

**Thursday September 3rd**

**Luke 5:1-11**

In the earlier chapter Luke was painting Jesus as moving around Galilee revealing his identity as the Saviour, the One sent by God to bring in the Kingdom of Heaven. He was shown as the One who was able to resist the temptations of the Devil, cast out demons, heal the sick and as someone who spoke with awesome authority. In chapter five Luke will build on this foundation by further showing Jesus' role in the community. Jesus is shown as attracting a large crowd in the area of Capernaum, a small town on the edge of the Lake of Gennesaret. To enable him to speak to this huge crowd, he sat in Peter's boat, a short distance from the beach. Peter and the others were already cleaning their nets, having fished all night (which is the best time for catching fish) and caught nothing. Now Jesus tells them to put their nets out again (this is morning time, the worst time for catching fish). These are exhausted fishermen who are frustrated at having caught nothing. What a surprise it must have been for them to catch so many fish! This was against all expectations, and while they may have obeyed him because they were aware of his many miracles, they could not have anticipated what eventuated.

What was it that made Peter respond in the way he did? I suspect that what moved him from being an interested observer to a disciple was that he found God revealing himself in his life and work as a fisherman. He knew all about the difficulties related to catching fish in the early hours of the morning. He knew about the frustrations involved in catching nothing all night and it was into his way of living that Jesus moved. He did not observe the Kingdom from a distance but found it in his daily life. He did not go looking for Jesus but found Jesus entering into what he did for a living. Peter was transformed at this discovery and he can see his own life in a proper perspective. His sinfulness stands out in stark contrast to the divinity of Jesus. The closer he comes to Jesus the more he is aware of his own needs and limitations. What Luke is showing is that these highly skilled fishermen could not catch fish using their own skills, talents, experience and strength. It was all useless. Following the command of Jesus, they had more fish than they could handle. As a message for the growing Church this would have been of great comfort as well as providing a way forward. Life has to be Christ-centred.

*Prayer*

Creator Lord, we marvel at the richness of your creation and rejoice in your many gifts to us. Help us to be ever aware of your presence in our daily lives that we may be people of hope.



## **BIBLE STUDIES AUGUST 2009**

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## LANTERN SERIES

*After the General Synod of 2001 the Bishop of Ballarat invited Anglicans throughout the Diocese to spend time in reflecting on the role the Scriptures play in the life of Anglicans and to take part in Bible studies and Bible reflections for General Synod 2004. This mandate now continues for the Mission of the Diocese.*

The Scriptures are the Word of God and in them we can not only discover God's teaching and his wonderful works of salvation down through the ages in the lives of his people, but we can also hear God speaking to us in our own varied situations. It is a living word that when read with eyes of faith brings us into a deeper relationship with God.

This Lantern Series of studies follows through the Gospel reading from the daily Eucharist as set down in the Australian lectionary. By reading these each day we are in a prayerful manner joining with people around the world as they gather for the daily Mass.

Each study is in three parts. Some background study of the text, opening up details and background that will help the reader to come closer to what the Gospel writer may have had in mind. An analysis of what possible meaning could the writing have to people seeking to live out lives of discipleship in the world today? And each study ends with a short prayer which may help us to ground the reading in our spiritual lives. It is to be hoped that as the people work through the texts they will be led to present their meditations to God in prayers of their own.

What is important is that adequate time is put aside each day to read the Bible texts before we work on the studies. Through familiarity with the language of the Bible and direct contact with the stories we will find ourselves growing in confidence as we study. To do them justice it would also be helpful to include a little extra time for reflection and prayer. The texts themselves are also suitable for discussion groups and over time will help give an introduction into various methods of biblical studies.

The Lantern Series is an initiative of the Diocese of Ballarat. These studies are also available at the start of each month at the diocesan web page at [www.ballaratanglican.org.au](http://www.ballaratanglican.org.au)

**Wednesday September 2nd**

**Luke 4:38-44**

When we compare this story to the same version in Mark (Mk 1:29-31) we can see something of the thinking of Luke. Of course there is no mention of Andrew, James and John, because in Luke they are yet to be called. He also has Jesus healing by the power of his command instead of reaching out and taking her hand. He also adds that the fever left her and her cure happened "immediately" a style the evangelist uses to heighten the power of Jesus. She was not only freed from the illness, she was restored to full health and strength. We need to remember that here at the start of the Gospel, Luke is setting out a picture of the power and authority of Jesus. He has power over evil (the demoniac in the earlier story and now over an illness). The cures and exorcisms he performs (vs 40-41) paint a picture of Jesus as a healer and an exorcist who is recognized as such by the demons who give him the title "Holy One of God". In the section verses 42-44 we are given a glimpse of the future ministry of Jesus which will move out beyond the borders of Galilee. We see here the first statement from Jesus about his mission. He has come to proclaim the Kingdom of God. Luke also seems to be building up a point of contrast between the people of Capernaum who do not want him to leave and his home town who cannot accept him and among whom he can perform no miracles.

