**Week 1: Mark 2: 1-12 Jesus forgives and heals a paralysed man**

The whisper went round the village like wildfire. “The Teacher is back!”

I didn’t hesitate. It had been a while since the Teacher was last in town. Then, he had taught in the synagogue and we had all been amazed. There was something different about his teaching- he spoke with an authority that most teachers just didn’t have. And he didn’t just talk, he acted. There were stories of people being healed, bodies and lives restored after they met Jesus, not just here in Capernaum but all over Galilee. And now he was back, and no one wanted to miss out.

Our friend Ben had been unable to move by himself for a long time. When we first heard about the Teacher we’d talked with Ben about whether the Teacher might be able to heal him, and decided it was worth a try. A group of us agreed to carry him to the Teacher next time he was in town. This might be Ben’s only chance, and we couldn’t afford to miss it.

By the time we got there, a crowd had gathered and the place was packed. They were even crowded around the door, straining to hear what the Teacher said. We tried to push our way in but there was no chance. My heart sank. There had to be some way we could get Ben to the Teacher. Then I saw it. Round here, everyone has a flat roof that’s almost like another room of the house. The steps leading up to the roof over where the Teacher was speaking were just beside us.

It wasn’t easy, carrying Ben up there, but we managed it with the help of a rope from someone’s fishing boat. No one paid us much attention, they were too busy listening to the Teacher and his stories. Once there, we started to rip up the roof, pulling the straw out of place until we had a hole big enough, then used the rope to lower Ben on his mat right through the roof.

They noticed then. Some people started shouting and came running up to the roof to see what was going on. But we didn’t care. We’d done it. Ben was lying in front of Jesus. What would he do?

Jesus crouched down to talk to him, although we couldn’t hear what he said because of the noise of the crowd. Then- he looked up at us. I’ve never forgotten the love, the compassion in his eyes. And a touch of humour too. He didn’t mind the broken ceiling. He just saw our hope, our faith that our friend could be healed.

The crowd had fallen silent again. Jesus looked back down at Ben.

“Son, your sins are forgiven.”

I’ll admit, I was disappointed. It wasn’t what we had hoped for. Forgiveness was all very well- the synagogue teachers would say it was more important than physical healing- but it doesn’t help a man put food on the table for his family. It’s easy to say, but it doesn’t change anything.

You could see the crowd thinking the same thing, muttering among themselves. A group of other teachers weren’t happy at all, and were muttering about blasphemy and asking who Jesus thought he was. Only God can forgive sins, after all.

Jesus knew what they were thinking. He looked straight at them and asked which they thought was easier, to heal someone or tell them they were forgiven? He didn’t give them a chance to answer, but turned back to Ben. He told him to get up, pick up the mat he lay on, and go home.

No one in the crowd spoke or even moved. There was total silence. Then slowly, Ben, who a minute before had not been able even to sit up without help, got to his feet. Then he bent down, rolled up the mat, and picked it up. Hesitantly at first but with more confidence in each step, he began to walk towards the door.

The crowd parted to let him through. They wouldn’t make space for him before, but now he was healed they drew back with murmurs of wonder. At the door he turned and smiled back at Jesus, then looked up at us, the smile so wide it covered his whole face. We hurried down to meet him, through the crowd that was now shouting, cheering, praising God. We greeted our friend, restored to health, knowing he was loved, valued, healed. We joined the crowd in praising God and continued celebrating long into the night. It was amazing. Who *was* this man?

**Week 2: Mark 6: 45-56 Jesus walks on the water**

I’ve never been so afraid. I grew up near the water, but that night was like no other. First the storm, and then- well, it’s not an experience I want to repeat in a hurry.

We’d been with Jesus over the far side of the lake, looking to get away from the constant crowds crying out for teaching and healing. It hadn’t worked. So that night Jesus told us to get in the boat and head back to Bethsaida, while he stayed for a bit to pray alone. We did as we were told, although the fishermen among us looked at the sky and muttered ominously about storms. And sure enough, a storm came.

