

# HEARERS OF THE WORD

Job 7:11-4, 6-7; Psalm 147 (146); 1 Corinthians 9:16-19, 22-23; Mark 1:29-39

## Let us go on to the neighbouring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also

Mark 1:29 As soon as they left the synagogue, they entered the house of Simon and Andrew, with James and John. 30 Now Simon's mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they told Jesus about her at once. 31 He came and took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them.

Mark 1:32 That evening, at sundown, they brought to him all who were sick or possessed with demons. 33 And the whole city was gathered around the door. 34 And he cured many who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons; and he would not permit the demons to speak, because they knew him.

Mark 1:35 In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed. 36 And Simon and his companions hunted for him. 37 When they found him, they said to him, "Everyone is searching for you." 38 He answered, "Let us go on to the neighbouring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do." 39 And he went throughout Galilee, proclaiming the message in their synagogues and casting out demons.

### INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

Although short, there are four moments in these eleven verses from Mark 1: (a) a

miracle, (b) cures and exorcisms in general, (c) Jesus at prayer and (d) a very brief summary statement at the end.

### KIND OF WRITING

(a) The miracle story is unusual. Usually, such stories have five steps: the sick person's need, the encounter with Jesus, the request, the healing moment in word and/or gesture, the evidence of the cure. Our story is missing the request and the word. Verse 31b, which might seem a little hard on the woman just up from her sick bed, is proof that the cure was fully effective. The stripping away of incidental details serves to profile the power of Jesus.

(b) That power is equally at work in this general scene. Illnesses of all kinds were attributed to evil spirits (compare "So his fame spread throughout all Syria, and they brought to him all the sick, those who were afflicted with various diseases and pains, demoniacs, epileptics, and paralytics, and he cured them." [Matthew 4:24]). Forbidding the demons to speak is a feature of the narrative of Mark (those from the world of the spirit reminds the readers of who Jesus really is) and of the theology of Mark (the theme of the Messianic secret).

(c) The prayer scene is a typical vignette or *chreia*, showing some essential characteristic of the protagonist's life. The previous day had sparked enthusiasm for

### Thought for the day

Which of us is not in need of some kind of healing? The healing touch of Jesus reaches out to all in need: the physically ill, the mentally disturbed, the addicts, the bereaved, the lonely, the distraught, the stressed, the sinners. He desires our well-being, that we might be fully alive and experience life in abundance.

### Prayer

I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

(Ephesians 3:16-19)

Jesus. The source of his readiness is revealed as prayer.

(d) Finally, Mark has dotted his account with summary and transition passages and this is one example.

### OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND

There is no very specific OT reference here. Galilee is mentioned fairly frequently (Josh 12:23; 20:7; 21:32; 1Kings 9:11; 2Kings 15:29; 1Chr 6:76; Is 9:1; Tob 1:2, 5; Judith 1:8; 15:5; 1Mac 5:14-15, 17, 20-21, 23, 55; 10:30; 11:63; 12:47, 49). At the time, it was rural and Aramaic-speaking. Considerable Hellenisation is evidenced in the cities, largely avoided by Jesus.

### NEW TESTAMENT FOREGROUND

Diseases and sicknesses are features of the ministry of Jesus in the Gospels (e.g. Mark 1:32, 34; 2:17; 3:10; 4:29; 5:29, 34; 6:5, 13, 55-56).

Jesus is shown at prayer three times in



this gospel and there is a teaching about prayer as well. (Mark 1:35; 6:46; 9:29; 11:17, 24-25; 12:40; 13:18; 14:32, 35, 38-39). The Baptism, the Transfiguration, the Lord's Supper and the crucifixion are also examples without the word "prayer" being used.

**ST PAUL**

We always give thanks to God for all of you and mention you in our prayers, constantly remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.

