Looking Back, Looking Forward

As I write this, we are coming towards the end of our journey through Mark's Gospel. When we started, we said that we would keep asking three questions: Who is Jesus? Why did he come? And what does he call us to do? Mark has certainly given us plenty to think about!

Mark is wonderfully fast-moving. Everything happens immediately! — although I suspect our Sunday mornings have sometimes been slightly less energetic than Mark's Gospel! Yet beneath all the action, Mark keeps bringing us back to one simple truth: Jesus is Lord. He meets people where they are, welcomes outsiders, touches the untouchable, forgives the broken, challenges the religiously respectable, calms storms, raises the dead and calls ordinary people to follow him.

And perhaps that is a particularly important message for us now. We have known quite a lot of sadness as a church family. There have been bereavements, illness and times when life has felt fragile. We have said goodbye to people we have loved; people who have been part of the story of this congregation (for a few years, or for many). We have sat with families in their grief, celebrated lives well lived, shed tears, shared memories and tried to find the right words — often discovering that there aren't any.

One of the great privileges of being part of a church is that we don't have to face those moments alone. I am increasingly convinced that one of the most important things we can offer as a church isn't an answer to every difficult question. Sometimes it is simply presence. To sit with someone. To make a cup of tea. To remember a name. To laugh and cry together. To listen to a story for the tenth time. To pray when someone else can't find the words. That is ministry too, and one we all can do in one way or another. But while we grieve what we have lost, we also have reason to look forward with hope.

Jesus doesn't promise his disciples a life without storms. Mark reminds us that even when the disciples are terrified in the boat, Jesus is with them. And when the storm is raging, he is not absent. That is good news for us too.

And perhaps Mark's Gospel reminds us why. Jesus never seems to be in a hurry to get past people. He stops. He notices. He listens. He touches those others avoid. He welcomes those others exclude. He brings hope into places where people have run out of it. That is the kind of church I hope we can continue to become.

As we look ahead, I am excited about the possibilities God has placed before us. I would love Market Harborough Congregational Church to become increasingly known as a place where people are welcomed, supported and loved — especially when life is difficult. A church where someone who walks through our doors for the first time can breathe out and think, "I think I might be okay here."

Our developing work with people experiencing bereavement is part of that. So is our community and schools work. We have opportunities to build relationships with people who may never think that church is "for them", but who may nevertheless need friendship, encouragement, somewhere safe to belong, or simply someone who will listen.

And I am excited about continuing to develop our worship. Mark's Jesus constantly calls people to see things differently, to move beyond simply knowing about him towards actually following him.

Our worship should help us do that — sometimes with ancient words and beautiful hymns, sometimes with newer songs, silence, prayer, laughter and perhaps the occasional slightly adventurous idea!

Because worship isn't about putting on a good performance. It is about meeting together in the presence of God and allowing Jesus to keep changing us.

There is something else I have noticed during our journey through Mark. The disciples rarely seem to understand everything Jesus is doing. They get things wrong. They ask the wrong questions. They misunderstand. They sometimes argue amongst themselves. In other words, they sound remarkably like the rest of us! And yet Jesus keeps calling them. That gives me enormous encouragement.

We don't have to have everything worked out before we can be disciples. We don't have to be the finished article before God can use us. We simply have to keep following Jesus and keep our eyes on him.

But there will also be opportunities to welcome someone new, support someone struggling, encourage a child, share the good news of Jesus, discover new ways of worshipping and grow together as God's people. And through all of it, Jesus remains at the centre.

Who is Jesus? Why did he come? And what does he call us to do? Perhaps those aren't questions we ever finish answering. Perhaps they are questions we spend our whole lives discovering.

Thank you for being part of this church family — for your prayers, your kindness, your patience, your humour, your generosity and all the countless things you do that often go unnoticed. Thank you for continuing to walk together, even when the road is difficult. There is still a lot of Gospel story to be written here and I rather suspect Jesus isn't finished with us yet!

With every blessing,

Your friend, brother and Minister, Roo