

Two by two

Planning

Lectionary Bible readings

RCL Proper 9 Year B
Ezekiel 2.1-5, Psalm 123, 2 Corinthians 12.2-10, **Mark 6.1-13**

Theme Following the footsteps

Seven weeks in which we explore who Mark's Jesus is and ask what it means to become his apprentice. An article that provides an overview of the theme can be found on the [WEB](#).

Week 5 of 7

Two by two Mark 6.1-13

Jesus returns to his home town, where he does not find a favourable reception and cannot do the amazing deeds he has done elsewhere. He then sends his disciples out, two by two, to work in his name.

This week provides an opportunity to:

- recognise that Jesus sends us out with realistic expectations
- understand that disciples are not required to work alone.

A Bible study worksheet on this reading, suitable for midweek groups, is available on the [WEB](#).

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Week by week

Bible notes
Prayers
PostScript: up-to-the minute comment
Bible study worksheet
Children's Sheet
Further resources
Drama sketches
Sermon notes on a different Bible reading
Links to other materials for this week's readings

Gather

Prepare the space

Display images that reflect a variety of mission and evangelism activities, e.g. Livingstone in Africa, a speaker addressing a rally, some Victorian ladies in the jungle, people playing football with street children, a coffee morning in church. Invite people to discuss what they think about these and if there is any kind of picture they think should be added to the selection.

Gathering words

Jesus has called all of us to be disciples. He has given us a job to do. As we gather together today, we pray for new strength, new ideas and a new love for the world.

Open the Word

Bible notes

New Testament 2 Corinthians 12.2-10

Paul is struggling to establish his credentials with critics in the Corinthian Church, who boast of their spiritual experiences. Paul refers to the ecstatic visions that he received at his conversion, but modestly couches them as if to a third person. To underline this humility and to make this point to the Corinthians that he is a servant of Christ, and not elevating himself, he emphasises his weakness (v.5). He describes how a thorn in the flesh, which is not specified – it may be a physical ailment, or other handicap – continually reminds him of his utter dependence on God; and prevents him becoming conceited. He has prayed three times for this to be removed, but through prayer has come to accept God's word to him: 'My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness' (v.9).

Gospel Mark 6.1-13

Jesus shows his humanity in that he too has difficulties and obstacles, which frustrate and limit his ministry. The lack of faith of those in Nazareth, including difficulties with his family, means that he can exercise little power and he has to contend with failure. Prophets are

not always honoured by their family (Jeremiah 11.21). The twelve (appointed and named in Mark 3.14f.) are sent out in twos to continue Jesus' work. They proclaim repentance (6.10f.); cast out unclean spirits (v.7); and heal (v.13). In Mark, the word for journey connotes 'way of discipleship' and the instruction is to travel light (v.8). The staff is used for support and protection and is symbolic of authority (cf. Exodus 4.20). The instruction to take no bread, no beggar's bag, no money, is an instruction to trust in both God and neighbour for provision and hospitality. Mark allows sandals in contrast to Matthew and Luke, but no change of clothes. In Acts 13.51, shaking the dust from your feet is a symbolic judgement against those rejecting missionaries. The wisdom to note is that rejection will happen, just as it has happened in Nazareth to Jesus, but when this happens to move swiftly on, and go to places where the message will bear fruit. Anointing people with oil for healing was a practice in the Early Church. The main activities of Jesus – proclamation, confronting evil, and healing – characterise the mission of the disciples. Disciples sent are called apostles.

Two by two Following the footsteps Week 5

Today's passages underline the need for a deep sense of humility and dependence on God and one another to work with God's power to bring signs of the incoming kingdom. We like to sense our giftedness and strength but often it is in the stretched limits of our weakness and vulnerability that we are most effective channels of God's power as disciples. Paul would prefer to be relieved of the things that constrain him but comes to recognise them as a God-given means of depending on God, and not proclaiming himself. Jesus is limited by the unbelief of those he grew up with and reminds us that there will not be universal acceptance of the message of Jesus or ability to demonstrate everywhere signs of God at work among us. Jesus sends the disciples out together: we need each other to work for the kingdom. He sends them travelling lightly and dependent on others for their provision. He tells them to stay where the message is accepted, and

to move swiftly on where it is not. Signs that the message is being accepted show themselves in the confrontation with evil, which today might be shown as working for justice and people receiving healing and wholeness in transformed lives. An important element in learning how to be a disciple is being an apprentice, sent to learn by doing, especially in tasks beyond our comfort zone, where we have to depend on resources beyond our own.