We have already seen Jesus presented as a prophet, a teacher, a healer, an exorcist, the Son and the Messiah. Here, importantly, he is seen as the one who proclaims the Kingdom of God. Luke does not explain what this means. We can presume that the people understood well what was being said. It was about "being saved". Their history reminded them that they were a people who had received much from God and a nation which had found many ways of sinning and being unfaithful. They needed God's loving mercy and needed saving. It was because they understood this basic starting point that they could come to Jesus and be healed. It was not that they wanted God in their lives. They **needed** God. That is what salvation means. It acknowledges human limitations, weaknesses and sins. It recognizes God's compassion, patience, love and mercy. This is highlighted by Luke when he records that the people came to Jesus and gathered around him. This is what is required if salvation is to be a reality in our lives. Standing at a distance hoping for salvation achieves nothing. It is here already. It is ours for the receiving if we gather around Christ.

*Prayer*

Father in heaven, you are a God who gathers your children to yourself and keeps them safe. Help us to hear your invitation and leave behind our sins so as to walk in your ways.

## **Tuesday September 1st**

## **Luke 4:31-37**

Jesus leaves Nazareth and heads down into Galilee. Having been rejected in his home town he now finds acceptance among the Galileans. He did the same thing among them (teaching) but they were able to see that he spoke with authority. This authority is the presence of the Holy Spirit with which he has been anointed (4:18). What follows then is the first of the twenty-one miracles recorded by Luke. There are a variety of miracle stories in the Gospel and all of them have the same basic purpose. They show the powerful presence of God in the lives of people who had, up until that time, been under the power of Belial. They show these people being freed from the dominion of the evil one and set free to a new life in the Kingdom of God. The reign of God is present in the ministry of Jesus and when God is present, mighty works naturally take place. Luke, right at the start of his Gospel, wants to show Jesus as having power over all the evils that beset human beings. The source of his power for doing these wonderful signs is to be found in his anointing with the Holy Spirit. This belief is to be found on the lips of the demon as he professes that Jesus is not only Jesus of Nazareth, but also the "Holy One of God".

Demonic possession in the Gospels is not usually associated with Satan and so is not a moral possession. Their presence indicates a person who is afflicted in some way with a physical or mental ailment. A read through the Gospel will show a wide array of such problems. What Luke is doing by the way he arranges and tells his story is bring home the message that Jesus is about freedom. God understands that men and women can find themselves weighed down by all kinds of chains. Some of these are of their own making while others are thrust upon them by others and by the wider world in which they live. Because we are sinful and live in a sinful world these things are inevitable. That is why these stories in the Gospel of Luke are so important. Jesus is a bringer of freedom. Jesus takes burdens upon himself and helps us to carry them, enabling us to get on with life and not be destroyed by what is happening. Luke tells us that Jesus is a Saviour and that he has come to bring salvation and nowhere in the Gospel do we see that limited in any way, except by the lack of faith of those who encounter him. For the believer, hope and peace are always options and ever present gifts in our lives, if we seek Jesus out as our Saviour.

### ***Prayer***

Almighty God, we acknowledge your Son Jesus to be your Holy One among us. Help us to turn to him at all times, that our burdens may be light and we may know always your peace.

## **Saturday August 1st**

## **Matthew 14:1-12**

Jesus had explained in the parables that the Word of God will meet with resistance in the wider world. His own ministry was opposed by the Scribes and the Pharisees, some of the crowds were hostile and unwilling to respond and his own town rejected him. It is in this context that Matthew introduces this story (in a different setting in Mark [Mk 6:14ff]). He also has Herod initiating the rumour that Jesus was John the Baptist come back to life while Luke (Lk 9:7ff) and Mark see it coming to Herod from the crowds. Herod's problem was not so much that he married a relative but that he cast out his first wife to take Herodias, the wife of his half-brother who was still living. John's main enemy was not Herod. It was Herodias who hated him, presumably because he was a threat to her position, especially if, as we read in Mark, John had the ear of Herod. One cannot help but notice that in the accounts Herodias resembles Jezebel and there are similarities between Herod and Ahab the king of Israel (1 Kings chapters 19-21). What was happening to the prophet John and to Jesus was just a continuation of the rejection of those sent by God from the beginning. John is also presented as a prophet in that he proclaims the judgement of God on the behaviour of the people. In God's name he proclaims: "It is not lawful" and it is for his testimony that he is martyred. Jesus too came to proclaim the Kingdom of God and because of his faithfulness he too was killed.

