



*Synod Bible Studies*  
*2022*

## Introduction

The following Bible studies provide updated and revised versions of presentations made at the 2022 Synod Meetings of the Uniting Church in Australia Synod of Victoria and Tasmania. While it has been necessary to edit and tidy up material that was initially prepared for oral delivery, I have often chosen to preserve the tone and idiom of the studies as they were first spoken and heard.

I have devoted some effort, however, into providing further information about and explanation of a number of the topics that the studies touch upon, relating to various aspects of interpretation of the Synoptic Gospels. These are set out in the text boxes and can easily be passed by as you make your way through the main reflections in each study.

While some time has passed since the 2022 Synod meeting, I thought that it might still be helpful to make the studies as widely available as possible. Synods (along with all sorts of other manifestations of the church's institutional life) are often places for extended deliberation about the church's future. Equivalent conversations are, no doubt, happening in churches and faith communities and small groups across and beyond the UCA. If these studies can help inform those ongoing deliberations, then that is all I could hope for.

My aim in the studies was to insist, as best I could, that without deep and sustained attention to important theological ideas (not least those ideas that were so integral to the emergence of the various Protestant traditions that together formed the Uniting Church in 1977) all such deliberation is likely to reflect the inevitable distortions of the way of Jesus that all institutions and structures created in his name are liable to perpetuate. Essentially, the studies are a plea for a recovery of the vibrant spirituality, the robust christology and soteriology, and the committed evangelism (in the broadest sense) that makes churches communities of good news rather than just good advice.

I am grateful to The Moderator of the Vic-Tas Synod, Revd David Fotheringham, for inviting me to give these studies and so to contribute in a small way to the Synod theme: Arise, Come With Me. This is the second time I have led the Synod in this way, and the welcome, engagement, and feedback I received at the Synod meetings is simply a small token of the overall hospitality that the Uniting Church has extended to me over many years. Three students from Pilgrim Theological College contributed to the creation of the questions and activities for reflection at the end of each study, so thanks to Annie Brophy, Kyle Moffit, Andreana Reale, and Duncan Turuva. And final thanks to Carl Rainer of the Synod Comms team for taking raw text and making it look readable and inviting.

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# Study 1

## Get Up and Go Towards God: An Invitation to Revival

### Text: Mark 1:35–39

In the morning, while it was still very dark, *he got up and went* out to a deserted place, and there he prayed. And Simon and his companions hunted for him. When they found him, they said to him, “Everyone is searching for you.” He answered, “Let us go on to the neighboring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do.” And he went throughout Galilee, proclaiming the message in their synagogues and casting out demons.

### Introduction

‘Arise, Come With Me’: this was the theme of the 2022 Synod of the Uniting Church in Victoria and Tasmania. It provides us with an invitation, derived from the language of the Song of Songs, a Hebrew text found in Jewish and Christian bibles, that celebrates the shared passion of two lovers. The text actually says:

‘Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away’ (Song of Songs 2:10 and 2:23).<sup>1</sup>

Note that we have two verbs here: ‘arise’ and ‘come away’. The second of those verbs can equally be used to mean ‘go’.<sup>2</sup> So, one way of translating the phrase is: ‘get up and go’. That isn’t quite what the lover of the Song of Songs is saying. ‘Arise and come’ is so much more romantic than ‘get up and go’! But, the key thing to note at this point is that the phrase contains two verbs of movement: one relating to arising or getting up, and the other describing a further movement, away from where you were initially sitting or lying down, from one place to another.

This phrase isn’t especially unusual for the obvious reason that when we stop somewhere we often sit or lie down in that place. And that means that before we can go anywhere else we need to ‘get up’. But when we turn to the New Testament it is at least interesting to see that in a number of places we find the same combination of terms in similar phrases. Of course, in the New Testament the verbs are in Greek.<sup>3</sup>

1 It is actually a little more complicated than even that. A literal translation would be ‘Arise and come away, my fair one, my beautiful one, and come away’. The repeated use of the verb ‘to come away’ suggests that this is the most important ‘movement’ implied in the invitation.

2 The verb we are talking about is *hlk* in Hebrew which means both ‘to come’ and ‘to go’. The same is true of the Greek verb that is used to translate the Hebrew *erchomai*.

3 For those who are interested in the detail: the Hebrew verbs in Song of Songs 2:10 and 2:23 are *r’h* and *hlk* which in the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew, are rendered with the verbs *anistēmi* and *erchomai*. The theological significance of the first of those Greek verbs will be explored in Study 3.

And they turn up not just as invitations or commands ('get up and go'), but also as descriptions ('Jesus got up and went').

In these three Bible Studies we are going to look at three of these New Testament examples of the 'get up and go' formula. And we start with Jesus.

In Mark 1:35 we are told that at some stage between the hours of around 3am and 6am—desperately early in the morning— Jesus 'got up and went out' of the house in which he was staying.<sup>4</sup> We learn that he went to a 'deserted place', where he prayed.

## Jesus At Home

This is a typical transition sentence in Mark, moving Jesus from Capernaum to the surrounding towns and the rest of Galilee (see 1:38–39). So, it is easy to miss the fact that we are at something of a turning point here in

Mark's story of Jesus. Thus far in Mark's Gospel, Jesus has embarked upon his mission and ministry: baptism (1:9–11), followed by testing (1:12–13), followed by proclamation (1:14–5), followed by calling disciples (1:16–20), followed by confrontation with an unclean spirit (1:21–28), followed by healing (1:29–31). All of this ministry activity is summarized in Mark 1:32–34:

**Mark 1:32** That evening, at sundown, they brought to him all who were sick or possessed with demons. 33 And the whole city was gathered around the door. 34 And he cured many who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons; and he would not permit the demons to speak, because they knew him.

The *location* of that all this work is what we might call 'home territory'. The village of Capernaum was, it seems a familiar environment for Jesus, a place of family and friends. And perhaps that observation can help us to enter imaginatively into the story in a deeper way.<sup>5</sup>

I think that it is entirely plausible that, however challenging the vocation as God's 'beloved son' (see Mark 1:11) might have been for Jesus, there was a certain reassurance that came from trying to work it all out on home territory. Capernaum provided Jesus with a place to go home to in the evenings, even if people did tend to gather round the front door and demand healing. It was a place of family and friends. Mark also tells us that in Capernaum there was someone else's mum to do the cooking, even if she had been unwell recently, a

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4 In Greek, *anastas exēthen*, 'arising, he went out'. Mark is being pretty precise about timings in this part of his story. The phrase he uses is made up of three adverbs, literally 'early, at night time, exceedingly', so the reference is to the hours before sunrise. Compare the equally detailed 'evening, when the sun was setting' in 1:32.