For we know, brothers and sisters beloved by God, that he has chosen you, because our message of the gospel came to you not in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction; just as you know what kind of persons we proved to be among you for your sake. And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for in spite of persecution you received the word with joy inspired by the Holy Spirit, so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia.

For the word of the Lord has sounded forth from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but in every place your faith in God has become known, so that we have no need to speak about it. For the people of those regions report about us what kind of welcome we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols, to serve a living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead—Jesus, who rescues us from the wrath that is coming. (1 Thessalonians 1:2-10)

**BRIEF COMMENTARY**

**Verse 29** Andrew is not so important in this Gospel, though he does turn up again at 13:3. The trio of Simon, James and John recurs with some frequency (Mark 1:29; 5:37; 9:2; 13:3; 14:33).

On an archeological note, a house has been traditionally identified as that of Peter in Capernaum. It could well be historical, given the antiquity of the tradition. In the Byzantine period, it was converted into an octagonal shrine. A raised church with a glass floor stands over it now.

**Verse 30** Simon Peter was married, as is confirmed in Paul: *Do we not have the right to be accompanied by a believing wife, as do the other apostles and the brothers of the Lord and Cephas?* (1 Corinthians 9:5)

**Verse 31** This is the moment of encounter and of the effectiveness of the cure. The language used—raised—is the same as for the resurrection. This is a hint, from Mark to the reader, that the miracles point beyond themselves to Jesus' saving death and resurrection.

**Verse 32** Typically, Mark gives a double indication of time (evening, sundown). It is permissible to carry people to Jesus because the Sabbath ended at sunset.

In the culture, you could almost translate, the sick, *that is*, those possessed by demons. Of course, they are not identical but any illness was an experience of evil / demonic power and so some degree that is true always.

**Verse 33** The gathering is quite graphic: no room even around the doorway.

**Verse 34** According to the scholarly theory of the Messianic Secret, Jesus' own historical reticence about his identity was elevated by Mark into a strong feature of his story to help readers at the time of writing to understand how it was that most of Jesus' contemporaries did not recognise him. The same topic comes up for extensive reflection in Romans 9-11.

**Verse 35** Notice again the double marking of time. Jesus own prayer during the ministry is incidentally reported in Mark 6: "After saying farewell to them, he went up on the mountain to pray." (Mark 6:46) Jesus at prayer underlines his humanity—like us he needed to pray to God.

**Verse 36** Hunt is quite a strong verb, meaning to look for something diligently or even aggressively. In Greek, it is somewhat hostile, suggesting that even those nearest wouldn't leave him alone.

**Verse 37** A generalised statement of the excitement generated. In any case, *they* are searching for him.

**Verse 38** The expression translated as "proclaim the message" is a single word in Greek, "to herald". It is a technical term for the effective proclamation of Jesus, and it is regularly associated with conversion and gospel (Mark 1:4, 7, 14, 38-39, 45; 3:14; 5:20; 6:12; 7:36; 13:10; 14:9). The noun *kerygma* with it associated adjective *kerygmatic* comes from it. A *keryx* was a herald.

Jesus, whom they have disturbed, is nevertheless willing listen to their need and to respond accordingly.

**Verse 39** Notice again the little slip *their* synagogues, revealing the context of the emerging parting of the ways between the parent religion and Christianity.

**POINTERS FOR PRAYER**

**1.** The first story (vv. 29-31) is one of healing. You might reflect on times when you were sick in body, mind or spirit and someone was a 'Jesus person' to you, someone who 'took you by the hand and lifted you up'. Remember them with gratitude. Have there been times also when you did this for others?

**2.** The second story (vv. 32-34) adds another dimension. People are freed from demons. Have you had the experience of being freed from demons that imprisoned you: fear, anxiety, guilt, low self-esteem, addictions, bitterness, etc.? What was it like for you to get that freedom? Who were the 'Jesus people' who helped to free you?