This short story reminds us of one of the uncomfortable aspects of our discipleship. There is a cost. If we are going to enter into life in the Kingdom of God then we are going to have to not only "sell all that we have" so that we can obtain the treasure, but also daily take up our cross and follow after Jesus. Some things will have to change if we are truly to live in that Kingdom. But the bigger worry is that our faithfulness will at times antagonize others and the world around us. There will be times when it is embarrassing and difficult to stand up and confess our faith. People will rejoice to see the Church struggle and will delight in its failings and weaknesses. At those times (perhaps that is where we are now?) we need to keep our eyes on Christ who is our strength and our comfort. When all goes crazy around us he is there as our rock and is the guarantee of the success of our discipleship.

### ***Prayer***

All-powerful God, being a disciple of your Son is not easy and makes many demands on our time, our resources and our energies. Strengthen us in our faithfulness and may we never allow difficulties and problems to weaken our discipleship.

## **Sunday August 2nd**

## **John 6:22-35**

This teaching is developed by John in four sections. The first sets out the nature of the food used by God to satisfy the hunger of his people (vs 26-34). The second identifies that satisfaction with Jesus Christ (vs 35-40). The third deals with the question of how are men to recognize Jesus as the divine bread, the consequences of such a belief for them and the tragic cost for Jesus in giving himself as heavenly bread (vs 41-51). Finally, we are told how in his self-offering to God on the cross and to men in the Eucharist, Jesus Christ is and remains the true and eternal bread of life (vs 52-59). The frustration shown by Jesus (v 26) arises out of the fact that the crowd saw the miracle of Jesus and were mesmerized by the potential it seemed to have for material well-being and power. He sees in their response a hope that he would provide material food and possibly a new Jewish empire free of the Romans. Any hope they had of understanding the call of the Kingdom of God would arise out of their being disabused of this misconception of the teachings of Jesus. This is what the teaching on the sign is all about. The key point is not the miracle but what the miracle is pointing to. John does not see this as the highest form of faith but as a necessary step for them to move forward. Thus we can follow through the teaching of Jesus. He takes them through a process they understand, from their physical appetites and the bread they ate yesterday to feed those desires. The seal set on the Son of Man by the Father is the cross and resurrection and it is through these events that men and women will be truly fed with food that will lead to eternal life.

It is in this context that we can understand his reference to Moses and the manna in the desert. It was not Moses who fed them in the desert, it was God and the manna was not really bread. God is the constant giver and Christ is the real food of all men and women (1 Cor 10:4). What made Israel the people of God was that they allowed themselves to be fed by God, watered by God (from the Rock) and led by the Father into the land that was theirs only through his promise to Abraham. John uses this story of the Exodus as a kind of parable to highlight what it was that God was doing in Jesus. The Son of Man was leading them to life in the Kingdom, was their food and drink for the journey and the light in their darkness and the cloud that leads them through uncertain times. All that is required is that we understand our need for a new life and God's graces.

### ***Prayer***

Heavenly Father, you are the Lord of all life. Fill us with your Holy Spirit that we may walk in the way you want us to walk, trusting in you to be our light, our strength and our hope.

## **Monday August 31st**

## **Luke 4:16-30**

This is an important account in Luke in that it points forward to the ministry that is to come. He is rejected here at the beginning of his ministry, just as at the end he will also suffer rejection. He goes to the Sabbath prayers at the Synagogue and, as was the custom, he was invited to comment on the text. The Bible was always read in its original language which was Hebrew. By the time of Jesus, Hebrew was no longer a spoken language and many people would not have understood much of what was being read out. An interpreter was therefore required who could not only make a translation into Aramaic but who would also comment on the passage for the congregation. His words were aimed at telling the people that the prophecies he had just read out were now being fulfilled in himself. He was the one who had been anointed by God with the Holy Spirit and sent to proclaim the Good News to the poor. In his coming God was bringing salvation to his people. The people were not well disposed to hearing this word because he was just the son of a local carpenter. This seems to have been anticipated by Jesus who reminds them that the prophet is always rejected in his own home first and so to be accepted he has to go out to others. Herein lies Luke's key point. Jesus is making it reasonably clear that if the Jews were going to reject him then he would go out to the Gentiles. Salvation was here whether or not the Jews were ready to accept it.