5 The use of the imagination is an important skill in reading, understanding, and interpreting the Bible. It is important, however, to make sure that our imaginations are responsive to and to a certain extent controlled by the evidence and witness of the biblical text itself.

problem easily fixed (see Mark 1:29–31).<sup>6</sup>

## Capernaum

The village of Capernaum is located on the North-West side of the Sea of Galilee (also known as Lake Tiberias). It is the remembered site for the opening events of Jesus' public ministry, following his baptism (see, for example Mark 1:21–28; 2:1–12; Luke 4:31–38; John 4:46–54). For a long time the remains of Capernaum lay beneath the ground, but in the twentieth century and especially from 1968 onwards, archaeological excavations brought them back into view, including buildings that archaeologists have identified as the 'house of Simon Peter' (see Mark 1:29; 2:1; 3:20; 9:33) and the 'synagogue of the centurion' (see Luke 7:5). The lakeside location of Capernaum probably explains why Jesus (who seems to have been living there) calls disciples associated with the fishing industry and taxation. The 'tax-collector' Levi, called by Jesus in Mark 2:13–17 was probably collecting fishing taxes.

I guess we have all grown up to think that Jesus received the Spirit, resisted the Satan, and then set out on his mission to proclaim the kingdom of God to the whole world (see Mark 1:14–15). But all the evidence suggests that the world was not in his sights in these early days. The holy city of Jerusalem doesn't even seem to be on Jesus' horizon at this stage of his ministry. In fact, nowhere outside of Capernaum and some fishing villages close to the Sea of Galilee were on his radar.<sup>7</sup>

## Jesus 'Got Up and Went'

Mark tells us that before even the crack of dawn, Jesus arose, and went out to a deserted place (Mark 1:35). To understand this, we need to get a few things clear. It cannot mean that Jesus walked off and made a trip back into the Judean wilderness or desert. Getting back there was several days walk to the south. If you have ever been to Galilee you will know that there isn't much sand around. It is pretty lush and verdant, more Gippsland in spring than Rutherglen in summer. No, it is likely that Jesus stays in Capernaum, but that he finds a quiet place, an isolated spot, a space, perhaps a silence, that will enable him to do what is necessary if he is to continue with his mission. Jesus needs to find somewhere in order to talk with God.

At which point, as we imagine the scene, all of our own particularly modern notions of prayer and piety probably kick in. Jesus is 'on retreat'. Jesus is having some 'down time'. Jesus is exercising some 'self-care'. Or we may imagine some form of contemplative or informal prayer. Jesus talking to 'Abba', a term that we often think

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<sup>7</sup> The largest and most important cities in Jesus' home territory were actually Sepphoris (quite a way inland, and nearer to Nazareth) and Tiberias, further round the shore of the Sea of Galilee which was sometimes called the Sea of Tiberias (see John 6:1; 21:1). The fact that Jesus is never remembered as teaching or healing in those locations (Tiberias is only mentioned in John 6:23) suggests that it is extremely unlikely that he saw them as a focus for his message or as a location for his ministry.

means ‘Daddy’ or something like that, but which really means nothing of the sort.<sup>8</sup>

But we know what Jews said when they prayed first thing in the morning, and during the day, and last thing at night. They said the same prayer every time. I am going to write it in Hebrew first, to remind us that Jesus didn’t pray in English. Then I’ll give you a readable version of the Hebrew, which gives you a sense of what this prayer might have sounded like on the lips of Jesus.<sup>9</sup> Try and say the words out loud. Then an English translation.

שְׁמַע יִשְׂרָאֵל יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ יְהוָה אֶחָד  
 וְאֵהְבָה אֶת יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ בְּכָל-לִבְבֵנוּ וּבְכָל-נַפְשֵׁנוּ וּבְכָל-מְאֹדֵנוּ

*Shema yisrael yhwh elohenu yhwh ehad. Weahabta et yhwh eloheka bekol-lebobka ubekol-napska ubekol-meodeka*

**Deut 6:4** Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone. <sup>5</sup> You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.

This prayer is called the *Shema* (taken from the first word, the instruction ‘Hear’). At the time of Jesus, faithful Jews said this prayer each day; some even strapped the words to their wrists and their foreheads. They taught these words to their children... this prayer is everything. You see, the only way of making sense of Jesus’ life, vocation, mission, and message is to recognize, as Mark does, that his life was centered on and saturated by the question of God, to which this prayer provides an answer.

## The Shema

We know that devout Jews prayed this prayer every day because of evidence that comes to us from the 2nd century CE, specifically the tractate of the Mishnah called *Berakoth* which discusses the timing and circumstances of daily prayer in great detail. But the idea that Jews should pray these specific words every morning and evening is already present in Deuteronomy 6:7–9. The instructions in Deuteronomy led to the debates about when, where, and how the *Shema* should be prayed, including this typical disagreement between two of the greatest first century rabbis: Shammai and Hillel

<sup>8</sup> This is one of those things about Jesus which has the effect of making Jesus less formally ‘religious’ and, as a consequence, less Jewish. But the idea that Abba=Daddy is based on a major misunderstanding of the evidence. It just means ‘father’ with all of the potential connotations of respect and affection that are contained in that term in English.

<sup>9</sup> Although Jesus primary language was Aramaic, a language closely related to the Hebrew in which Israel’s scriptures were written, it is likely that the Shema was prayed in Hebrew.

The House of Shammai say, “In the evening everyone should recline in order to recite [the Shema] and in the morning they should stand, “as it says ‘When you lie down and when you rise’ (Dt. 6:7).”

But the House of Hillel say, “Everyone may recite according to his own manner [either reclining or standing], “as it says, ‘And as you walk by the way’ (ibid.).”

(m. *Berakoth* 3, translation Jacob Neusner)

We often think of Jesus as someone devoted to prayer, an example to us all of the need to spend time with God. But, if we read the gospels we see that these occasions are actually pretty rare. Mark, in particular, remembers Jesus as someone constantly on the move: up a mountain, onto a boat, across the lake, back home to Capernaum, across to Nazareth, into the region of Tyre. He is sometimes accompanied by the disciples, but he is always followed by the crowd. The constant movement, and the emphasis that there is something secret and mysterious about what Jesus is up to, suggests perhaps a reluctance on his part, perhaps even a struggle to stay true to his vocation (see Mark 3:12). In the midst of all of this activity, and the demands of others on Jesus, the reference to him taking time to be alone with God takes on deeper significance. Perhaps it also reflects a priority: the recognition that if you only face the crowd, if your only attention is the crowd, if you devote all your energy to the crowd, you may end up losing touch with the very one who sent you.

So, early in the morning, Jesus arises and goes out to seek God.

The prayer that he prays is not a seeking after God in some kind of spiritual quest for self-fulfilment and it certainly isn't just a matter of religious duty or obligation. Jesus does not go to God because he has some questions to which he would like the answers, or some problems for which he would like God's help. If he prays the Shema then Jesus asks for nothing. Instead, in that deserted place, just a few paces and moments away from the everyday hustle and bustle of trying to do God wants, Jesus reminds himself and reconnects with who God is: the God who is one, and whose love for a small and insignificant nation meant that in love God reached out to give them land and law. God, whose love for an enslaved people meant that through fire and cloud God delivered them and set them free to be a people whose whole life, heart, soul and strength was devoted to the love of God. Deuteronomy 6 goes on to tell the people ‘do not forget the LORD, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. The LORD your God you shall fear; him you shall serve, and by his name alone you shall swear.’ (Deuteronomy 6:12-13).