**3.** The third story (vv. 35-39) has a number of different elements we can consider:

a) Jesus goes off to a desert place to pray. After a hectic day he felt the need for quiet to ground himself once more. In the busyness of life how do you keep in touch with what is going on inside yourself? How do you keep in touch with God? Where do you find your 'deserted place'? What difference does it make for you when you do succeed in taking time out?

b) Jesus shows himself as a person seeking to break new ground. The disciples want him to continue ministry where he is. He wants to move on. What has been your experience of breaking new ground, moving beyond your comfort zone, or trying something you had not tried before? When has this had a life-giving effect for you?

**PRAYER**

Out of your power and compassion, O God, you sent your Son into our afflicted world to proclaim the day of salvation.

Heal the broken-hearted; bind up our wounds, bring us health of body and spirit and raise to us to new life in your service.

We ask this through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, God for ever and ever. Amen

# I do it all for the sake of the gospel, so that I may share in its blessings

1 Cor 9:15 *But I have made no use of any of these rights, nor am I writing this so that they may be applied in my case. Indeed, I would rather die than that—no one will deprive me of my ground for boasting!* 16 If I proclaim the gospel, this gives me no ground for boasting, for an obligation is laid on me, and woe to me if I do not proclaim the gospel! 17 For if I do this of my own will, I have a reward; but if not of my own will, I am entrusted with a commission. 18 What then is my reward? Just this: that in my proclamation I may make the gospel free of charge, so as not to make full use of my rights in the gospel.

1 Cor 9:19 For though I am free with respect to all, I have made myself a slave to all, so that I might win more of them. 20 *To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though I myself am not under the law) so that I might win those under the law.* 21 *To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law) so that I might win those outside the law.* 22 To the weak I became weak, so that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that I might by all means save some. 23 I do it all for the sake of the gospel, so that I may share in its blessings.

## INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

At first sight, this passage is not so easy to follow. Some phrases have been restored above but the whole context (see below) is required to make sense of it. The earlier part of ch. 9 is meant humorously, a rare enough aspect of Paul.

## KIND OF WRITING

This digression is laid out in mirror sections as follows:

- A.** Paul himself as a free apostle (1-2)
- B.** Paul's exercise of freedom (3-14)
- B\*** Paul chooses *not* to exercise (15-18)
- A\*** Paul's adaptability (19-23)
- Athletic comparison (24-25)
- Paul as example (26-27)

Our reading is really B\*A\*, with editing in the lectionary. The previous section should also be read to pick up the enjoyable tone of mock/serious defence throughout. He established beyond all

reasonable doubt that he has the right to be paid as an apostle but he does not exercise that right. And that's his point.

## ORIGIN OF THE READING

The issue arising from ch. 8 is the good use of freedom and knowledge so that others may be built up. The context is that of food sacrificed to idols, but it has a wider application. Paul then embarks on a digression to illustrate what he means, using two examples himself and the generation of the Exodus.

## RELATED READINGS

As you know and as God is our witness, we never came with words of flattery or with a pretext for greed; nor did we seek praise from mortals, whether from you or from others, though we might have made demands as apostles of Christ. But we were gentle among you, like a nurse tenderly caring for her own children. So deeply do we care for you that we are determined to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you have become very dear to us. (1Thessalonians 2:5-8)

For the love of Christ controls us, since we have concluded this, that Christ died for all; therefore all have died. (2Corinthians 5:14)

So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do everything for the glory of God. Give no offence to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God, just as I try to please everyone in everything I do, not seeking my own advantage, but that of many, so that they may be saved. Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ. (1Corinthians 10:31-11:1)

But we who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak, and not just please ourselves. Let each of us please his neighbour for his good to build him up. For even Christ did not please himself, but just as it is written, "The insults of those who insult you have fallen on me." (Romans 15:1-3)

## BRIEF COMMENTARY

**Verse 15** Paul "boasts" that he is free not to exercise his authority.

**Verse 16** Immediately (as in 2 Cor 13), he denies that he can boast at all.

**Verse 17** Nevertheless, he will have reward/wages, that is, the reward of not taking wages (v. 18).

**Verse 18** This is very thing which got him into trouble with the Thessalonians (see above). As he said at the start, *Am I not free?* To put it in modern terms, he has the pleasure of postponed gratification.