The rejection of Jesus in his home town is a picture of his wider rejection by the nation and the people. Luke wants us to understand this point. If Jesus was rejected in his own time, and the early Church suffered great times of persecution throughout its history, then why would we think that the Gospel message will be widely accepted and taken up today? There will always be those who accept the Gospel and always be those who will reject it, and if experience is anything to go by, the rejectors will always be larger in number than those who accept it. Its lack of popularity does not weaken its message and power. This is what Jesus is trying to say here. Salvation has come. God's mercy and love are available to all those who come to Jesus and accept him as Saviour. That is where our hope is to be found and not in packed church buildings and blossoming parish incomes.

### ***Prayer***

Ever-patient God, we thank you for the gift of your Son who came to bring us the Good News that we have been set free from the power of sin and given the gift of new life. Help us to always experience your presence in the events of our lives.

## Sunday August 30th

### Mark 7:1-23

*Fr Drew Hanlon*

The Scribes and Pharisees have assembled with Jesus to challenge some of the practices of Jesus' followers. In Mark there is an earthiness to the presentation of Jesus and his interaction with opponents. For example, in a story such as this one that focusses on a controversy, there is often a pointed question or deceptive challenge posed by Jesus' opponents. Jesus often responds in a manner that points to deeper flaws in the opponents arguments. In this reading, Jesus does not immediately address the concerns surrounding purity. Rather he turns the question back to them by effectively asking them if they believe that the tradition of the elders is superior to the Law and the prophets. Jesus is rejecting the Pharisaical tradition of interpretation of the Law, particularly as it relates to food customs. The writer of Mark's Gospel is not interested in these legal debates. Indeed it could be that Mark has Jesus speaking with a sarcastic tone, nevertheless the reader is left in no doubt about who the author desires one to have empathy with. Mark presents the interpretation that all foods are clean, and therefore that what is important is the Law as it is lived by Jesus, not as it stultifies in the hands of the Pharisees.

While it is tempting for Christian readers today to think of the purification rites as representing an enforced legalism or a contrived way of living the Law, it is important for us to be aware of the context in which Mark was writing. These laws helped to maintain the Jewish people's distinctive identity, particularly in times of occupation. When we believe that we are standing self-righteously with Jesus we might find that through the text Jesus is criticising the human tendency to understand some human traditions as though they are divinely inspired. Perhaps this Gospel asks questions of us to look at what we hold onto a little too fiercely to the exclusion of the Spirit of God. What attitudes and beliefs that were held in the past are now thought to be anachronistic? Perhaps this text also asks questions of us in relation to what is vital to the faith and the community of faith, i.e. the Body of Christ. What stops us from allowing the Good News of God-with-us to be manifest in our lives? It is liberating to know that God shows us in Jesus the simplicity of living a divinely human life. It is the responsibility of the members of Christ's Body to allow the room for this to happen.

#### *Prayer*

Holy Trinity who gives us life, inspire us to know your life-giving presence, that we may hold fast to that which gives us life and let go of those things that stop your love building up the Body of Christ. Amen.

## Monday August 3rd

### Matthew 14:13-21

Upon hearing about the death of John Jesus and his disciples left the town and headed into the wilderness and many people followed them. As we have seen before, in Matthew the wilderness or desert is the place of the Exodus and where God walks with his people. He seems to have preached and healed all day and the disciples want to send the people home. These are the same ones who came to Jesus because they were in need and afraid and so it seems strange that they are now being sent off. The reason is that the disciples cannot feed them as their supply of food is too meagre. Jesus has us focus in on this point by getting them to find out what their resources were: five loaves and two fish for what must have been a crowd of around ten thousand! It is clearly not enough. Jesus asks them to bring the food to him. He blesses it. Gives it back to the disciples and they distribute it to the hungry people, who are not only filled but there are twelve baskets of scraps left over. This story is set before the Transfiguration and the prediction by Jesus of his death and the need for the disciples to follow him.

