

Who is Jesus?

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[0 : 00] Tonight's reading is from Mark chapter 2 verse 18 to chapter 3 verse 6 and it's on page 1004 of the Church Bibles.

Mark chapter 2 verse 18. Now John's disciples and the Pharisees were fasting. Some people came and asked Jesus, how is it that John's disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees are fasting, but yours are not?

Jesus answered, how can the guests of the bridegroom fast while he is with them? They cannot so long as they have him with them. But the time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them, and on that day they will fast.

No one sews a patch of unshrunk cloth on an old garment. Otherwise, the new piece will pull away from the old, making the tear worse. And no one pours new wine into old wineskins.

Otherwise, the wine will burst the skins, and both the wine and the wineskins will be ruined. No, they pour new wine into new wineskins. One Sabbath, Jesus was going through the cornfields, and as his disciples walked along, they began to pick some ears of corn.

[1 : 19] The Pharisees said to him, look, why are they doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath? He answered, have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry and in need?

In the days of Abiathar the high priest, he entered the house of God and ate the consecrated bread, which is lawful only for priests to eat. And he also gave some to his companions.

Then he said to them, the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. So the Son of Man is Lord, even of the Sabbath. Another time, Jesus went into the synagogue, and a man with a shriveled hand was there.

Some of them were looking for a reason to accuse Jesus, so they watched him closely to see if he would heal him on the Sabbath. Jesus said to the man with the shriveled hand, stand up in front of everyone.

Then Jesus asked them, which is lawful on the Sabbath, to do good or to do evil, to save life or to kill? But they remained silent. He looked around at them in anger and deeply distressed at their stubborn hearts, said to the man, stretch out your hand.

[2 : 27] He stretched it out, and his hand was completely restored. Then the Pharisees went out and began to plot with the Herodians how they might kill Jesus. Let's pray as we sit.

May the words of my lips and the meditations of all our hearts be now and always acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer.

Amen. Well, what an important and fascinating passage we've just heard read to us. Perhaps the most striking verse is the last one.

Chapter 3, verse 6. Then the Pharisees went out and began to plot with the Herodians how they might kill Jesus. I think it's about 10% of the gospel has already gone past, the gospel of Mark, perhaps just slightly over that.

And we've had these wonderful verses about all that Jesus did, his healings, forgiving sins. And what's the conclusion? By the time you get to 3, verse 6, beginning to plot how they might kill Jesus.

[3 : 51] So there are undercurrents tonight in our passage of enmity to Jesus. Those undercurrents have started at the beginning of chapter 2. And I'm going to look at that.

But on top of all that, and perhaps much more important, we see how our verses contribute to the general theme of Mark 1 to 8, which is, who is Jesus?

But to start just briefly with thinking about the way in which enmity to Jesus is expressed. In chapter 2, from the beginning and through to the end of my reading, there are four hostile questions.

That's what seems to pull it together. Last week we had two of them. 2, verse 7. Then verse 16.

Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners? And in our verses, verse 18. How is it that John's disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees are fasting that yours aren't?

[5 : 01] And then verse 24. Look, why are they doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath? And in each case, we see Jesus' answer and we see more about who he is.

And then, at the very end of our passage, Jesus asks a question. Which is lawful on the Sabbath? To do good or to do evil? To save life or to kill?

But he doesn't get an answer. They say nothing. So the big issue in our passage, our verses, the ones that Bethany read, is Jesus' failure to follow tradition.

He's been criticized in the matter of fasting and in the matter of the Sabbath. Fasting was only required, I think, in the Old Testament on the Day of Atonement.

But by the time of Jesus, it was expected on many other days. And keeping the Sabbath was indeed a biblical commandment.

[6 : 13] You can see it written up on the table on the commandments up there. But it's also at the very heart of the Jewish people's sense of being a people. And it seemed to the Pharisees that Jesus was disobedient to the Jewish way.

And to each of those two hostile questions that have come up in our reading, Jesus gives a threefold answer that reveals who he is.

The first of those questions was, How is it that the disciples of John and the disciples of the Pharisees are fasting, but yours aren't? And we have that wonderful answer from Jesus.

