

**“A RULE OF LIFE (Mark 5)”**  
*Mark 1:35-45*

What do you do when a crisis looms? When things aren't going your way - in fact, they're going in quite the wrong way - how do you cope? Does panic set in? Do you try to sort things out yourself? Do you end up with an approach to life that is all fire-fighting - crisis management, rather than calm reflection; a constant series of white-knuckle rides, rather than a cooler, more collected process? Maybe that's the way you like it, you work better under pressure, so you tell yourself. But it's not always terribly easy to cope with, even so.

Jesus' ministry is just getting under way. In fact, if you take out his baptism by John and the six weeks of fasting and temptation in the desert - which are really only the preparation for his ministry - according to Mark's account, he is only one day into it. He has only called a third of his band of disciples (Simon, Andrew, James and John), he hasn't moved very far from his starting base, and everything that Mark has so far described - the teaching in the synagogue, the exorcism of the demon-possessed man, the healing of Simon's mother-in-law, and the evening session of healings outside her house - all that has happened within the space of one Sabbath day. But Jesus already seems to be having problems.

Now here we have to read between the lines a bit. That's what interpreting the Bible - or, indeed, any other book - is all about. Whatever your view of how to interpret the Bible - even if you claim to be taking everything literally and going only by what you see on the printed page - there is some element of scratching around beneath the surface. That's bound to happen, especially when you are dealing with a book written a couple of millennia ago in a different language. And when we look at the words Mark uses here and what they can actually mean in Greek, when we compare what he has written with the accounts in the other gospels, when we look at the things he says (and doesn't say) in this passage in the light of what he writes in the rest of his book, we are drawn to the conclusion that right at the beginning of his mission here on earth, Jesus has run up against some problems.

Remember what we've been saying about the purpose of Jesus' mission? He has come into this world to bring to reality the “*good tidings*”, the “*gospel*” of which the Old Testament prophets spoke to God's people. He has come to join battle with the forces of evil, to banish the demons to their pit of punishment, to begin restoring God's creation to its original state. It's the opening salvo in a long-term mission that has actually been planned since before the beginning of time. Jesus is here to declare nothing less than

the inauguration of the Kingdom of God. He comes proclaiming an alternative way, a new and radical agenda for those who want to follow him, a complete change of attitude and emphasis. Jesus has come with a heart to preach the gospel, a desire to demonstrate that he is the true Messiah, the one who is appointed and anointed by God himself - not some quack charlatan with a short-term agenda and a solely political or military mission. But the people to whom he has come, the people who have been waiting centuries for the appearance of this chosen messenger of God seem to want little more than their infections cleared up and their lives brightened for a few days. Is all that he has come to proclaim going to fall on deaf ears? Will his mission be in vain? How will he cope?

Well, here at the very outset of his ministry, Jesus is described as developing a routine, a “rule of life”, which enables him to cope with the disappointments and face up to the difficulties that will confront him. I don’t think it’s any accident that what Mark describes here in vv35-37 comes right at the start of the story. We know from the other gospels writers that Jesus goes off regularly to pray alone so, once again reading between the lines, we can surmise that what Jesus does here is going to become something of a habit for him. Just in case you’re wondering quite what I’m talking about, let me read vv35-37 to you again. And let me suggest that the example of Jesus is one that is well worth following for anyone who wants to be a disciple of his. The kind of framework, the “rule of life” that we’re talking about is something that provides a structure within which it becomes easier (or, perhaps, less difficult) to deal with the ups and downs, the crises and difficulties of everyday living, and I would commend it to you as well worth considering.

**He finds a time when he won’t be disturbed.** Jesus goes off to pray and reflect “*very early in the morning, while it was still dark.*” Before he got into the business of the day, before people started queuing up to see him, he carved out a bit of time to ensure that he wouldn’t be disturbed. It meant, I would imagine, a certain amount of inconvenience: it certainly meant he had to want to do it. He certainly didn’t tell his friends what he was doing because they had to go and search for him. (The Greek word here means “*hunted him down*”.)

If you are serious about spending some time with God, then you need to carve out a bit of time for yourself when you can concentrate on God alone. Yes, we all need time together with other people for worship and prayer and fellowship - that’s what this morning and house groups and all the other groups, large and small, are about. But we each need time with God on our own, time to pray and reflect, time that is not disturbed by other people and other responsibilities. For many of us that time might be at the beginning of the day, before we do anything else. Some of us might be able to find some time at lunch

time or towards the end of the day when we know that no-one will disturb us, but it is important that we try to find a regular time, so that it becomes part of the fabric of our lives, one of the habits of our daily routine.

**He went to a solitary place.** Clearly Jesus could not always go to the same place. As he moved around Galilee and then into Judea - as well as the other parts of Palestine that he visited - he had to find different places where he could be alone. It wasn't just the time that was important, it was also the location. The fact that Simon and his companions had to hunt for him suggests that this was a fairly isolated spot. And it needed to be, so that his time and space wasn't invaded by other people who were going to prevent him spending time with God as he felt necessary.

Most of us perhaps don't have the luxury of going off into the countryside to be quite with God. But we are all able to find some "*solitary place*" where we know we won't be disturbed. It may actually be necessary to tell other people that you do not wish to be disturbed, or you may find a place that no-one knows about. Once all the children have gone off to school, once your colleagues have left the office (or before they arrive), a corner of the Cathedral, a lay-by on the route to work, a path through the woods - there are all kinds of times and places when you can try to build being alone into the routine.

