

Psalm 62 v3-12

1 Cor 7 v29-31

Mark 1 v14-20

Our readings today show snapshots from times of crises. The first one we will look at is a time of personal crisis, we find in Psalm 62.

From the book of Psalms comes a picture long since placed in the snapshot album. It may help if you consider your feelings and thoughts if you opened an album of an elderly relative or friend. If you imagine the picture to be sepia toned, you know, that light brownish colour, and its tones have faded.

The central character is still recognizable, but the background is now blurred.

The picture is of a man in personal crisis. He feels battered – the victim of some ultra critical group. He admits that there is a weakness in his life – one push and he will fall. I mean, he says he is no stronger than a broken-down fence.

I wonder if he is being attacked because they are jealous of him because he has risen above them in wealth or social importance? He confides in us as we read the psalm: “You only want to bring him down from his place of honour.” We see things like that going on in this day and age. We only have to think of the world of politics to realize that.

There is also the hint of sleaze in the Psalm.

“Put no trust in violence; don’t hope to gain anything by robbery; if riches increase, do not set your heart on them.”

Did somebody try to bribe the Psalmist? Or did he initially think he could buy his way out of trouble?

Whatever the circumstances, the crisis has taught him an important lesson.

Whether he was a guilty man who deserved fierce criticism, or an innocent man unjustly attacked, his affirmation is the same: only God can be trusted.

This snapshot portrays a personal crisis time in which the psalmist faces up to the reality of his own life and the culture around him.

Seeing life as it really was took him back to the reality of God’s unending faithfulness.

Our next snapshot is one in a series. It would be better served by a video camera, because only a video camera would capture the whole story in this chapter. The situation was this. Paul had received a letter from the Corinthian church asking a variety of questions, including one about marriage. 1 Corinthians is his response, and, in the letter, he offers much advice.

He tends to encourage celibacy rather than marriage because at this stage in the life of the early church, it was thought that Jesus would return within months if not weeks.

That gave them thoughts more pressing even than personal relationships and family life. Later, when it became evident that God’s timetable for the end of the world was rather different, Paul renewed his advice and, like other New Testament writers, re-valued the marriage relationship.

We need a video camera to pan over the entire New Testament if we are to discern the Word of God about marriage but, writing at this stage, even such important things as marriage, mourning, rejoicing, and owning property seemed insignificant against the implications of the overwhelming conviction that the purposes of the God for the world were being brought to a conclusion, heralded by the return of Christ. This was crisis time both for the Christian community and the world.

What can we learn from this snapshot for our response to crisis? Well, mainly that every crisis demands that we re-examine our priorities.

It is often said that the church in the UK is in crisis. Our own church may not be in a crisis, but in this time of change, this period of transition, perhaps asking a few questions would be in order.

Among the many tasks we normally do in the church, which has priority? Are there jobs that have “always been done” that should now stop before more essential priorities?

Are there things that we’re not doing that we should be doing? Should we be reviewing our giving’s, both as a church and as individuals. Who or what decides our priorities? Can bible study enlighten us? Do the needs of society give us any clues? Should we as a church be responding to those needs round about us?

It is good to remember that the early church was ready to change its mind in changing circumstances. This period of transition may demand no less from us.

The final snapshot is a group photograph. Like many in our own photograph albums, it was taken at the beach. But this is not holiday time in summer: it is crisis time in discipleship. John the Baptist has been arrested and Jesus has moved to the forefront.

He comes with a clear message: “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent and believe the good news.”

It is unlikely that Jesus swooped out of the blue on four unsuspecting fishermen. They had probably heard him speak before, but nothing can disguise the sense of urgency Jesus’ words evoked. The invitation was insistent: “Follow me and I will make you fish for people.”

Immediately is a word Mark was fond of using.

Its use can be found throughout Mark’s gospel and in some translations, in this one paragraph, he uses it twice.

Mark wrote his gospel with the Romans in mind. Mark’s gospel is the shortest of the four gospels. There is an air of urgency in every sentence he writes. He wants to tell the message that Jesus brings, and he feels the sooner we hear it, the better off we will be.

It is also reckoned to be the first gospel to be written. Part of the urgency is that after the crucifixion, there were different stories going round, gossip, rumours, and misunderstandings. Mark wanted to get a version out that was reliable and as accurate as possible. Mark doesn’t want us to waste a minute of our lives not realizing the fact that God wants to save us.

Hence the use of the word, immediately. It is a word that conveys action. It is a word that demands action. By the end of this chapter, Jesus had called a third of the disciples who would share his ministry.

He had taught in the Capernaum synagogue, healed both a man described as having an unclean spirit, and Simon's mother-in-law, cured many others including a man with leprosy, visited synagogues throughout the region, as well as spending time in prayer. This is action man, and the disciples are expected to follow suit.

What can we learn from this? Well, speaking of Jesus' birth and life, John wrote: The Word became flesh. In other words, the word speaks to us, but it's the flesh that acts. Our faith is tested by its action.

It is because of compassionate social action by other Christians that a poor person, living in a poverty-stricken region of India was able to write these lines.

"Every noon at twelve, in the blazing heat, God comes to me, in the form of 200 grams of gruel."

Of the crisis times of the 2nd World War, Victor Frankl wrote: "We who lived in the concentration camps can remember the men who walked through the huts comforting others, giving away their last piece of bread.

Children see this principal clearly.

Gerde Klein, a Holocaust survivor, tells of a child who found a raspberry cane in a neglected corner of a concentration camp. The child carried a raspberry in her pocket all day to present it to Gerde in the evening on a leaf. Gerde wrote, "Imagine a world in which your entire possession is one raspberry, and you give it to a friend." We can imagine such a world. It is the world in which Christ lives and where love and faith are turned into action. We can do more than imagine it.

We can make it a reality. We can give of our time, our skills and financially. How does Jesus want us to give?

What is he saying to each of us this morning? How are we going to respond to Him?

There was once a college student who was struggling in many areas of his life. He spent a great deal of time feeling angry and frustrated. When he could stand it no longer, he went to the dim and seldom-used chapel on campus.

He paced up and down the aisles, slapping the back of the empty pews. He yelled, he cried, and he raged at God.

"God, you created the world...what could you possibly been thinking? Look at the problems people face. Look at the pain, suffering, and hunger. Look at the neglect, the waste the abuse. Everywhere I look, I see messed-up people, hurting people, lonely people!" The young man ranted and raved on and on.

Finally, exhausted, he sat in the front pew and looked hopelessly at the cross. Its tarnished surface reflected the dusty sunlight filtering in through the stained-glass windows.

"It's all such a mess! This world you created is nothing but a terrible mess! Why, even I could make a world better than this one!" And then the young man heard a

voice in the silence of that dusty chapel that made his eyes open wide and his jaw drop.

In answer to his statement, "Why, even I could make a world better than this one!" came the answer, "And that is exactly what I want you to do."

It's easy to identify problems that exist all around us. And sometimes we wonder why God doesn't solve them for us. But that is why he put us here – to his work. We can identify the problems – but we sometimes don't realize that we are the solution. For instance, and only for instance, if our giving's have fallen behind the cost of living, then perhaps we should review our givings regularly, in order that we, as a church, can meet our obligations, just like any other organization.

God has commissioned the church to be the hands and feet of Jesus in a broken, needy world. That's why we are called "the body of Christ." Are we ready to do our part?

In crisis time, the psalmist demands that we face reality. Paul calls us to assess our priorities. Mark says that crisis necessitates action.

The question for us is a simple one. Do we believe that we live in a time of sufficient crisis to face the stark reality of our circumstances, work out our priorities – and then act?

Amen.