How can the guests of the bridegroom fast while he is with them? They can't so long as they have him with them. Well, when you get invited to a wedding, you know that you're going to a party.

It won't be a fast. It'll be a feast. And Jesus says that becoming part of his family, being with him is to join a place of joy and feasting.

[7 : 21] A place where we celebrate God's goodness and love and creativity. And more than that, Jesus is claiming that he is the bridegroom.

Which I think, which clearly points back to the Old Testament. There are lots of passages in the Old Testament in which Israel is pictured as Jesus' bride.

God's bride, I mean. Wayward, indeed. Rebellious, indeed. Sometimes running away with strangers. But eventually to be wooed and won back again.

If I give you just a couple of passages that take that theme of God's people as his bride.

Isaiah 54, verse 5. They're noted on the notice sheet tonight. Isaiah 54, verse 5. For your maker is your husband.

[8 : 23] The Lord Almighty is his name. Or Isaiah 62, starting at verse 4. No longer will they call you deserted or name your land desolate.

This is obviously being said about Israel. But you'll be called Hephzibah and your land Beulah. For the Lord will take delight in you and your land will be married.

As a young man marries a young woman, so will your builder marry you. As a bridegroom rejoices over his bride, so will your God rejoice over you.

The word bridegroom speaks of yearning with a passion. And Jesus implies that he is the bridegroom.

That in him, God has come to bring his people back to himself. And the joy of that experience of coming to be with him is akin to that of a wedding.

[9 : 30] It's very exciting. That's why when the bridegroom is there, you can't fast.

You're going to feast. But how does verse 20 apply? But the time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them and on that day they will fast.

That's a bit more difficult, isn't it? Jesus was taken away on Good Friday and so clearly fasting would be appropriate between then and Easter day.

But what about now? When Jesus is present spiritually as we meet, but absent physically. There's no command in the New Testament to fast, but Christians clearly did fast.

I'm not actually going to go into this subject tonight. I'm going to duck out of it. And the reason I'm going to duck out of it is that I don't think it's really the focus of our passage tonight.

[10 : 36] And I suggest that it might be wiser to look elsewhere in the New Testament for guidance on fasting. Because for now, I'm going to go on to verses 21 and 22, which are the second and third answer to the question in verse 18.

To take verse 22 first, no one pours new wine into old wineskins, otherwise the wine will burst the skins and both the wine and the wineskins will be ruined.

No, they pour new wine into new wineskins. Now, of course, we've not tried this because we don't put our wine into wineskins.

But wineskins then were made out of animal skins. New ones, I gather, are stretchy and they can cope with wine that's still fermenting. Now, when I was young, ginger beer was the big thing.

Everyone wanted to have a ginger beer plant. And you pass this rather sort of dodgy mix of bacteria and yeast round to other people. And then your parents insisted that you have it in the shed or somewhere because it wasn't unknown for the bottles actually to explode because it wasn't done quite right.

[11:52] But certainly, a ginger beer plant could easily, certainly would even burst bottles. We didn't try it with animal skins.

But I don't think it would have gone too well. The point is, Jesus is saying, is that what he is doing won't fit into the historic forms. It won't fit into the older forms of Judaism.

This is a new and exciting thing he's come to do. It's a second sense of excitement. Excitement about the bridegroom coming. And here's another picture of it.

New wine that is so exciting that it will make old wineskins explode. And then back to verse 21.

That's sort of the third part of Jesus' answer to the question about fasting. No one sews a patch of unshrunk cloth on an old garment. Otherwise, the new piece will pull away from the old, making the tear worse.

[12:54] Now, I can't claim to have tried this one. I think you'd be suspicious if I said, oh, I know all about this. Of course, the point here isn't, therefore pre-shrink the patch.

That would not be helpful. The point here is simply that you can't sew the new patch onto the old garment and then wash it and hope that it's all going to stay together.

The new bit will shrink and the patch will come off. Jesus' new community can't be simply added to the old one. You can't patch Jesus onto what you already have.