**He prayed.** OK, but what did Jesus do when he found this little haven of peace and calm? Well, "*he prayed*", he spoke with his Father, and he listened and was quiet (that's all part of prayer). It was vitally important that Jesus did not touch with his Father, the one who had chosen him and sent him. He needed to feel connected to him, to feel the bond with him that would help him to cope with the difficulties and disappointments that his mission would throw up. That would provide part of the framework within which he was to function. As we read on through the story of his life - in the versions that Matthew, Luke and John give us, as well as Mark's - we see that Jesus brought before his Father his fears and struggles as well as his joys.

There's no doubt that we need the relationship with God that comes through prayer just as much as Jesus did (if not more). We need to feel able to bring our problems to God as well as to approach him in worship with our thanks and our rejoicing. And we need to be prepared to listen to God, to be silent before him and enjoy the awareness of his presence that he grants us through his Holy Spirit. For us, part of that, I believe, is reading and reflecting on the Bible. It is vitally important that we read the Bible regularly, that we build that, too, into our routine, that Bible reading becomes part of our rule of life.

If you're not too sure how to go about that, or you want to bring a bit more discipline to your Bible reading, or you need help coping with the bits you find hard, then have a good look at the leaflet you were given on the way into church this morning. It can be very helpful indeed to have something that will enable you to read a small part of the Bible each day and discover some help from other people's thinking about it, so consider getting one or other of the various Bible reading guides advertised in it. Pat Cartmale has for some years been able to provide you with what you want, so if you're thinking of getting involved, have a word with her (or talk to me about it).

**He made it a priority.** It's clear from what Mark says here that Jesus put the idea of being alone to communicate exclusively with his Father right at the top of his agenda. Even though everyone was looking for him, seeking him out (usually with hostile intent, according to the verb Mark uses), Jesus was going to ensure that he was quiet, undisturbed and focused. There would be plenty of time later on for him to deal with the problems and questions of the crowds. Yes, his mission was to preach and teach and heal, but before he got stuck into that, he needed to pray and nothing would deflect him from that, even if he had to sneak out before dawn to a secret place.

Let me just ask you how much of a priority you set by a regular, undisturbed time of quiet in which to pray and read your Bible. Is it something that you insist on doing before anything else - it's the first thing to be slotted into your timetable each day (whether it's at the crack of dawn or at some other time)? Or is it, as with so many of us, something that will be dealt with if there's time. Maybe the first priority is what the boss gives you to do rather than what God asks you to do. It's the other members of the family who have to come before God. You need your entertainment or retail fix first and then there might be time for God - if it doesn't take too long, of course. Make a date with God. Get into the habit of letting him have the first pick of your time. Put him at the top of your agenda. If you do that with regularity and a sense of purpose, then it won't be so difficult to sort it out when the times of crisis actually come along.

**This affected all that Jesus did.** The time that Jesus spent alone with God in prayer and reflection was not something that was totally disconnected from his mission and ministry. This wasn't a little isolated chink of his life that was carved out and made him feel good but left everything else untouched. It was in his solitary times of prayer that Jesus was able to sense his purpose, to see the direction he was to take. You'll find that before he chose his disciples, before he went to his death, and at other times too, he took time to pray alone. Here it is after this time of solitary prayer that he changes his plans for preaching and moves off into some of the other villages. It is after this time of prayer that we see him deeply touched by the need of those he meets (v41 - he is "*filled with compassion*" or "*anger*" at what he sees the leper

having to cope with). And as he continues his ministry in the wake of his praying, we see that he continues to have a powerful effect on the people - they still flock to him "*from everywhere*" (v45).

Time spent alone with God - praying, reading, reflecting, listening - is never time that is wasted. As we encounter God in such situations, we find that our response to what we see around us may change, we find that decisions we have to make may become clearer. We find that our relationship with God deepens. we find that our lives reflect more of the love and holiness of Jesus. But we might also find that there are periods when nothing seems to happen. As we pray it seems as if the heavens are brass (as the Psalmist says). Our prayers rebound, seemingly unheard. As we read the Bible, it fails to move us or to excite us. As we listen for God, we find that he is silent.

Then temptation then is to give up, to say that it's all a waste of time. Why should we go to the trouble of carving out time, finding a place to be alone, putting it at the top of our agenda, if God doesn't seem to be bothered with us? Well, it's precisely at such points in our lives that we really do need to make this a part of our routine, to build the **habit** of setting aside time for God. If we give up speaking to God and listening for him, we take away that vital avenue of communication between ourselves and God. If we are not listening, we will never hear God speak. If we're not seeking his direction, we will never find it. You may have been praying, reading the Bible and so on for weeks without, apparently, anything worthwhile happening. Then suddenly God makes his voice heard. Suddenly there's that sentence from the Bible that is just what you need. Suddenly there's that awareness that God **is** there and he does care about you.

We have already begun to see just what an extraordinary person Jesus was according to Mark. We have a great deal more to learn about this man who was the son of a carpenter and the Son of God. He was special, unique, all-loving and all-powerful. Yet he needed to spend time alone with his Father. He needed to pray to God and to listen to God. How much more, then, do we need to follow that example! Think hard about it - and then do something about it. There will be no real progress in your Christian life until you take steps to sort it out.