It is not too much, I think, to claim that the Jesus who prayed that prayer, and told others that love of God and love of neighbour were the most important things in the world (Mark 12:28–34), was himself caught up in and captivated by the presence and



promise of divine love. Divine love that creates and restores and transforms and saves. The kind of love that is present in human lives and the spaces of our world when God truly reigns and when all that which is hostile to God is defeated.

What we see here in this scene movement to the deserted place, in the most abbreviated form, is Jesus getting up and going to seek to the source of all life, all love, the one God of Israel, who is the one who is sending Jesus into everything that lies ahead.

## Seeking God's Face

That other great prayerbook of the Hebrew Bible, known well by Jesus, has a phrase for this kind of quest: 'Come, my heart says, seek God's face; your face, O Lord, do I seek' (Ps 27:8). Perhaps we should keep that phrase in mind as we consider what lies ahead: if we are to get up and go, then the first place we go to is God; we seek God's face.

### Seeking God's Face

The idea of 'seeking God's face' can be found in in Psalm 24:6 where it describes the intention of worshippers who stand at the entrance to the temple. In Psalm 27:8 it seems to refer to an inner compulsion or perhaps a divine command, heard by someone who is facing adversity, an idea also repeated in Hosea 5:15. Most famously, in 2 Chronicles 7:14 God's people are invited to seek God's face in the context of prayer and repentance. This motif relates to the broader biblical idea of encountering God, or seeing God 'face to face'. Think Jacob wrestling (Genesis 32:30) or Moses on the mountain (Exodus 33:11; Deuteronomy 5:4; 34:10).

The important thing to bear in mind here is that to speak of God's face is not a way of talking about God's appearance, but God's presence. To seek God's face is to seek after God who is unapproachable mystery, but who nevertheless reveals that presence in such a way people can know, or see, or experience God directly. This encounter with God, the turning away from ourselves to discover the God who gives of Godself in love and judgement is the only genuine basis for renewal and revival in the life of the church.

This is an idea which reconnects us to the theme of the Synod: 'arise and come away', where the bride 'seeks after' the bridegroom (see Song of Songs 3: 1–2). Indeed, this is how the love poems of the Song of Songs have been read in the life of the church. The Song's greatest medieval commentator, Bernard of Clairvaux writes that 'God loves us that he may be loved by us, knowing that those who love God become blessed by their love itself' (Sermon 83:4). This priority, of seeking God and knowing God's love for us so that we, in turn, may know what it is to love God and love neighbour, surely should continue to be our daily prayer. To quote a famous saying from a more obviously Protestant source: "The chief end of a human being is to worship God and enjoy God



forever”, as the Westminster Confession puts it.

There is an awful lot of movement that takes place in a church that is trying to work out what is next. There is lots of running around – to keep some shows on the road, or to get other things up and running. We live with almost constant activity, adjustment, and alteration: places to go, people to see, things to do. All of that is fine. In Mark’s gospel, Jesus is about to be busy again. But let us never forget that the primary movement in the life of the church, the one that makes the church what it is, the form of movement that, if it should ever stop, would mean that we would stop being the church, is our journey towards God. We are to seek God’s face, and it is a journey that we make not because of what we need, but because of the glimpses we have of who God is. This is our daily exercise, and it has no other purpose than to turn our faces to the one in whom we live and move and have our being, the source of all life and love, the one who saves and restores us, the one to whom all honour and glory and power are due; the one God.

There has never been genuine renewal or reform in the life of the church unless this seeking after God is placed at the heart of the church’s life. In earlier generations, and in different cultural forms of piety, but still within in our own ecclesial tradition, there was a term for this kind of quest that kept the people of God yearning and burning to know God’s love. They called it ‘revival’. Like many words from our tradition, we tend not to use it because it makes us feel uncomfortable somehow. I think that’s a shame, I think we need a revival. But it will only happen if we seek after God.

My job is not to tell you what revival looks like. The Shema is pretty expansive. It talks about using all of your mind, your soul, your strength in your search for God’s love. We can and should remind ourselves that in the history of the church revival takes the form of renewed spiritual vitality and fervency in prayer. It also leads to renewed engagement with Scripture, which is read not just as a source of doctrinal authority or aid to personal devotion, but as a word of divine address and judgement. Whatever revival is, it is something felt by those who seek God’s face and encounter God’s love, and something that becomes visible to others. Which means we can also look at what happens next in Mark’s story:

“Let us go on to the neighboring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do.” (Mark 1:38)

Perhaps revival looks like a community of those who have heard and experienced the salvation contained within Jesus’ message. We will think more about that in Study 2, *Get Up and Go After Jesus: An Invitation to Discipleship*.

And perhaps revival looks like following Jesus and going somewhere new. That will be our theme for Study 3: *Get Up and Go Away From Home: An Invitation to Mission*.

But for now, we are reminded that our journeys in discipleship and mission, the 'get up and go' of the life of the church in the world, all begin, and will end, in our arising and coming to seek God's face.

**Hear, O LORD, when I cry aloud,  
be gracious to me and answer me!  
"Come," my heart says, "seek his face!"  
Your face, LORD, do I seek.**

(Psalm 27:8)

## Study 1: Questions for Reflection

- 1)** How is your church or community of faith currently 'resting'? And what are some signs that it is 'on the move'?
- 2)** How do you respond to the assertion that 'There has never been genuine renewal or reform in the life of the church unless this seeking after God is placed at the heart of the church's life'? What would seeking after God look like in your context?
- 3)** How would you connect your church's current patterns and priorities in worship and mission to the idea of seeking God's face?

# Study 2

## Get Up and Go After Jesus: An Invitation to Discipleship

### **Text: Matthew 9:9**

As Jesus was walking along, he saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax booth; and he said to him, “Follow me.” *And he got up and followed him.*

Jesus calls the strangest people. Just go into a church and look around you and you will see that this is true. As someone who prayed to and was obedient to the ‘one God’ of Israel, I guess we should expect Jesus’ selection criteria for disciples to be slightly unusual. We might imagine that, as someone who learned how to pray from Deuteronomy 6, Jesus was also aware of what it says Deuteronomy 7:7–9:

It was not because you were more numerous than any other people that the LORD set his heart on you and chose you—for you were the fewest of all peoples. It was because the LORD loved you and kept the oath that he swore to your ancestors, that the LORD has brought you out with a mighty hand, and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt. Know therefore that the LORD your God is God.<sup>10</sup>

Let us call this the principle of indiscriminate love and calling. If you are a Jewish prophet, and you believe that you are called to lead a movement for the renewal of God’s covenant people, what should your followers look like? Well, they will look like the ramshackle bunch of men that Jesus gathered around him.<sup>11</sup> It was not because you were especially good fisherman, Peter Andrew, James, and John, that the Lord set his heart on you (Matthew 4:18–22). And Matthew, or Levi, or whatever your name is, it was not because your status as a tax collector gave you wealth and prestige that Jesus called you to get up and follow him.