By that time we were right in the middle of the lake. The wind was so fierce we couldn’t make any headway against it. It howled around us, whipping up the waters into waves that seemed to tower over us in our little boat. We were all soaked, tired, and secretly afraid.

The night dragged on, an endless turmoil of wind and darkness and straining at the oars. It was hard to see anything with the spray flying. When I first thought that I saw, or felt, something out in the darkness I dismissed it as a hallucination. But as dawn drew near I saw it more clearly. The shape of a man, not coming straight towards us, but making as if to pass us by.

Someone else saw it at the same time, and shouted that it was a ghost. Everyone stopped rowing and cried out. The boat spun in the wind and nearly capsized as people stood up and grabbed at one another in terror. I wasn’t much better myself. It had to be an omen. This storm would be our deaths.

But then the figure spoke, and we heard him despite the wind. “Don’t be afraid. It’s me.” The voice, so well known, so welcome. It was our friend, Jesus.

He came towards us, walking on the water, as if the storm was nothing. He climbed into the boat with us. The wind died down at once, the water grew calm. We were all stunned into silence.

We’d seen him heal the sick and raise a girl from death, we’d listened as he told stories and taught about God’s kingdom, we’d even helped as he fed thousands of people with five loaves and a couple of fish. Now he’d calmed a storm and walked on water. Was there anything he couldn’t do?

**Week 3: Mark 9: 2-13 The Transfiguration**

It was a steep climb. The three of us were puffing and panting long before we reached the summit. Fishermen aren’t built for mountaineering. Jesus seemed fine though, if a little preoccupied. He hadn’t told us why we were climbing this mountain, or why the others had been left at the bottom. Privately, the three of us all felt rather proud that we had been chosen to accompany him, even if we didn’t know why.

The view from the top almost made the climb worthwhile, seeing our homeland spread out below us. The land Moses had led the Israelite people out of Egypt to settle. The land Elijah and the other prophets had warned would be overthrown and destroyed because of the disobedience of the Israelite people and their leaders. The prophets were right, of course. We were subject now to the Romans and to Herod, their puppet king, the last in a long line of conquerors. Was Jesus going to be the one to overthrow them, and lead us into freedom? Some of our number thought so. In whispers while he wasn’t listening they said Jesus must be the promised Messiah, the one who would bring freedom from our oppressors. They were hoping he would start a violent rebellion, overthrow the Romans, and establish a just and free nation. All the signs were there, they said. He was doing everything the prophets said the Messiah would. Surely, soon, he would declare himself.

Peter made a funny noise in his throat, and pointed at Jesus. As we looked, something happened to Jesus, something impossible to describe. His clothes became dazzling white, whiter than any bleach could make them. It was like he shone.

And the four of us were no longer alone. Two figures had appeared beside Jesus. Moses and Elijah. I don’t know how we knew who they were, but we did.

All we could do was stare open-mouthed in fear and wonder. Moses, the man who had led the Israelites out of slavery, who had received the Law from God and taught it to the Israelites. And Elijah, the great prophet who had confronted the people and their leaders about their disobedience to God’s law. Two of the greatest leaders in Israel’s history, legendary figures. Moses had died long ago, before the people entered the Promised Land he had led them to. Elijah had been taken up to heaven before his apprentice Elisha's eyes.’ And yet here they were- standing on a mountain top, talking to Jesus.

Peter had to go and open his mouth, as usual, and babbled something about building shelters for Jesus, Moses and Elijah. I mean, shelters? This was a miracle happening right in front of us, why did he think that if Moses and Elijah needed shelters they would need us to build them? Was he thinking that they’d come to stay and needed somewhere to live?

Suddenly the sky darkened, and a voice came from out of the cloud- just like it had for the Israelites when God spoke to Moses on Mount Sinai and gave him the Ten Commandments. The three of us cowered in fear.

