

Talk Number Two

Jesus shows us God's new world



I'm not sure who said it, but they were right: Fear *is* a scary thing! I remember as a teenager reading once that "*There are certain whispers at noonday that are far more terrifying than things that go bump in the night*". I was certainly scared when I read that! It is true though isn't it? There are many things that produce fear more effectively than sounds intruding into the quietness of the early hours of a morning. Real fear can often grip us when we realise that this world is not what we would like it to be. For example, when we encounter death at close quarters for the first time. Or we hear the chilling news of a potentially terminal illness. Those are the times when we realise with an awful and chilling clarity that this world is not the world we all want.

1. Jesus gives a glimpse of the world we all want

We have read about an incident in the life of Jesus when he was in a boat on the sea and faced a fierce and threatening storm (Mark 4:35-41). The people with him in the boat were experienced and seasoned fishermen, yet it is clear in the way Mark describes their actions and rebuke of Jesus that they were very scared. This may not have been on the scale of the Perfect Storm, but it was scary. Death was staring them in the face and they were afraid.

The next incident shows Jesus confronted by a notorious madman (Mark 5:1-20). Mark tells us that the man is under the control of demons, and has terrorised the area for a long time. Local people have tried to contain him but whatever they have attempted to do has failed. It must have been a traumatic event for those with Jesus to see this unkempt and scarred man running down the hill towards them. It is always disturbing when we are confronted with something out of the ordinary, such as a terrible disfigurement. We find ourselves staring and with a profound sense that this is not as it should be. Something within us is repulsed and appalled, not at the person but at the condition. Perhaps fear is at the root of that response too?

In the final incidents we saw a woman with a chronic condition and a young 12-year-old girl dying (Mark 5:21-43). Both situations were distressing, and both bear testimony to the fact that this world we live in is far from the world we all want. Both situations carry with them their own 'fear factors', and we manage successfully to exclude them from our thinking and relating. Most of the time!

I suspect few people would willingly invite the label of 'control freak'! The label 'freak' suggests that it is something to be reserved for people who are out of control in their attempt at controlling things! We talk about controlling our emotions, or controlling a situation, or controlling our hair. Often being in control is good and necessary, and certainly desirable on a bad hair day! The problems often occur when we try to control other people by manipulating them or circumstances. Events like the ones described for us by Mark show how uncomfortable we are in situations where we are not in control. Yet the world in which these incidents happen is an ordinary world. They are everyday kind of events, and in their ordinariness they describe a world out

of control. Or at least out of *our* control. The elements are out of control; people are out of control; chronic sickness is out of control; death is out of control. We are impotent in the face of them our fragility is exposed. When the pop star Kylie Minogue was diagnosed with breast cancer she is reported to have said: *I am a fighter and I will beat this*. It was a sad and telling reaction to something over which she has little control. That powerlessness was illustrated with great pathos when Gloria Hunniford was interviewed and her advice to the singer was "Be positive". Ironically, Gloria Hunniford's daughter Caron Keating had died of breast cancer a short time before. She went on to say: *Caron definitely lived a couple of years longer than she might because of her positivity*. For all of her positivity and for all of the medical treatment available, death stalked her and finally took her at the relatively tender age of 40 years old.

Did you notice that fear was a common theme running through all the four incidents? What is of particular interest is fear in relation to Jesus. The followers of Jesus are afraid when they see him calm the storm simply by speaking a word of command (4:41). The locals are afraid when they hear about what Jesus has done to the local maniac (5:16). The woman is afraid when Jesus notices that someone has touched him (5:33).

Jesus is in control and people are in awe of him. He does things that no one else can do. Experienced fishermen watch as the Carpenter controls the sea. Demons who would have laughed at the pathetic attempts of puny humans to deal with the madman among the tombs hang on his every word. Sickness doctors couldn't cure evaporates in his presence. Death immediately gives up its cold grip on a young life as soon as it hears Jesus speak. The response of fear is altogether appropriate in the presence of someone as awesome as Jesus before whom the elements, the demons, sickness and death bow in obedient service. The followers of Jesus were right to ask the question weren't they: Who is this?

New people often make an impact don't they? I remember being at school and learning that there was a new boy in the class. Everyone was talking about him, and he came with quite a reputation. People wanted to know who he was and most of our year was intrigued by him. At least we were for a day or two! How much more intrigue and curiosity must Jesus have generated? "Who is this?" they asked. What do you think is the answer to that question? After reading about these events who do you think Jesus is? What are the options?

A figment of Mark's imagination? A great religious leader? A miracle worker? A wise teacher? All of those are answers suggested by different people over the last 2000 years, and none of them are adequate to explain the Jesus we are introduced to by Mark and others like him in the pages of the New Testament. Mark's answer is that Jesus was sent by God into this broken and often frightening world to bring about the world we all want. He is the one in whom we should invest all our hopes and to whom we should bring all our fears.

"Who is this?" is a crucial question and it comes up on a number of occasions in Mark's biography. Jesus doesn't want us to stand in awe of him or be afraid of him. He wants us to trust him (5:36). As we live in this world with all of its pain and disappointment and as we long for another world, he wants us to trust him. He wants us to recognise that he is the one, the only one, who can bring about the world we all want.

2. Jesus had to die so we could enjoy the world we all want

But there is a twist in the tale. There is a shock. Jesus himself dies. The man who defeated death falls a victim to it. Our hopes are built up only to be shattered into tiny pieces. It forces to ask a difficult question: is this the end of the hope of the world we all want? It is as if Jesus builds up our hopes and then smashes them. As we read the story, perhaps we find ourselves beginning to believe that the world we all want can really happen, but then it ends in tragedy. If Jesus the death-destroyer dies, then surely death has won the final battle?

Look at Mark 8:31-33. Jesus tells his closest friends ahead of time that he is going to die. Indeed, Jesus tells them that he *must* die. This is part of the plan. The friends of Jesus are shocked. Here is the man who has the power to bring the world we all want. And now he says that he must die. What a waste! What an incomprehensible strategy. Why must he die so soon? Surely it would be better to go on healing the sick, defeating evil spirits and feeding the hungry for thirty years and maybe then die an old man if he had to die at all. But why must he die? If Jesus is the man who conquered death surely he need never die.

But Jesus says that he *is* going to die and that he *must* die. Peter, who had been with Jesus since the beginning, tells Jesus not to talk that way. Peter was upset. If Jesus died as he said he was going to then all of Peter's dreams would vanish into thin air. All of his hopes would come to nothing. All of his excitement at what Jesus was doing was pointless. We want to say with Peter: Why must the hope of a new world end in death? Why must this good man die?

But Jesus says: You do not see things as God sees them. God's ways are not our ways. The death of Jesus was part of God's plan. The rest of the Bible tells us that Jesus died so that we could enjoy the world we all want.

The rest of the course shows us why. We will discover why it was necessary for Jesus to die so we could enjoy the world we all want.