### **Matthew/Levi and the Authorship of Matthew’s Gospel**

The one verse story of the calling of Matthew the tax-collector in Matthew 9:9 is taken, pretty much word for word, from the story of the calling of Levi in Mark 2:14. To put it bluntly, here as in so many other places, the author of the gospel of Matthew has copied and lightly edited material that they found in the earlier gospel of Mark. This is one of the reasons why it is hard to believe that this same Matthew was actually the

<sup>10</sup> It is important to point out that the description of God’s covenantal love with Israel in Deuteronomy 7 is surrounded by problematic verses relating to conquest and violence perpetrated against Israel’s enemies (see 7:1–6).

<sup>11</sup> The tradition tends to remember that Jesus called twelve men as ‘disciples.’ But it is important to note those places that hint at the important role played by female disciples in the Jesus movement. See Mark 15:41, 47; 16:1; Luke 8:1–3, 19–21; 23:49, 55; 24:9.

author of the gospel that the later church attributed to him. After all, if you are going to tell your own call story, why would you simply copy another story of Jesus' calling another person with a different name? We need to remember that the gospels were not initially written with titles indicating authorship ('The Gospel of/according to Matthew'). These are later additions.

The author has changed the person's name from Levi to Matthew probably because in a later list of the 'twelve apostles' (Matthew 10:2–4, which seems again to be borrowed from Mark 3:14–19) there is no reference to anyone called Levi, but there is a mention of someone called Matthew. So, 'Matthew's' gospel names him as a 'tax-collector' in Matthew 10:3 just to make the connection explicit.

Later generations, keen to connect the anonymous gospels as closely as possible to those 'apostles', noted the change, and perhaps regarded it as good enough reason to attribute the gospel to this 'Matthew'.

## **Disciples and Discipleship: Call and Response**

The stories of the calling of those first disciples are very familiar to us and they remind us about some very important things about discipleship.

Perhaps the first is that it seems that Jesus does indeed call all sorts of people. Every now and again in Australia a list is published of the most and least trusted professions. If you are a doctor or a nurse or a teacher, the chances are that people will like and respect you. But, fair warning for anyone who is a politician, or works in the media, insurance, real estate, or advertising. For them. The truth is that everyone except their parents (who should love them whatever) is raising their eyebrows with suspicion or distrust at them whenever they aren't looking. Side note: clergy are in the top half of this table.

Tax collectors in the ancient world were down on the bottom of the list. They occupied a role that in the class structures of ancient society did not make them an ideal candidate for the Jesus movement. They worked for the elites: the landowners and ruling authorities who made up less than 5% of the population but owned more than 90% of everything else. Tax collectors weren't *from* the elite, but they were so associated with the exploitative behaviour of the aristocracy that they were regarded as exploiters themselves.

### **'Tax Collectors'**

The term 'tax-collectors' is potentially misleading, suggesting someone employed by Roman or Jewish authorities to collect various kinds of direct taxation. Matthew/Levi and the tax-collectors mentioned both positively and negatively in the gospel traditions do not belong to this category (see Matthew 5:46; 9:10–11; 10:3; 11:19; 18:17; 21:31–32). Instead they operated as 'tax farmers' harvesting revenue from goods,

trade, and movement with the approval of the authorities (to whom they paid a commission) but with a focus on indirect taxation and a reputation for exploitation, deceit, and collaboration with elites. Think somewhere midway between the legitimacy of the Australian Tax Office, and the morally dubious forms of business taxation sometimes operated by organised crime.

The 2nd century Jewish text, the Mishnah, states that such people are 'unclean' and lists them with 'murders and robbers' (tractate Nedarim 3.4) whereas the Greek orator Dio Chrysostom includes them in the same list as 'those who run brothels' (*Discourses* 14.4).

The setting of the calling of Matthew (by now Jesus is back in 'his home town' of Capernaum, Matthew 9:1) suggests the strong possibility that Matthew collected taxes from the fishing industry, something that connected him, albeit negatively, to the other disciples. So, Jesus seems to be calling someone that the other disciples may have been deeply suspicious of.

The story of the calling of Matthew is therefore a reminder to us that God's love is truly indiscriminatory and that the community of disciples is neither a community of the culturally respectable or morally upright. Instead, it is made up simply of those who have heard the call of Jesus to walk in his way: to get up and go after him.

The story of the calling of Matthew is wedged between the story of the healing of a paralysed man (Matthew 9:1–8) and a conversation over dinner with followers of John about fasting (Matthew 9:10–17). The latter story is set in a home where 'tax collectors and sinners' joined Jesus and his disciples for a meal. The setting of the calling story between accounts of healing and table-fellowship serve to remind us of another basic truth about discipleship, a truth that the language of physical movement ('he got up and followed') symbolizes. Discipleship is a practice, or a praxis. It is about where we place our feet and how we spend our time, the decisions we make, and journeys we take. Discipleship makes a difference to the priorities we hold, the values we live by, and the people we hang out with. Matthew the tax-collector is invited to join a movement, and he is soon immersed in the demands and constant disruptions that will always accompany those who follow in the way of Jesus. Within the space of a few verses Matthew, now as a disciple of Jesus becomes part of a community that has argues with Pharisees, argues again with followers of John the Baptist, is requested for healing by a synagogue leader, walks on to heal two blind men, who then leave the scene just as someone with a demon arrives, and that is just chapter 9. At the end of that chapter we are told that 'Jesus went about in all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and curing every disease and sickness' (Matthew 9:35). Matthew 10 opens with Jesus sending the disciples out themselves, and Matthew is listed there as a tax collector (Matthew 10:3). It is as if Jesus is saying: 'you have seen me do it, now it is your turn'. This is the second thing about discipleship: at its core it is a matter of getting up and getting out there: on the road, in the world, following Jesus.



## Disciples and Discipleship

So, discipleship begins with God's undeserved invitation, and it continues with our dedicated commitment to try and do the things that Jesus did. We know this, of course, and at our best as the church we do our best to be faithful disciples. But, now I invite you to look at the story of the calling of Matthew a bit more closely, because there is more going on. And to help us, we need to take a look at a visual representation of the scene of the calling of Matthew.



Caravaggio (1571–1610), *The Calling of St. Matthew*. Reproduced under Creative Commons Licence: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:0\\_%27La\\_Vocation\\_de\\_saint\\_Matthieu%27\\_de\\_Le\\_Caravage\\_-\\_fr2.JPG](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:0_%27La_Vocation_de_saint_Matthieu%27_de_Le_Caravage_-_fr2.JPG) (created by Jean-Pol Grandmont).

Look at this picture closely. It attempts to capture the scene described in Matthew 9:9 but, as great art does, it also points us to deeper truths that lie behind and within the story.