“This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him!”

The cloud lifted, and the light came back. When we dared to look up, Jesus was standing there, alone, normal. It was as if nothing had happened.

As we went down the mountain Jesus told us not to tell anyone what had happened until “the Son of Man had risen from the dead.” We didn’t have a clue what that meant, but after what we had just seen we weren’t going to object. Jesus talked about suffering, reminded us that Elijah had had his share of tough times because he did what God told him to. He was trying to warn us that he would suffer too. Death, suffering- it didn’t sound much like the victorious messiah the other disciples talked about. But the voice from the cloud had called him Son. What did it all mean?

**Week 4: Mark 14: 12-26 The Last Supper**

We were all hungry by the time we arrived at the upstairs room. It was the first day of the festival of unleavened bread, and we were all looking forward to relaxing and enjoying the Passover meal together. It wasn’t just another feast. This was a special time to recall our history, to remember that we were the people God had rescued from slavery and had made a covenant with, a promise that God would be with us.

Earlier in the day Jesus had sent a couple of the disciples to prepare the meal, and we could smell the roast lamb and fresh bread as we climbed the stairs. The room was brightly lit with lamps, and set out with everything we needed for the evening’s feast- bread, wine, meat, bitter herbs. We didn’t waste time in settling down to the meal.

We were expecting a comfortable evening of eating, drinking and telling stories, both of Israel’s history and of our own experiences. We thought maybe Jesus would tell some of his own stories, the ones that had caused the religious leaders to turn against him. But we weren’t expecting Jesus to suddenly say that one of us was going to betray him. One of us! We were his closest friends! How could he accuse us of this? We had followed him since Galilee. Didn’t he trust us?

Each of us asked him who he meant, scared that we’d done something bad without knowing it, or that he had misunderstood something we’d said or done. But all he would say was that it was one of us that was eating with him. We looked at one another, confused, suspicious. Suddenly none of us trusted each other anymore.

But what happened next distracted us from talk of betrayal. There was flat bread as part of the meal, to remind us of how the Israelites left Egypt in such a hurry that they couldn’t wait for the dough to rise. Jesus picked the bread up and thanked God for it, breaking it into pieces to share out. Nothing unusual in that. But as he gave it to us he said that we should take and eat it because it was his body.

We stared at him, confused and a bit disgusted. Eat his body? He passed the pieces round, and hesitantly we all did what we were told. I was so thankful that it just tasted like bread. But I still didn’t understand what he meant.

Then Jesus picked up the cup of wine, and gave thanks again. He passed it round, this time saying that it was his blood.

We all drank the wine. Jesus explained that it represented a new covenant to replace the old one that God had made with the Israelites after rescuing them from slavery. The old covenant had been sealed by the blood of animal sacrifices, like the Passover lamb, but had been frequently broken by the Israelites. Despite God providing them with food and a homeland, they had ignored God’s laws and gone their own way, thinking that they knew better.

Now Jesus was making a new covenant, bigger and better, sealed with his own blood, represented by the wine and the bread. It sounded great, but I still didn’t really understand what it meant. We disciples were used to not understanding everything Jesus said, but this was stranger than usual. I’d been hoping for a cosy evening and instead I was confused and anxious.

The room that had been so warm and welcoming when we arrived now felt tense and strange, as if the brightness of the lamps was struggling to keep the darkness beyond at bay. Even singing one of the well-known hymns we had often sung together didn’t break the tension. I was glad when we left.

I didn’t know it would be the last night we spent together. I didn’t understand how our world was about to change, the shame, the fear, the grief that awaited each of us. Bread, blood, betrayal, all linked in ways I still don’t fully understand, but I know that Jesus is at the centre of it. That night was the end of something- and the beginning of something new, strange and wonderful. A new covenant, where God will always be with us. Isn’t that exciting?