Q How confident are we as disciples today in the task to which we have been called?

Q Why is the giving, receiving and rejecting of hospitality so central to mission?

Sermon ideas

- For up-to-the-minute comment, see PostScript on the [WEB](#).
- In the synagogue we find Jesus teaching the disciples and some other interested listeners. He generates dispute and, ultimately, rejection. This does not lead to retreat, however. Jesus gathers his followers and sends them off on an experiential journey. Some might have preferred to continue arguing in the synagogue, marshalling intellectual ideas to convince the opposition. But actions speak louder than words. Jesus doesn't engage in argument; he moves on and encourages the disciples to be active. It can be tempting for Christians to get sidetracked from action by arguments about credibility and intellectual credentials. But the proof about Jesus is in the actions we take. It is not staying in but going out.

- Three chapters have passed since the disciples' 'first call' (Mark 3.13-15). They were told then what was involved. Now, after a period of observation, they are going to do it themselves. This is a time-honoured method of training people, formerly known as 'Learning from Nellie', and is exemplified in the TV game show *The Cube*. The disciples know the risks and they can go into the task realistically. They must identify people in the local context who will be strategically supportive, and be prepared and realistic about the local situation.

- Many organisations, from the Scouts to management training groups, participate in survival exercises, where people are sent to face challenging circumstances with little to help them. The purpose of this is to develop teamwork. In the situation in which they find themselves, members of the group very quickly become dependent on each other, and on the environment they are in. Relationships have to be made and they have to work. The disciples are sent out with very little, not for ascetic reasons, but so they have to make relationships. There are many stories, historical and contemporary, of missionaries finding the house that welcomes them.

- There are some shining contemporary examples of mission in pairs. Some years ago, the Catholic and Anglican bishops of Liverpool, Derek Worlock and David Sheppard, worked in partnership to inspire Christians in their then troubled city.

- The challenge for those involved in mission is discerning when it is time to move on. The gospel is not to be forced

on people: if visitors are not welcome, they need to leave. There is a balance to be struck between long-term faithful commitment to a place or a role, and the value of the new broom. How do we discern what God is calling us to? How can we persuade others that it is time for a change?

All ages together

See p.9 for an idea to engage very young children during worship.

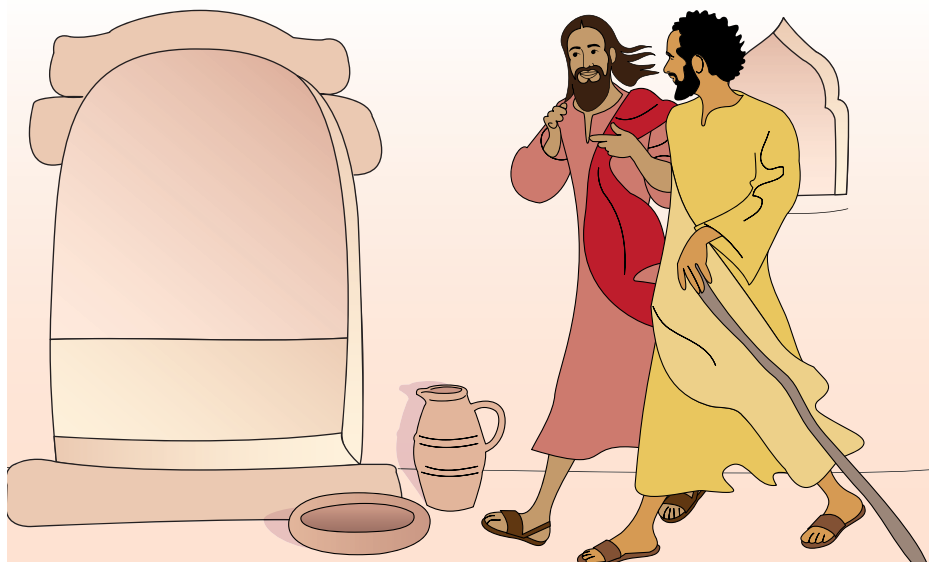
Present the reading

On the [WEB](#) you will find a contemporary retelling of the Gospel passage. Jesus is identified by wearing a white T-shirt. You will need a couple of people to interrupt Jesus, and a small group to represent the disciples who follow him. The characters will need to be prepared.