Look at the pointing finger of Jesus. It follows the line of light that makes its way towards Matthew at the other end of the table. But it also seems to bring an accusation. Caravaggio captures the moment of grace, the invitation to come and follow, but the pointing finger, and the slumped body of Matthew, who refuses to look at Jesus, suggests that we are looking at someone who experiences judgement even as they are being called.

I said before that tax collectors were retainers of the elite class. Whatever else we can say about Jesus and his teaching, we can be sure that he belonged to the non-elite and had harsh things to say about the religious and political elites of his day.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> For a fascinating study of Jesus in these terms see James Crossley and Robert J. Myles. *Jesus: A Life in Class*

So, I don't think we should imagine that Jesus said to Matthew 'Hi, I'm Jesus, up you get' and that Matthew just looked up and smiled and said 'yes, OK then'. For Matthew to become a disciple surely meant realising that he had made some life choices that were very badly wrong, and that there were some things, which no doubt he clung to very dearly, that he had to let go of. Look at the picture again. Matthew seems to realise the demanding nature of Jesus' call or, what we sometimes call the 'cost of discipleship'.<sup>13</sup>

The life of discipleship begins with Jesus' invitation, and it is sustained by our following, but in between those two things there is something else happening that we should probably just call 'salvation'. Christ's gracious call makes it clear that we are embedded and trapped in systems of injustice, greed, and darkness. It points us to our own selfishness, our tendency to idolatry, and our love of power, even if, like Matthew, all we do is try and ride on the coat tails of power that belongs to someone else. In the call to discipleship, these things are exposed for what they are, and they come under the searing judgement of God in the person of Jesus, who comes, as the text that immediately follows tells us, to heal those who are sick (Matthew 9:12). We are invited not just to get up and go, but also to turn around and away from all that is hostile to God's reign and God's saving purpose. Discipleship is not a lifestyle choice. It is a summons to repentance.

That summons comes to Matthew the tax-collector in the form of a wandering teacher who stops at the side of the road and addresses him. Jesus is described in all of the gospels not just as a teacher who shows us the way to live, but as the messenger, Messiah, and son of God who has the authority to address us with all of the authority and demand of God's own voice. When Jesus called the first disciples by the Sea of Galilee, it seems that they already knew something of this and were somehow prepared in advance to respond to Jesus' invitation. It is likely they all knew each other and knew Jesus, prior to their call.<sup>14</sup> We are told that when Jesus calls them, 'they left their nets and followed him' (Matthew 4:20, 22). But the story of the calling of Matthew includes an extra verb of personal movement: he got up and followed Jesus. Matthew's response isn't just in the following, it is in the 'arising' into grace, into a salvation from all that holds him captive.<sup>15</sup> He doesn't just respond to the grace that is

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*Conflict*. Winchester: Zero, 2022.

13 That phrase was made famous because it formed the title of an English translation of a book by Dietrich Bonhoeffer. The original book was just entitled *Discipleship*, but Bonhoeffer's comparison between discipleship, or 'costly grace', and 'cheap grace' led to the title. The cost of discipleship, for Bonhoeffer, is summarized in the famous assertion that 'When Christ calls a person, he bids them come and die'. Bonhoeffer's German is actually better rendered 'Whenever Christ calls us, his call leads us to death', *Discipleship*. Edited by Geoffrey B. Kelly and John D. Godsey. Translated by Barbara Green and Reinhard Krauss. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001, p.87. It is that kind of call that Caravaggio is depicting.

14 The likelihood is that Peter and Andrew, James and John were, long with Jesus, part of a community of adherents / followers of the renewal movement started by John the Baptist (see John 1:35–42).

15 As we will see in Study 3, the use of the verb *anhistēmi* here to refer to Matthew's 'getting up' evokes ideas of resurrection.



present in Jesus' invitation, he experiences transformation, a deliverance, effected by the mercy of God extended to him in the person of Jesus himself.

So, what does this discipleship look like? We have seen earlier that it is a call to action and to a lifestyle of doing the things that Jesus did. But, perhaps there is more. One of the things we know about tax collectors is that they were likely to have been literate. They possessed what we call 'scribal literacy', understood as the capacity not just to read and write, but to understand and interpret texts and documents.

## Scribes in Jesus' World

Scribes are mentioned often in the gospels, usually in conjunction with other groups like the Pharisees (see Matthew 2:4; 5:20; 7:29; 8:19; 9:3; 12:38; 13:52; 15:1; 16:21; 17:10; 20:18; 21:15; 23:2, 13–15, 23, 25, 27, 29, 34; 26:57; 27:41). The title 'scribes' draws attention to their main role (one which provided a degree of status and influence in society). Namely, their ability to write, copy, and interpret written texts, ranging from a tax-receipt to a text from the Bible. As such, scribes were located at the top end of the scales of literacy in Jesus' world, at a time when 90% or more of the population were likely illiterate. Recent scholarship has focussed especially on the question of interpretation.<sup>16</sup> While there were other forms of literacy that provided an ability to write or copy documents, scribes seem to have acquired authority because of their capacity to act as recognised interpreters of texts. One of the points of dispute between Jesus and the Jewish authorities of his day, seems to have revolved around the fact that Jesus seems to have claimed this kind of interpretative authority, but on the basis of something other than advanced levels of literacy: see Matthew 7:29; 13:55. Luke seems to feel that it is important to represent Jesus as someone who possessed scribal literacy (see Luke 2:41–50; 4:16–30).

Matthew's gospel has an interest in scribes. We have seen that some people think that in this call story, the author of the gospel is giving away their identity. There is another passage in the gospel where people have seen the same thing going on, but now in a way that talks not just about his old vocation as a scribe who collected taxes, but as a scribe who follows Jesus.

Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old. (Matt 13:52)

What is a scribe trained for the kingdom of heaven? It appears to be someone who doesn't just live by the values and priorities of the kingdom of God, but who seeks to understand it by means of the interpretation of texts and traditions. A kingdom-scribe is someone who doesn't just do things, but someone who has the capacity to step

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<sup>16</sup> The best discussion of the issues is Chris Keith, *Jesus Against the Scribal Elite: The Origins of the Conflict*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2014.

back and interpret what is being done. Someone with the ability to ask questions about the path of discipleship: where next? what next? Someone who has learned how to relate where we are going to the question of where we came from and who can articulate the relationship between the new and the old. This is a mark of discipleship that we sometimes forget. It reminds us that we are called not just to do but to learn; not just to act, but to discern; not just to change and transform the world but also to understand it.

And so, where does all this leave us as a community of disciples? It means that getting up and going after Jesus is something that goes deeper and extends further than we often imagine. To the extent that the call of Matthew is an idealised story, it prompts us to consider not just those first steps in discipleship, but every step, every journey. It brings into focus questions that should always accompany us in the life of faith.