**Verse 19** Paul is a paradox in relation to God (slave and free) and also in relation to the mission (free and slave). The playful language continues: one of the meanings of "win" is to earn.

**Verses 20-21** Paul illustrates his adaptability to all, accommodating himself to all kinds of people and their reactions. Another paradox: he is free and not under the Law; he is not free, but under the law of Christ. No doubt the portrait here will be obvious to all in Corinth. Paul is not a pastoral chameleon but intent upon meeting people where he finds them. The freedom in verse 20 is inconsistent with Galatians but consistent with Romans, where he is more tolerant of practicing the Law.

**Verse 22** The startlingly specific identification of the week is consistent with Romans 15 above. In other words, the more advanced have greater responsibilities. "All things" is an expression with a chiefly commercial ring to it, thus sustaining the earning metaphor throughout.

**Verse 23** Paul's ultimate purpose and motivation.

## POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. The good exercise of freedom is often a challenge. The key criterion or discernment remains the building up of others.
2. Paul's absolute dedication to the Gospel does indeed put it up to us all today. We pray that we may become so.

## PRAYER

Set us on fire, O God, with the energy of the Holy Spirit, that we may serve the Gospel with every fibre of our being. Give us true freedom and the gift of knowing when to exercise it and when not to.

We make our prayer through our Lord Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God forever and ever. Amen.



# My days are swifter than a weaver's shuttle, and come to their end without hope

Job 7:1 “Do not human beings have a hard service on earth, and are not their days like the days of a labourer? 2 Like a slave who longs for the shadow, and like labourers who look for their wages, 3 so I am allotted months of emptiness, and nights of misery are apportioned to me. 4 When I lie down I say, ‘When shall I rise?’ But the night is long, and I am full of tossing until dawn. 5 *My flesh is clothed with worms and dirt; my skin hardens, then breaks out again.* 6 My days are swifter than a weaver’s shuttle, and come to their end without hope. Job 7:7 “Remember that my life is a breath; my eye will never again see good. 8 *The eye that beholds me will see me no more; while your eyes are upon me, I shall be gone.*

## INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

Job is an arresting book and today’s first reading is quite striking. It is chosen in the light of Gospel passage, which enumerates healings performed by Jesus. The reading goes wider, however, than any single complaint and deals really with the human condition as such. It illustrates well the comment of Kierkegaard that Job “keeps the wound of the negative open.” If well read, this could be a very powerful reading indeed.

The lectionary omits v. 5, probably because of forthright description of Job’s physical condition. V. 8 has been added here to complete the literary unit.

## ORIGIN OF THE READING

The book of Job begins and ends in prose (Job 1-2 and 42). The substance of the book, however, is in the dialogues, which are in powerful poetry.

- I. The Prologue 1-2
- II. The Dialogue 3-31
- III. The Discourses of Elihu 33-37
- IV. The Reply of YHWH 38-41
- V. The Epilogue 42

The “meat” of the argument is in the conversation between Job and his friends. This dialogue unfolds in three great cycles: (1) 3-14; (2) 15-21; (3) 22-27. In the three cycles, the three friends each speak and Job replies to each. Our verses from Job 7 are found within the first cycle of speeches, as follows:

Job (3, 6-7, 9-10, 12-14)  
Eliphaz (4-5)  
Bildad (8)  
Zophar (11)

Job opens the dialogue and then the friends speak in turn. The lion’s share falls to Job, who responds to the friends one by one. To get a sense of context, it would be good to read Job 6-7. For a real cool dip in the icy waters of Job, take a look at ch. 3.