The key line in the story is where the disciples are confronted by Jesus and they acknowledge that their resources are inadequate for the task of feeding so many hungry people. And so they are. What does Jesus do? He does not multiply the fish and the loaves. There is no mention of any increase in what they have at hand. Jesus feeds them with what they have available. What is the difference? It is to be found in the words: **"Bring what you have here to me"**. Once they approach their task with a "here with me" perspective, their own limitations are removed. Now the five fish and two loaves feed the huge crowd. This is what the disciples will reflect on later after the resurrection, as they go about the task of taking the Gospel out into the nations. They are weak and sinful and there is no way they can carry out their vocations. Their resources are limited and inadequate and the problems and challenges far too large. The answer they will go back to is that line: **"Bring what you have here to me"**. That is how the Church survives and it is how we are invited to live out our lives. Our littleness is raised up and filled with grace and power if daily we bring our lives to Christ. We bring them to Christ when we pause for prayer and to listen to what it is he wants to say.

#### *Prayer*

Father, there are times when we struggle to keep going and to overcome the challenges and problems thrown up by the world. Keep our eyes firmly fixed on Christ your Son so that in him we can find strength and the power to continue to grow.

## **Tuesday August 4th**

## **Matthew 14:22-36**

Matthew links this story to the feeding of the five thousand by the word "then" because he sees the two stories as flowing together. Having seen the power of Jesus they head off over the lake to a destination given to them by Jesus. They leave at dusk and by dawn they are still only half way over, due to a major storm. As dawn broke Jesus came to them, walking on the water. Importantly for Matthew, their immediate response was fear. Although they had seen him feed the crowd they found it difficult to acknowledge his presence there in the middle of the lake. Jesus' response to this was: "Do not be afraid. It is I." There was no miracle of calming the storm as that was not Jesus' purpose. The storm rages around them and Jesus offers peace. As we saw with the calming of the storm in Matthew 8:24ff the question was a matter of faith. Could they believe in Jesus when they faced a major threat to their lives? Or, was their faith limited to the times when things were going well? The desire of Peter to walk on the water continues that same theme. He wants to do the impossible and so Jesus invites him to have faith and come to him "over the water". When he sinks beneath the waves the question Jesus asks is "Man of little faith. Why did you doubt?". In the earlier story they doubted their own ability to minister to the needs of the crowd and so were invited to "bring what you have to me". Here they were invited to believe that Jesus makes it possible for them to reach their goals and to overcome all of their limitations.

There are lots of issues in this story. One that is worthy of reflection is the question as to why the disciples could not recognize Jesus. They had spent ages with him and knew him intimately and could presumably recognize him easily. Yet, when he came to them walking on the water they did not know him and were filled with fear. Was this lack of recognition due to the fact that he was doing something different from their expectations? If he came to them in another boat, would they have recognized him then and accepted his presence? What about us? Are there times when Jesus comes to us but we fail to recognize his call because we have already determined the way he will work in our lives? Do we miss his presence because we have limited the ways in which we will accept him? The message of this Gospel story is one that calls us to believe that Jesus is with us in all that happens. Can we find him?

### ***Prayer***

Father, we thank you for being a God who is forever revealing yourself to us and reassuring us with your presence. Help us to be ever open to what it is you want to reveal to us.

## **Saturday August 29th**

## **Matthew 25:14-30**

This parable is also found in Luke (Lk 19:11-27) though with some differences. The man going on the journey is Jesus who was understood as the master of the servants. The treasures of the Kingdom have been entrusted by him to the disciples. Some have suggested that Jesus first directed this parable to the Scribes to whom the word of God had been committed. They had, however, abused their calling by a self-serving way of life and by neglect of this God-given gift. The servants are either good and faithful or wicked and lazy, depending on their behaviour during the master's absence. This is very much in keeping with the way Matthew saw things. For him it was vital for the Christian to be producing fruit and to be using their God-given talents for the sake of the Kingdom of God. The condemnation of the Pharisees and the Scribes was on the basis of their failure to "do" the work of God. They professed it and they believed it to be their calling, but there was no obvious produce coming out of their lives.