Questions like:

- What are the structures, practices, commitments, contexts that, in Christ's call, are addressed with a word of judgement?
- What do we need to leave behind to respond to Christ's call and to enter more fully into the grace that is offered in Christ's invitation?
- Where have we grown complacent about the transformative power of Christ's presence and invitation?<sup>17</sup>
- In Christ's call do we realise that we are invited back to school? We are invited not just to follow Christ but to learn what it means to follow Christ. The word disciple actually means 'someone who learns from a teacher', so faith formation and education lie at the core of Christian discipleship.<sup>18</sup>

A few verses after the story of Matthew's call, Jesus says this:

Go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice' (Matthew 9:13)

When we get up and go after Jesus we are committing ourselves to a life that will take us more deeply into the mercy of God, a grace that saves, a love that sets us free.

Again, the Psalmist gives us the right words:

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<sup>17</sup> There is a constant temptation for the church to forget to attend deeply to the truth of the 'grace which justifies through faith' and to the 'centrality of the person and work of Jesus Christ'. Both phrases are taken from the Uniting Church in Australia's *Basis of Union*, but the shorthand way of referring to all of this is 'gospel'. The need to hear the gospel again is articulated with great insight by Douglas John Hall, *Waiting for Gospel: An Appeal to the Dispirited Remnants of Protestant 'Establishment'*. Eugene OR: Cascade, 2012.

<sup>18</sup> Here is another reason why the author of Matthew may have changed Levi's name to Matthew in the tax-collector story. The word for disciple in Greek is *mathētēs*, which sounds pretty similar. Maybe there is a pun going on, one which reminds us that that this story isn't just about a tax-collector, but about anyone who gets up and follows Jesus.

**Have mercy on me, O God,  
according to your steadfast love;  
according to your abundant mercy  
blot out my transgressions.  
Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity,  
and cleanse me from my sin.**

**Create in me a clean heart, O God,  
and put a new and right spirit within me.  
Do not cast me away from your presence,  
and do not take your holy spirit from me.  
Restore to me the joy of your salvation,  
and sustain in me a willing spirit. (Psalm  
51:1-2, 11-12)**

## Study 2: Questions and Activities for Reflection

1. Discipleship begins because God loves us indiscriminately, and has invited us into a loving, undeserved relationship.

Spend 5 minutes in silence, imagining God's love for you. You might like to visualise it, for example, imagining being bathed in light. You might like to repeat a mantra in your mind, for example, God is love. You might like to play some music, like this: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-fvmboqfpbY>

After your time in silence, discuss together what discipleship feels like, if it begins in a place of love and acceptance.

2. Discipleship is a practice, or a praxis. It is about where we place our feet and how we spend our time, the decisions we make, and journeys we take. Discipleship makes a difference to the priorities we hold, the values we live by, and the people we hang out with.”

Read this short paragraph out loud, slowly, a few times. Are there any words or phrases that are standing out for you? Share these with the group and, if you feel comfortable, a story you might have about discipleship that relates.

3. Everybody look at the painting by Caravaggio, silently and deeply, for about 5 minutes. Where in the painting are your eyes drawn to? What are you noticing? Is there anything stirring in you? Pay attention to any emotions or bodily sensations you feel.

If you feel comfortable, share with the group what you experienced as you gazed at the painting. How does it connect (or not) to your own experience of Christ's call.

# Study 3

## Get Up and Go Away from Home: An Invitation to Mission

### **Text: Mark 10:1**

He *left that place and went* to the region of Judea and beyond the Jordan. And crowds again gathered around him; and, as was his custom, he again taught them.

### **Introduction: Moving (Away From) Home**

In these studies I am inviting you to be attentive to some of the patterns of *movement* that we see in the stories of Jesus and his disciples in the gospels of Mark and Matthew. We have considered the example of Jesus, who *got up and went* to a place where he could seek God's face and confess and pray to the one in whom we live and move and have our being. We have also explored the story of Matthew the tax collector, who *got up and followed Jesus*, because in Jesus' call he experienced God's transforming grace and presence. These moments and the movements they describe provide us with important reminders as we contemplate what it means to be the church. The story of these movements beyond the New Testament, through time and across cultures, is the history of the church. We are the church because we have these moves.

In 2005 my wife and I bought a new house. We had just had a second baby and we needed more room. We couldn't quite afford a bigger house in the area we lived in, so we moved across a suburb and down a price bracket, and purchased a house that needed renovation. Later that year, having carefully massaged the relationship with our parents with the explicit purpose of generating additional income, we employed builders and got to work in making our house into our home.

It damn near killed us and was one of the most stressful things I have ever done in my life. But by early 2006 we had what we wanted. We had built a home and could settle in. Work, local schools, and good friends were all close by. 2006 and 2007 were wonderful. I celebrated my 40th birthday in July sunshine. Our home was a place of welcome, hospitality, and great joy.

Then, in early 2008 I was sitting upstairs in our loft conversion reading my emails, when a message came in saying that the Uniting Church Theological College in Melbourne was seeking a Professor of New Testament. Less than three years after moving in to our new home, I leaned back in my chair and said my wife: how do you fancy moving to Australia?

Today, in the third of our 'get up and go texts' we are reminded that following Jesus can mean that we need to leave home. Let me explain what I mean.

## Jesus Leaves Home

It is highly likely that when Jesus embarked on his mission of proclamation, healing and deliverance in and around the sea of Galilee (see Mark 1:38–39), he had little or no thought of going to Jerusalem for anything other than celebration of the Jewish festivals. Even the fateful events of Holy Week are connected to the intention to go and celebrate the Passover in the Holy City. Of course, the gospels give the impression that Jesus always knew that his 'destination' would be Jerusalem. Luke makes Jerusalem a 'city of destiny' for Jesus and describes how Jesus 'set his face' towards it before making the journey south from Galilee (Luke 9:51). But, in Mark's gospel, in our verse, you will see that things feel less intentional. Jerusalem is not yet in Jesus' sights. The so-called 'passion predictions' that come before Mark 10:1 speak clearly of Jesus undergoing suffering, but they don't name a location (see Mark 8:31; 9:31). Therefore the 'movement' described in Mark 10:1, while not exactly being aimless, seems more tentative or exploratory.

Jesus decision to 'leave' and to 'go' into the regions of Judea and the Transjordan is somewhat confusing. To understand what is going on we need to pay close attention to three things: the story of Jesus' movements that Mark tells; the geographical issues relating to this movement 'away from home'; and the variations in the different manuscripts of Mark's gospel that we still have.

### ***Movement: Home and Away***

In most translations of Mark 10:1 it simply says that Jesus left 'that place' and went into other regions. But the verbs that Mark uses are the same as the verbs we encountered in Study 1 with Mark 1:35. We are told again that Jesus 'got up' from 'that place' and went somewhere else. This suggests that the place being referred to is still Capernaum. In other words, Jesus has basically been working from home-base all this time. All through Mark 2–8 Jesus has gone on journeys, taking his disciples with him into neighbouring villages, across the Sea of Galilee, on an excursion into the Decapolis.<sup>19</sup> But, Jesus has always gone back home. We assume that he did so for all of the obvious reasons and all of the things we associate with home: familiarity, security, privacy, family and friends.