## KIND OF WRITING

Job 7 may be divided into three literary units, which resemble each other in structure and content. The first unit, 7:1-8, has this pattern: Axiom (1-2); Complaint (3-4, 5-6), Taunt (7-8).

## RELATED READINGS

Perhaps the easiest way to feel the power of the images here is to see their use elsewhere in the book of itself.

(i) Hard service: the word is *tsaba*, meaning military service or compulsory service (the word *sabaoth*, “hosts”, comes from it). The word occurs three times in Job. As is evident, it does not mean to serve in the sense of to be of help. Cf. Job 10:17; 14:14.

(ii) Slave (or servant) is used widely both as noun and as verb in the book of Job. There is considerable irony because, in the prologue and the epilogue, the word is used by God about Job very positively. On the lips of Job himself, however, the sense is simply negative. Cf. Job 3:19; 21:15.

(iii) Shadow: a metaphor for both relief (from heat and oppression) and the brevity of life. Cf. Job 14:1-2; 17:7.

(iv) Night is a huge theme in Job, as can be seen from this sample of verses:

*Let the day perish in which I was born, and the night that said, ‘A man-child is conceived.’ That night—let thick darkness seize it! let it not rejoice among the days of the year; let it not come into the number of the months. Yes, let that night be barren; let no joyful cry be heard in it. (Job 3:3, 6-7)*

(v) Shuttle: Job often wearily mentions days, months and years. He complains

that life is short and at the same time too long. The image of the weaver and shuttle does not recur in Job but in Isaiah.

*My dwelling is plucked up and removed from me like a shepherd’s tent; like a weaver I have rolled up my life; he cuts me off from the loom; from day to night you bring me to an end. (Is 38:12)*

## BRIEF COMMENTARY

**Verses 1-2** The axiom, restated here, seems to come from general Ancient Near Eastern wisdom. Forced labour was used as a metaphor for the human condition. The longed-for shade means both “end” and at the same time “refreshment”.

**Verses 3-4** Job moves to his particular experience. In the literature, nocturnal agony is frequently used to express the grip of oppression.

**Verses 5-6** The mental torment is accompanied by physical pain. Worm—not in the lectionary verses—is often used for mortality and the experience in Sheol.

**Verses 7-8** The covenant cry “remember” is used ironically: leave me alone! Breath (*ruach*) also has two meanings. It does mean breath / wind, but also the spirit God breathed into human beings at creation.

## POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. Anyone with some experience of life should be able to identify with the axiom in vv.1-2. When / how did you become aware that “life is difficult”? (Cf. the opening words of *The Road Less Travelled*.)

2. How have you been able to cope with the pressure, which leads to sleepless nights?

3. The “eye” is a tough name for God (cf. big brother). Of course, sometimes we do wonder about God and God’s attention to us.

## PRAYER

God of all life, when suffering comes our way, let us have the courage always to bring it into your presence and to speak our pain with feeling and frankness. God of Jesus Christ, may we see in him your word of compassion as he accompanies us on the pilgrimage of life. We make our prayer through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, God for ever and ever. Amen

# THE LITURGY

Job 7:11-4, 6-7; Psalm 147 (146); 1 Corinthians 9:16-19, 22-23; Mark 1:29-39

## READINGS 1 AND 3

Job is about the experience of innocent suffering, not an uncommon experience as we know. The author of the book of Job eventually puts God in the dock (ch. 31) and Job demands justice or at the very least an explanation. In the Gospel, we see Jesus respond both to the everyday suffering (Peter's mother-in-law) and to the root cause, evil as such, represented by the demons. Even then, there is no single grand explanation. However, the Christian faith brings a breath-taking dimension to the discussion: Jesus, the compassion of God, God incarnate, entered fully into the human condition, even accepting death on a cross. Cf. *He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that, free from sins, we might live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed.* (1 Pet 2:24)

## THE RESPONSORIAL PSALM

Psalm 147 constitutes a reply to the bleakness of the verses of Job just read. It balances the despair of Job with the more ordinary affirmations of the Bible that God comes to our help. A few verses can illustrate.