Explore the reading

Invite people to get into small groups and talk about skills and interests they have that others might not know about. This might mean adults telling young people about their work and children talking about activities they are involved in. After a few moments, invite some of the groups to feed back to the larger group. Express interest and surprise at some of the responses.

Ask people to research all the jobs that need to be done to make the Church work. Encourage people to look around for ideas, and get some to go outside and report back. Look too at magazines, pew sheets and the church's website. Then, on a large drawing of a church (either your own place of worship or an outline, stylised image) write up ideas. Talk about how rich the church is in gifts and abilities, yet often we don't recognise that these gifts are in our midst. Jesus had the same problem. The people who knew him didn't expect him to be able to do much – and he found it hard to do any miracles in that place. When other people have a low opinion of us, it is much more difficult to have confidence in ourselves. Jesus used his own experience to help the disciples. They had been watching him for ages and they had seen that things sometimes went wrong. They went in twos so they could help and support each other.



Prayers

The text of these prayers is on the [WEB](#).

Call to worship

God says,
You are never too young, never too old,
to be part of my work.
Come near,
all who are weak,
all who are afraid,
all who know their need of me.
**Lord, meet us where we are,
meet us in our need.
We give our lives to you.**

Gathering prayer

O Lord, help us to listen.
And when we hear you calling us on,
help us to let go,
though it is hard,
and follow where you lead us.
Amen.

A prayer of approach

God says, I will speak with you;
I will strengthen you;
I will send you.
O Lord, give us ears to hear,
courage to respond
and hearts to serve you, today and always.
Amen.

A prayer of thanksgiving

We praise you, O God,
for your love beyond all telling,
your kindness without limits, your joy without end.
We praise you, O God
for forgiveness beyond measure,
mystery past imagination, plans too big to see.
May we never think we have got to the end of all that you are,
or believe that we can contain the wonder of your presence.
Amen.

A personal prayer

Compassionate God,
always loving to those who seek you,
mend us where we hurt,
then send us where you will:
that we might speak, live and act as people who know
the love that makes all things whole,
and offer your hand of peace
to a world that needs to know
your word of life and hope. Amen.

A way into prayer

God says, 'I will speak with you.' Reflect on God's calling on your life. What are you being called into today? Is God still calling you to the work you are doing, or is God calling you out and on to new adventures and new things?

A prayer of confession

We bring to you our failure to see your love for us.
Silence
O Lord,
**in sadness for our wrongs we lift our eyes to you.
Cleanse us in your love: we lift our hearts to you.**
We bring to you our failure to let go and move on.
Silence
O Lord,
**in sadness for our wrongs we lift our eyes to you.
Cleanse us in your love: we lift our hearts to you.**
We bring to you our failure to rely on your word.
Silence
O Lord,
**in sadness for our wrongs we lift our eyes to you.
Cleanse us in your love: we lift our hearts to you.**
O God,
forgive what we have been and put right what we are.
Set our feet firmly on the path that leads to you.
Amen.

Prayers of intercession

We bring our prayers to you, O God, saying:
give your grace for the work of today,
and trust in your strength for tomorrow.
We pray for the trouble in our world...
To all who work to bring healing to people and places in distress,
give your grace for the work of today, **and trust... etc.**
We pray for the witness of your people...
To ministers in the church and all leaders of your people
give your grace for the work of today, **and trust... etc.**
We pray for your ways to be known in...
To those in public life
and people who make decisions that affect the lives of many,
give your grace for the work of today, **and trust... etc.**
We pray for...
(offer names or allow silence inviting the congregation to name people in silence)
and ask that in times of sadness and pain,
where all hope seems lost, you would
give your grace for the work of today, **and trust... etc.**
We pray for strength to live as we should.
To us, your people, as we try to follow you
give your grace for the work of today, **and trust... etc.**
Amen.

