the names, so they must have eventually become Christians. Simon's involuntary part in the crucifixion plainly had a deep effect on his life.

“The curtain of the Temple was torn in two” 15.38

The curtain of the Temple is the curtain which screened off the Holy of Holies, the most sacred part of the Temple. The Holy of Holies in the original Temple, built by Solomon, contained the “mercy seat” and the Ark of the Covenant where the stone tablets with the 10 commandments were kept. Although God was not believed to be contained within the Temple, this was, symbolically, the place where the people of Israel

expected to encounter him. Only the high priest was allowed within the Holy of Holies, and only on one day of the year, the Day of Atonement, after lengthy preparation. When Mark's readers heard that the Temple curtain had been torn in two they would understand this to mean that, through Jesus' death, the barriers to approaching God had been removed. Anyone could now come into his presence. The fact that the curtain was torn from top to bottom implied that this was done by the hand of God rather than by human hands.

DISCUSSION (30 mins)

Look back over the passage set for today.

- **Try to untangle where Jesus is taken and who is accusing him of what. Why does his ministry worry the Jewish leaders? Why does it worry Pilate?**
- **Do you think the charges against him are justified? Could he have argued his way out of his death?**
- **Marks account of Jesus' trial and crucifixion contains many cruel details – the mockery of the soldiers, the crowd's choice of Barabbas, the soldiers gambling for Christ's clothes, for example. Some of the pain inflicted is physical and some is emotional. What, for you, is the worst thing about this process?**
- **How would it change the impact of this story if there had been a disaster-movie-style last minute rescue by God – if Elijah had "come to take him down" as some in the crowd seem to expect 15.36. If Jesus could have avoided the crucifixion, what would be gained, or lost?**

REFLECTION

Look at the picture (right), by Hieronymus Bosch. In it, Christ carries his cross through a crowd in which there seems to be not one sympathetic character. Even St Veronica, the legendary figure who was supposed to have wiped Christ's face with a cloth which then retained his image, who we can see in the bottom left hand corner, seems to be more interested in the cloth than in him. Look back at the account of the crucifixion (15.21-39) – read it slowly. Just as in Bosch's picture there is not one sympathetic character here either; no penitent thief defending Jesus, none of Jesus' disciples close by (the women watch from a distance – 15.40). Jesus is entirely alone. Spend some time in silence reflecting on this.

**Christ carrying the cross:
Hieronymus Bosch, 1515-1516**



SESSION 4

A New Beginning?

INTRODUCTION

Watch “The Passion” Episode 4. Ch 2 (“God has broken my heart”)