He heals the broken-hearted, and binds up their wounds. The Lord lifts up the downtrodden; he casts the wicked to the ground. (Psa 147:3, 6)

Such faith bridges the experience of Job 7 and the healings of Jesus in Mark 1.

## SUNDAY INTRODUCTIONS

### First reading

*Job 7:1-4, 6-7*

A big strength of the book of Job is that the writer “tells it like it is.” Anyone who has faced suffering or hardship or injustice will be able to identify with the feelings and words of this short yet powerful reading.

### Second reading

*1 Corinthians 9:16-19, 22-23*

It may seem a surprise to us, but in the days of Jesus, rabbis were supposed to have a trade and support themselves. In today's passage, St Paul tells us why, as a kind of Christian rabbi, he refuses pay-

ment for his work as an apostle. The reasons are quite personal, as we shall hear.

### Gospel

*Mark 1:29-39*

Today we have a thumbnail sketch of Jesus' own ministry. It's a busy schedule, as he helps people in all kinds of needs. Towards the end of this reading, we get a little window on to what it was that kept Jesus going—his times of prayer.

## WEEKDAY INTRODUCTIONS

### Monday 5 February

*St Agatha, virgin and martyr*

*1 Kings 8:1-7, 9-13*

The setting of the ark of the covenant in the Holy of Holies completes the dedication of the Temple. As often, the imagery of cloud—revealing and concealing—conveys the presence of God. Notice the lack of any graven images.

*Mark 6:53-56*

The Gospel of Mark is told in an urgent, breathless style. Today we hear one of those compressed summaries, capturing the popularity of Jesus among the sick.

### Tuesday 6 February

*St Paul Miki and companions, martyrs*

*1 Kings 8:22-23, 27-30*

Every religion has somehow to manage or negotiate the nearness of God (immanence) and the beyond of God (transcendence). Solomon gets it right, in this moving prayer.

*Mark 7:1-13*

Before we plunge into a condemnation of the shallowness of the Pharisees, it is worth remembering that the rules were designed to bring an experience of God's presence into the everyday. Of course, they could become obsessive and pointless—features not unknown in the churches' various devotions! Jesus is sharp in his response, but not any more sharp than any of the prophets of old.

### Wednesday 7 February

*St Mel, bishop*

*1 Kings 10:1-10*

Finally, the famous queen of Sheba visits

to sample the wisdom of Solomon—which she (rightly) attributes to God.

*Mark 7:14-23*

This Gospel reflects an important moment for early Christianity. Although tied to a historical context, the principles are timeless. It is what is on the inside which counts.

### Thursday 8 February

*St Jerome Emilian or St Josephine Bakhita*

*1 Kings 11:4-13*

Under the guise of a prophetic judgment, the reading offers a broader “reading” of Israelite history: idolatry has disastrous consequences.

*Mark 7:24-30*

This story has always appealed — perhaps even more today. Jesus *learns* — at the hands of a woman!

### Friday 9 February

*1 Kings 11:29-32, 12:19*

This rather mysterious reading illustrates something familiar: frequently the prophets demonstrate their teaching with an action or a gesture, as in this reading.

*Mark 7:31-37*

A phrase from this Gospel has found its way into our baptismal ceremony. The priest touches the ears and mouth of the baby and says “*ephphatha*”. Today we get the context. We too can pray that our ears may be opened to the Gospel and that our mouths may be opened to proclaim it.

### Saturday 10 February

*St Scholastica, virgin*

*1 Kings 12:26-32, 13:33-34*

This story should sound familiar: it is another version of the golden calf. The setting up of another sanctuary splits the people of Israel.

*Mark 8:1-10*

To hear this familiar story in a fresh way, it may help to notice that it is Jesus who identifies the needs of his followers. Sometimes, we fail to notice our own deeper needs — to be met in Christ.