Most recently, Jesus has ventured north to Caesarea Philippi. There, as Mark tells the story, something decisive happens (see Mark 8: 27–33). Jesus seems to get to a point of realization and decision. The realization was that God's calling seems to clearly have been taking what we might call 'messianic' shape. Jesus now had followers, and was

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<sup>19</sup> The Decapolis was a region on the eastern side of the river Jordan, occupied by ten Greek cities. Jesus' visit there in Mark 7:31 anticipates, then, the movement to the region 'beyond the Jordan' in Mark 10:1. The difference is that, in the earlier instance, he went back home afterwards.

drawing crowds as well as opposition. Some people were comparing him to John the Baptist. God's reign, long promised and eagerly awaited, had started to break into the lives of the people and the places and spaces of those Galilean villages. And so, when Peter says 'you are the Messiah', Jesus doesn't say anything to dispel the rumour.

## Messiahship and Secrecy

One of the peculiar features of Mark's story of Jesus is the regular reference, especially in Mark 1–8, to Jesus telling others to be quiet or silent about his identity as Israel's messiah (see Mark 1:24, 34, 44; 3:11–12; 5:43; 7:36; 8:26, 30). This motif creates a sense of ambiguity around the question of whether and in what way Jesus can be regarded as Israel's Messiah. On the one hand, the reader of the gospel is told right at the start that Jesus is the Messiah and that the gospel will tell his story (see Mark 1:1). On the other hand, Jesus himself shows a reluctance for this idea to be made public. It is possible to explain this ambiguity by saying that the historical Jesus didn't actually think he was the Messiah. But it is more likely that Mark uses the ambiguity to highlight two crucial themes. The first is the idea that Jesus' messianic identity can only be understood when it is connected to the story of his suffering and passion. That latter emphasis is the focus of Mark 9–16, and the conversation with Peter at Caesarea Philippi (Mark 8:27–33) seems to be the fulcrum on which this question of messianic identity turns. The second theme is that the gospel of Mark seems to be written to invite the reader to carefully think through the question of Jesus' identity and the 'secrecy' motif. See, for example the question of the disciples 'who is this?' in Mark 4:41 and Jesus' question 'who do others say I am?' in Mark 8:27, 31.

This seems to lead Jesus to make a *decision*. As the Messiah, his next task is to take the good news of God's into those places where it is likely to confront those who have power and authority, the religious and political elites. Jesus knows that this will be a costly decision (Mark 8:31) but, as we have noted, it isn't yet connected explicitly to the need to go to Jerusalem. That decision is followed by the experience of the transfiguration, at which Jesus' vocation (which comes initially at his baptism in Mark 1:9–11) is confirmed (see Mark 9:1–8). It seems that everything is being set up for Jesus to make the journey south to Jerusalem. But, he still goes home (see Mark 9:33).

To be honest, we cannot be sure whether the chronology that Mark gives us reflects the actual reality of how things unfolded for Jesus. There is genuine debate about why Jesus makes the decision to travel to Jerusalem. But the way Mark frames chapters 9–11 is intriguing. In Mark 9:33 Jesus is back at home. By Mark 11:1 is entering the holy city as Israel's king. And in between these two locations, Jesus goes for a wander: 'he got up and went to the region of Judea and beyond the Jordan.' (Mark 10:1). It is precisely here that things get more confusing.



## Maps and Manuscripts: 'Judea (and) Beyond the Jordan'



Let's begin with Mark's reference to the region 'beyond the Jordan'. This territory, sometimes known as the 'Transjordan' is more technically referred to as Perea, and you can see it marked on the map as the area south-east of the Jordan river, just below and to the west of the Decapolis. Importantly, it was ruled by the same person who ruled Jesus' home territory of Galilee: Herod Antipas.

A look at the map makes something clear to us. The region 'beyond the Jordan' is not a part of, or to be equated with the territory called Judea. As you can see, Judea is to the west of the Jordan river (in fact the river was its eastern boundary). Crucially, Jerusalem is in Judea. It

is possible that Jesus travelled to Jerusalem via Perea in order to avoid Samaritan territory. Whatever the reason, the geographical accuracy of Mark's account, while interesting, is not the most important thing. Rather, the crossing of the Jordan into the region 'beyond the Jordan' provides us with narrative symbolism which can help us to think about Jesus' sense of mission and our own.

### Manuscripts and the Problem of Mark 10:1

When reading the biblical text closely, it is important to take notice of those places where, in our English translations, the editors of the text have provided a footnote. At Mark 10:1, in the New Revised Standard Version for example, we are told that while the editors have printed 'Judea *and* beyond the Jordan', 'other ancient authorities lack *and*.' As with many of these footnotes in the New Testament, this reflects the fact that the various manuscripts of the gospel of Mark that we possess differ from each other. In this case there are three alternative versions in the manuscripts:

1. He went to the region of Judea, beyond the Jordan: we find this version in many manuscripts, and it is identical to what Matthew says in Matthew 19:1. The problem with this reading is that it is clearly a geographical mistake: there is no Judea 'beyond the Jordan'.

2. He went to the region of Judea *and* beyond the Jordan: this version is also found in many manuscripts and it resolves the geographical problem. But it is hard to see why, once Jesus has entered Judea with a view to going to Jerusalem, he would then cross the Jordan to enter Perea.
3. He went to the region of Judea *through* [the territory] beyond the Jordan: this version actually was the one that dominated later copies of Mark's gospel and found its way into early English translations. But most scholars think it is clearly there because later scribes wanted to find a way of resolving the apparent difficulties with either option (1) or option (2).

These kinds of textual issues are everywhere in the New Testament, and the footnotes in our English Bibles only refer to the most important or significant. It is hard to know which is the original, although one principle often invoked is that the version that is the most problematic (in this case option (1)) is most likely to have been the original with later scribes finding different ways to 'correct' the problem.

## Crossing the Jordan: Leaving Home

Look again at the map. If you are coming from Galilee and making your way to the region 'beyond the Jordan' what do you have to do? You have to cross the Jordan river. We don't know where Jesus made the crossing, but given everything that we have seen about his sense of vocation as the Messiah at this point in his ministry, I think that one thing is clear. The act of walking into the water of the river Jordan could only have meant one thing for Jesus: a reconnection with his own baptism, the place where the Spirit descended upon him and where God's voice declared him to be the Messiah, God's beloved son.<sup>20</sup>

Jesus has got up and gone away from home, and in passing back through the waters of the river in which he was baptized he takes decisive and final steps in his journey towards Jerusalem, his own death, and God's raising him from the dead. All of which should remind the disciples of Jesus that mission takes place the other side of our baptism. To put it differently, our baptism not only brings us into the church, but at the same time sends us out 'beyond' it. To follow Jesus means to move away from home, to embark on a journey *from which there is no return*.