A prayer for all ages together

Invite people to hold out their hands with the palms face down and to offer to God all they need to let go of. Give thanks to God who takes from us what we hold and carries our burdens.
Turn hands palm up and invite people to consider what it is that God may be asking of them. Invite people to ask for the gifts they need to answer this call. Give thanks to the God who calls us and equips us for ministry.

Respond to the Word

Ideas to suit different interests, ages and learning preferences.
The Children's Sheet [WEB](#) offers activities to do in worship & at home.

A pairs game

On the [WEB](#), you will find a template to make a Bible pairs game. Make several sets of cards, mix them up and give them to groups of people. Invite them to sort the cards and match the pairs of characters.

Explore partnership

Many mission organisations and development charities work on a partnership basis. Christian Aid, for example, directs its resources to work with local partners in places that need its help, so that local people, who understand local needs, can direct help most usefully. The organisations also particularly value the support of those who provide funding and they work really hard to keep funders informed. Provide a pile of literature from charities and mission organisations, and a list of web addresses, and invite people to find out more about partnership working.

Take nothing with you

Invite two volunteers to come to the front ready to leave the church. Make sure they bring with them everything they have brought – bags, content of pockets, etc. – and make them put it all into a tray or box, as you would when going through a security scanner. Tell them you are going to keep all their possessions. Invite them to say what it feels like to be sent out with nothing. Ask them what their plans are now going to be. Invite everyone else to offer them some advice.

A simple worship activity for all ages

Prepare some simple invitation cards inviting people to join Jesus in spreading the good news. Include instructions to bring a friend but nothing else. Hand these out and invite people to hold them as someone says:

Thank you, Jesus,
for inviting us to join you in telling people
the good news of your love.
We give thanks that you are with us always
and offer us all we need.

Thank you, Jesus.

(Then invite everyone to hold hands with someone else.)

We give thanks that you send us out together.

Thank you, Jesus. *(Invite everyone to raise hands high.)*

Thank you, Jesus that you have shown us the way.

Thank you, Jesus. Amen.

When very young children are present

Today's activity offers a chance to play with things together.

You will need: soft balls, games, building sets.

Invite the children to play together and help each other, e.g. rolling balls to each other, building things or playing games. You might use this simple paraphrase and actions:

Jesus sent his friends on a journey (*sweep arm into distance*). He told them to help each other (*hold out hand and reach to take another's hand*). Repeat so the children can join in.

Using today's psalm

Psalm 123

Last week's psalm described times in the course of a life where God seemed to have withdrawn, and today's takes up the same theme, encouraging us to keep watching through every evil for the mercy of God to appear. 'We've had enough,' it says, 'and we know you will come to save us. We're looking out for you. Hurry up!' The question is, when people today find themselves in a desperate situation, do they cry to God, or do they simply complain generally? When we see distress, how often do we let ourselves be used by God as agents of mercy?

Singing together Go to 'Music support' on the left-hand menu of the [WEB](#) for how to use the psalms.

Response line Between verses, everyone says or sings: Our eyes look to the Lord our God, until he shows us his mercy. There is a response action on the [WEB](#).

Hymns and songs based on Psalm 123 include 'Up to you I lift my eyes' (PRA), 'We turn our eyes to you' (TP), and John Bell's 'As the eyes of a Servant' (in *We walk his way*, Wild Goose).

Hymns and songs

Songs in italics are suitable for all ages.
A key to abbreviations is on the [WEB](#).

Alleluia! For the Lord our God

Be thou my vision/Lord, be my vision

For I'm building a people of power

Give thanks with a grateful heart

God is our strength and refuge

God's Spirit is (deep) in my heart

I am the church

Inspired by love and anger

King of glory, king of peace

Laudate omnes gentes (Taizé)

O give thanks to the Lord

Thine arm, O Lord, in days of old

Thy/Your hand, O God, has guided

We have a gospel to proclaim

We will lay our burden down (HON, LFB, WGWG)

Send out

Live in faith

Take time this week to reach out in friendship to someone in your neighbourhood whom you have often seen, but have never spoken to.

Pray

Send us out, Lord, into the places that we know, bearing the good news of your risen life.

Send us out, Lord, into the less familiar places: the unknown and less trodden paths.

Give us strength there to speak your word, to live your truth and to make known the story of a people and a world made new. **Amen.**