He gives not some little extra that you can sort of stick, you can sew on, but he gives a new life.

Three pictures, a wedding feast, new wine, a new cloth, really.

Those are what Jesus brings. It's exciting, but not, it seems, to the Pharisees or to those who ask the question. So now let's look at the second incident in our passage and see how that fits together with it.

[14:10] Verse 23, one Sabbath, Jesus was going through the grain fields and as his disciples walked along, they began to pick some heads of grain. The Pharisees said to him, look, why are they doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath?

Now, as I said before, keeping the Sabbath was both a biblical command and at the very heart of the Jewish people's sense of being a people.

Now it's important to say first that in a world in which a day off was very rare, the Sabbath was a wonderful gift of God to humanity.

And the Pharisees were a holiness movement who prided themselves on keeping the Sabbath. The awful thing was that they transformed God's wonderful gift of rest and time off into a mass of picky regulations.

So on this Sabbath, they saw the disciples going through the fields, they saw them pick bits of grain, and they classified this as harvesting and therefore inappropriate for a Sabbath.

[15:25] Apparently, it was fine to act as religious policemen on the Sabbath, but it wasn't fine to actually harvest little bits of grain. And they expect Jesus to rebuke his disciples.

But instead, just as he had done in the matter of fasting, he gave three answers to the hostile question. And the first and most detailed is 25. Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry and in need?

In the days of Abiathar, the high priest, he entered the house of God and ate the consecrated bread, which is lawful only for priests to eat. And he also gave some to his companions.

So Jesus is looking back to an incident in 1 Samuel 21, which took place after David was anointed, but before he came to the throne.

David and his companions were on the run. They came to the priest for food, but the priest didn't have any. Only the bread of the presence was available, and that was for priests only.

[16:32] But the priest decided that David and his companions could eat it. And there's nothing in 1 Samuel to suggest that that was the wrong decision given the special circumstances.

So I think that here in the cornfield, Jesus is claiming special circumstances. The anointed one, King David's greater son, as we sing in the hymn, is here.

Now, David was not yet recognized as king at that point, and Jesus has not yet been recognized by everyone as king and enthroned, but Jesus, the second David, David's greater son, is able to set aside the Sabbath rules for his companions.

A new kingdom is breaking in, like new wine instead of old. Then in response to why are they doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath, Jesus gives two additional answers.

The first is, the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. In other words, God didn't start with the Sabbath and then create people to keep it.

[17:51] He created human beings and gave us time to rest. Now, the Sabbath has been transformed into the Christian Sunday because that's the day when Jesus rose from the dead.

So, we now celebrate Sunday rather than Saturday, but it's important that we do celebrate it as a gift of God, a time of rest in a busy world. But as with fasting, the New Testament doesn't, I think, give us rules.

It gives us a principle that rest is part of the Maker's instructions and it's very important. But there aren't complex rules which the Pharisees wanted.

The second additional answer to the Pharisees' question is, so the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath. I read that badly. So the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath.

There seem to be two different principles there. We need to perhaps pick them out separately. First one is the Son of Man. We had that phrase actually in our Bible reading last week, but this is the week we're actually looking at it.

[19:12] The phrase Son of Man is taken from Daniel chapter 7. Again, I've given you the reference on the notice sheet, but I will read the passage out because it's so wonderful. In my vision at night I looked and there before me was one like a Son of Man coming with the clouds of heaven.

He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. He was given authority, glory, and sovereign power. All nations and peoples of every language worshipped him.

His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed. That must have been quite hard for Daniel's readers to get, I think.

But it speaks of a mysterious human being who is worshipped. That's really hard for a Jewish audience.

a mysterious human being who is worshipped and whose arrival when he comes with the clouds of heaven and his enthronement signal the start of God's reign.

[20:19] And Jesus is saying, I am he. I am that Son of Man that you are looking forward to. And secondly, in this section, Jesus is claiming authority even over the most important principles of Judaism.

The end of the fourth commandment says, For in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea and all that is in them, but he rested on the Sabbath day. Therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.

So this great principle, a great principle based on creation itself, Jesus is now claiming lordship over its use.