With the help of some spatial imagination, we can take this a step further. The 'interlude' of Mark 10 helps us think about Jesus' mission unfolding in two steps. There was the 'away from home' that was the region 'beyond the Jordan', and the more distant 'away from home' that was Jerusalem itself. I want to suggest that it might be helpful to

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20 There is lots more to be said here, not least as to whether we can say anything further about the location of Jesus' baptism by John (there are two competing pilgrimage sites) and whether Mark intends us to make the connection between the journey of Jesus from Nazareth to the Jordan for baptism in Mark 1:9 and the journey from Capernaum to the Jordan on the way to Jerusalem in Mark 10:1.

think about the invitation to mission as one that always involves two destinations: one close to hand, the other further off; one ultimate (Jerusalem), the other penultimate ('beyond the Jordan').

Perea or the Transjordan was very much like Galilee. The two regions likely shared a similar culture and 'vibe'. To travel from one to the other was more like passing from Western Victoria to Loddon Mallee than from Mildura to, say, Brunswick. He is on his way to the big city 'far away', the strange place, the hostile place, the place where Jesus will meet an ending to his story, which will actually become just the beginning. But before he gets there. Jesus wanders through a more familiar place: still away from home, not quite home. I like to think that it is here, in the act of leaving and of walking deeper and further into close-by yet unfamiliar territory, Jesus was learning what his baptism really meant. He was learning that if God's call was real and if the Spirit really was upon him, then in the end he *had* to move away from home in a way that meant that there was no going back. It's a decisive step, but it's not something that you can do all at once.

## **The Church: Always On The Way**

I am suggesting that by imagining the movement of Jesus in Mark 10:1 we get a sense of what it might mean to be invited into playing our role in God's mission in the world. When we are told to 'remember our baptism' we aren't just being reminded of the moment we became a part of the church, we are reconnecting to our call to leave the familiarity and comfort of home, in order to be faithful to God's call. This is the invitation to mission. And when we do respond and leave, there is no going back. I want to close by asking two further questions, prompted by the 'get up and go' of Mark 10:1: where should we be going? what will keep us going?

### **Where Should We Be Going?**

I wonder if one of the things that holds us back from making decisions about the future of the church is the fear that if we go *there*, to an unfamiliar, strange, or difficult place, into new territory we will never be able to go back home. I find it reassuring to know that Jesus didn't head straight for Jerusalem, but that his mission away from home began in a region somehow 'closer to home'. What would happen if we thought about mission as God's invitation to step into territory that is familiar, but still new...close-by, but still challenging...on our doorstep, but still taking us deeper into the mission of God in the world. I also wonder if we can overcome some of our fear by discerning the next steps we should be taking as a church, into those places that are 'close to home, but away from home'.<sup>21</sup>

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21 This is a way of thinking about mission that works with the basic eschatological structures of the church's understanding of salvation: there is a future salvation which is 'not yet' and a present salvation which we only know in the concrete 'here and now' of our lives in the world. The UCA's Basis of Union (paragraph 3) encapsulates this dynamic of movement when it states that the Church 'lives between the time of Christ's death and resurrection and the final consummation of all things which Christ will bring; the Church is a pilgrim people, always on the way towards a promised goal'.

It seems to me that we don't need to look too hard to discover those places: the localities of our own communities, and the realities of life in contemporary Australia provide us with any number of possible next steps. For example:

In a church that consists largely of older generations, there are steps to be taken to encounter and take with full seriousness the perspectives, wisdom, leadership, and vibrant faith of younger generations who often feel much more at home in contemporary Australian culture than I/we do. To listen to them, and to provide opportunity for them to lead the church as we seek to be faithful to the call of Christ in a deeply secularized context, is a form of mission.

In the Australian context, we must take seriously the historical reality that colonization and settlement were processes that led to settlers making a home in this land by means of a removal of others from their home. In light of this reality, we can take get up and take next steps. The least that we can do is to leave the home of our colonial ideologies, our prejudicial assumptions, our fundamental whiteness, and learn what it means to get up and move towards those with whom we are called to 'walk together as first and second peoples'. Our journey towards justice, reconciliation and reparation is a response to God's invitation to mission.

A church that is prepared to get up, leave the security of its own culture and tendency towards insularity, and that walks into new territory, is a church that is learning what it means to follow Jesus. Elsewhere in Scripture, the city of Jerusalem comes to signify the church's ultimate destination, the fullness of its life in God (see Hebrews 12:22; Revelation 3:12; 21:2, 10). The church's great and decisive journey towards that fullness of life begins with a thousand small journeys to people and places who are just next door.

### ***What Will Keep Us Going?***

And along the way we need something to sustain us. Perhaps as we bring these studies to a close, this is a good point to notice one final linguistic detail relating to the theme of 'get up and go'. The verb that is translated as 'he got up' in all three of the verses we have explored in these studies (Mark 1:35; Matthew 9:9; Mark 10:1) is *an-histēmi*. In the gospels and elsewhere in the New Testament, this same verb is chosen to describe the ultimate act of 'getting up' or 'raising': that of Jesus' resurrection. It can be used in a way that just indicates that Jesus 'rises' or 'gets up' from the dead (see for example Mark 8:31; 9:9; 10:34). But in Luke's summary of early Christian preaching there is a strong emphasis on the idea that God 'raises' Jesus (see Acts 2:24, 32; 13:34; 17:31) from the dead.

It is not too much to suggest that it is only the power and presence of the God 'who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist' (Romans 4:17) that can sustain the church in mission. This means that, in the end, the three invitations that we have considered in these studies are all, ultimately, invitations to enter more

deeply into the experience of resurrection faith. That faith begins, and is only possible, because of Easter. We can 'get up and go' because 'Christ is risen'. And Christ is risen because God raised Jesus from the dead. The way of Jesus Christ in the world demands that we 'rely not on ourselves, but on God who raises the dead' (2 Corinthians 1:9). The 'one God' of Israel to whom Jesus prayed is the God whose power and presence, life and love, are present in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. This God raised Jesus from the shameful death of crucifixion to be Lord of all. The very existence of the church and every step of the church's journey is sustained by this God who has given us the Spirit so that we 'may not lose the way.' Like the bridegroom of the Song of Songs, God in Christ still invites us to 'arise and come away'. Today, tomorrow, and every day, towards God, following Jesus, away from home, we are called to 'get up and go'.

**“Arise, my love, my fair one,  
and come away;**

11 **for now the winter is past,  
the rain is over and gone.**

12 **The flowers appear on the earth;  
the time of singing has come’**

(Song of Songs 2:10–12)

### Study 3: Questions for Reflection

1. What are the 'moments' that you have experienced in the church that have meant the need to move away from familiar to 'unknown' territory? What needed to be acknowledged, amended, strengthened, for that 'movement' into mission? Where do you think the church needs to 'move to' next and what will be needed to tak the journey?
2. Do we have the courage, the leadership, and faith to pivot and change? If yes, how? If no, what can we do to ensure that we bring this aspect to the forefront of our church?
3. How do spirituality and discipleship relate to the invitation to mission?
4. What do we need for the journey? What is the role of buildings? What kind of leadership is needed? How do we make decisions? Where should we be focussing our attention and our resources?