

Last week at our united parish service at St Andrew's we began looking at Mark's gospel. Chris Scruby pointed out to us how Mark reads a bit like a thriller, perhaps an action movie, always moving on to the next thing.

We heard how the baptism of Jesus demonstrated the kingdom of God had arrived with heaven opening, the Spirit descending on Jesus, and the voice of God affirming Jesus in his ministry.

Now in this second part of chapter one, we see Jesus speaking and acting with divine authority. In these amazing and beautiful stories, we see God's compassion at work as suffering people are set free, demons rebuked and retreating, and illness confronted and healed.

And authority is Mark's key word. The world we live in is filled with people who have power, sometimes frightening people who demand to be obeyed, and destroy those who oppose them. They have power, but not authority. A toddler with a hand-grenade has power, but not authority. Authority can't be grabbed, it can only be bestowed by someone with greater authority to whom they are answerable.

Jesus had authority because it was bestowed on him by his heavenly Father, as we saw at his baptism.

And those who heard Jesus speak were impressed, they were challenged, they recognised his authority. And to begin with at least, they were favourable towards him. They saw how diseases were healed and demons forced to relinquish their hold over individual human lives.

Whatever your understanding of the world of spirits, the important thing to focus on is that all the unruly forces and powers in God's creation were coming under the sovereignty of Jesus. It is as if the kingdom of God had arrived in one small part of the Universe, and things were being sorted, put right, as a signal that the chosen ruler of God's kingdom was present among them.

No wonder that small gatherings turned to crowds, and the crowds went looking for him. And when they found him, they pressed around him, determined to keep him in their midst. Jesus their Messiah had arrived and everything was about to be transformed.

Nobody, however, expected *how* that would happen, not even Jesus' closest disciples. It was only afterwards the disciples came to realise the great mystery, that it was through the terrible darkness of the cross that Jesus overthrew the dominion of sin and death.

Jesus had authority even when he appeared to be powerless. And his Father in heaven affirmed his authority by raising Jesus from the dead.

That relationship between Jesus and his Father was crucial. There's a verse halfway through our reading, I'm sure you spotted it. Jesus got up very early, while it was still dark, and went off to a place of solitude to pray.

As we read the gospels it becomes clear that this was his practice. Luke's gospel says Jesus often went to a lonely place to pray. It's a pattern he might well have been following all his life.

Jesus had come to serve, to seek and to save. And that meant offering his life to his Father's service every day, keeping in harmony with the Holy Spirit, listening to the voice of God and receiving the ministry of angels.

However, while he was praying, Jesus was interrupted. Inevitably. People who serve others are always being interrupted because life doesn't run on train tracks, it's messy and noisy and demanding.

The disciples arrive to tell Jesus the crowds are looking for him. Luke's gospel goes further and tells us that the crowds wanted to restrain Jesus from leaving them.

But all that force of will, that pressure from his disciples and from the crowds does not deflect Jesus from his deeper purpose.

Being the centre of attention can be a hindrance if celebrity isn't your goal. We only need think of the wise men, the magi, who earnestly sought the baby Jesus. The outcome was, Jesus' whole family had to escape as refugees to Egypt. And many families in Bethlehem lost their baby boys, murdered by Herod. Dark forces coming into conflict with the light of Christ.

Jesus knew he would face opposition. And that he only had a small window of opportunity, a few years, when he could minister before things reached a

showdown. He forbade the demons from witnessing to him for complex reasons, including that it would restrict his freedom to move about. And at the end of our reading we hear how, because of a grateful leper, he could not go into the towns but had to stay outside.

So despite the crowds seeking him, Jesus moves on to the nearby villages. And he moves on because in fact he too is looking for someone. And who is he looking for? He's looking for you, and for me. As he said, it's why he came.

Jesus in that lonely, solitary place, praying before dawn in the presence of his heavenly Father, was in his spirit praying for us, seeking us, just as much as he sought those first disciples. In the hidden darkness, he was reaching out to us in our darkness.

In the gospel stories, we find Jesus was always seeking beyond the boundaries of where he was. That's why he went to Judea as well as Galilee, to Samaria, to the Decapolis, and to Tyre and Sidon. It's why he eventually sent his disciples out to all nations, why he sent Paul to the Gentiles, why each new generation of Christ's church has kept on reaching out beyond all boundaries to bring people the good news. And now we are part of that. Seek Jesus, follow Jesus, and he will ask you to seek others on his behalf.

But it begins with prayer. The hidden life. If I could choose to leave you with one impression, it would be of Jesus, praying in the dark before dawn, his heart filled with light, filled with love for his Father in heaven, ready to do his will because the will of God chimed so perfectly with his own. And then having the strength, the wisdom and the courage to confront a different darkness, and fill that darkness with light.

Prayer is about being open to God, firstly allowing him to serve us, to minister to us; so that we might serve him, and those he gives us to care for. As prayer weaves through our lives, the spirit brings us in tune with God's heart and will for us. And we are enabled to do his will in turn.

We may not see ourselves following Jesus' pattern of early rising. No comment. But maybe if we stretch the image, January is a dark month, we have seen dark

days of rain and cold. Perhaps at the beginning of a new year, this is the time for us to pray. And to seek the light of Christ for our own hearts, and for the dark world we inhabit.

ps. If the idea of praying rings true for you, - maybe start a conversation with someone you trust about how it could happen, whether it should include one or two other people or a group or just on your own. Where and when. But in the detail, don't lose the impetus, the Spirit's nudge. Praying is about you and God. You seeking God, as God is surely seeking you. As we have seen, it's a good place to begin.