And I think that too is an implied claim to being God. In the previous sections of Mark, we've seen Jesus exercising authority over evil spirits, ill health, leprosy, sin.

Now in our passage tonight, we see Jesus claiming authority over spiritual life in the matter of fasting and the Sabbath. And so coming into conflict with the religious leaders.

[21:42] We see Jesus as the bridegroom come from heaven, the anointed one, the son of man, lord of the Sabbath. And see that being with this wonderful Jesus is transformative.

With the bridegroom, it's a time for celebration. For the companions of the anointed one, it's a time for feasting. And so we come to the last bit of our passage, which in some ways is the climax of these different incidents.

Another time, verse 1 of chapter 3, Jesus went into the synagogue and a man with a shriveled hand was there. Some of them were looking for a reason to accuse Jesus.

So they watched him closely to see if he would heal him on the Sabbath. It's a very tragic story, isn't it? If we're used to it, it doesn't strike us.

But they don't have any doubts about Jesus' ability to heal. They just want him to heal on certain days. And is healing with a word Sabbath-breaking anyway?

[22 : 58] But Jesus isn't cowed. In fact, he takes the initiative. Jesus said to the man with the shriveled hand, stand up in front of everyone. Then Jesus asked them, which is lawful on the Sabbath?

To do good or to do evil? To save life or to kill? We've seen four questions from Jesus' opponents. Now Jesus just asks one, which is lawful? But they're as silent as you are just now. And so Jesus looked around at them in anger and deeply distressed at their stubborn hearts, said to the man, stretch out your hand. He stretched it out and the hand was completely restored. Jesus sees people who see God at work and reject him at his work and imprison and humiliate others.

[24 : 03] And he's angry and he tells the man to do the one thing he can't do, which is to stretch out his hand. And yet, by Jesus' power, he's enabled to do exactly that.

And by Jesus' act of healing him, I think Jesus confirms all the implied claims in the previous section that he really is the bridegroom, the anointed one, the son of man and the Lord of the Sabbath.

He justifies his claim to be able to put away tradition where it is unhelpful and to inaugurate a new kingdom. In fact, Jesus in verse 4 has described what he does.

Go back to verse 4. He talks about doing good and saving life. That's what Jesus does, whether on the Sabbath or any other day.

And so the challenge is how we respond to that. The Pharisees went out and began to plot with the Herodians how they might kill Jesus. They do the exact thing that Jesus has spoken about about doing evil and killing.

[25 : 18] And it was really weird because the Pharisees were Jewish nationalists who normally hated the Herodians who were in practice comfortable with Roman rule. Only a common hatred of Jesus could bring these enemies together.

So what do we see in our passage? We see a Christ-rejecting world. But a world in which Jesus' power is very real. At Christmas we read these wonderful words in John's prologue.

Jesus, he came unto his own and his own received him not. But as many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on his name, which were born not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God.

And the word was made flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth.

grace. So this evening we've seen who Jesus is. There's wonderful phrases based on an Old Testament background, the bridegroom, the anointed one, the son of man, the lord of the Sabbath.

[26 : 50] And the question is, do we want to be with Jesus? Because that is where good things and life are, whether we've seen that tonight for the first time, or whether we've seen it many, many times.

Or do we want to see Jesus out of the way, like the Pharisees do? We seem out of the way so that we can do our own thing. but if we choose that, we miss out on goodness and life.

If you've got any questions, do come and have a word with me afterwards, or speak to any of the staff team, I'm sure they'd be equally happy to chat. Let's pray. Let's pray. Let's pray. Let's pray.

Let's pray. Let's pray. Let's pray. Lord Jesus, thank you for coming to live amongst us.

Thank you for coming and bringing new life. Thank you for bringing the excitement of new wine, the joy of a wedding, the sense of your presence as the anointed one, the awareness of your power as the son of man.

[28 : 31] Thank you for your gifts to us, especially for the Sabbath and of rest. Help us to use your gifts aright as we walk through this world and help us to experience your goodness and life and help us not to turn from you.

For we ask it in your name. Amen. For you selder