Jesus calls each and every one of us for a ministry he has in mind. As we were told by Jeremiah, God called us while we were still in our mothers wombs. We are all unique and all a vital part of the plan of God for the salvation of the world. It is sometimes hard to believe that and even harder to understand just what our part in God's plan may be but he most definitely has one for us. As Jesus himself points out, it does not matter whether or not we feel we have five talents, two talents or one talent. It is not the quantity that is important. Each of us is called to use our God-given gifts in our own special way. What we notice from this story is that the time comes when the master returns and demands an accounting of what he had entrusted to the servants. They were gifts given for a short period of time and were never the property of the servants. They were gifts to be used for the master's business. What is challenging and confronting about this story is that the person who had the one talent had done nothing that would suggest he was dishonest, or that he had used the talent for his own personal benefit. His sin was doing nothing. Matthew clearly suggests that doing nothing is perhaps a greater sin than breaking some of the commandments! God is not after success. He is after effort.

### ***Prayer***

Merciful Father, as we reflect on the many gifts you have given to us, we offer you grateful thanks and praise. May we be so enthused with your life within, that we take the divine gifts with which we have been showered and share them with others.

**Friday August 28th**

**Matthew 25:1-13**

We now have a further parable on vigilance and while we find it only in Matthew there are themes that Luke picks up in his own Gospel (see Luke 12:35ff; 13:25). While most of the parables use familiar sights from the area of Palestine, this parable of the maidens has some difficulties associated with it. There is no bride present. The bridegroom arrives at an odd hour. They have lamps with them making it appear as though they were expecting some delay. Matthew even pushes the story to the point where we are to believe that the stores will stay open all night! But these are not major problems for the interpreter, as we understand that Matthew is only using those points that are necessary to bring out his message. He uses this parable of Jesus to warn the people to remain ever vigilant, even when the parousia is delayed. We can presume that the bride is not mentioned because Jesus is the spouse and the bridesmaids are the Christians awaiting the second coming. Some are prepared and others are negligent. The lamps represent the fire of their callings and that will see them through the darkness of the end times. This flame, for Matthew, would be that way of life that is presented in the Sermon on the Mount. The keeping of those instructions would be the equivalent of keeping their lamps burning.

The Kingdom of God in this parable is not being compared to the maidens. It is being compared to the wedding feast. There is an invitation, an expectation of the coming of the bridegroom, a festive celebration and the bringing of gifts. This is how we should view life in the Kingdom of God. It is not something that hinders our lives, or makes them more difficult or seeks to hold us back or stop us from being fully human and fully alive. It is about helping us to discover what true joy is all about, and how to be truly human and truly alive. This story tells us about foolish and wise maidens and back in the Sermon Jesus told us about the foolish man and the wise man. The wise man was the one who built his life on the teachings and example of Jesus. Nothing could destroy him. The wise maiden is the one who fills her lamps with the fruits of her life of service of the Gospel. Such a way of living never leaves her high and dry and when the bridegroom does come, she is able to find her way into the festivities.

*Prayer*

Loving Lord, there are many times when we fill our lives with hopes and dreams that are no more than fantasy and follow roads that never lead to lasting peace. Show us the way to life in your Kingdom that we may know true and lasting joy.

**Wednesday August 5th**

**Matthew 15:21-28**

Matthew is writing for a Jewish Christian community and this explains why there is little mention in his Gospel of any mission to the Gentiles. Matthew notes that this woman was a Canaanite. This term would ignite all the old animosities that had grown up between Israel and this most pagan of its neighbours. The worship of the gods of the Canaanites had caused so much trouble for the people before this time and these sit in the background of the exchange. It would be important for Matthew that the woman left her country to come to Jesus. The dialogue between the woman and Jesus is far more important than the miracle for it touches on a major debate of the early Church. At first Jesus refuses to respond to the woman's request and only makes a move after the request of the disciples, and her statement of faith in him as Lord. When Jesus uses the image of the "dogs" the point of comparison is not between dogs and Canaanites. What is being compared is Canaanites and Jews. He is not showing contempt for the pagans. When Jesus says that the Jews should be fed "first" it appears that he envisaged a ministry among the Gentiles for himself. The cure is granted because of the mercy of God and not because of any ethnic reason. She came to God, asked for his mercy and his love and so received the gift of salvation. This would have been good news for the Gentiles in Matthew's community and a comfort for the Jewish Christians. God's saving work is meant for all peoples.

What stands out in this story is the understanding that there were those who were "in" and those who were "out". This woman was "out" on the basis of something as simple as her nationality or ethnic origins. How easy it is to exclude people from life in the Christian community of the Church. We might not exclude them in an obvious way but there are many ways of leaving people out or making them feel less than welcome. Church organizations and groups are notorious for doing this by suggesting that its members are in some way special or "better" or more committed than those who do not join. When strangers come it is so easy to exclude them. It is also possible to continue to keep them out of groups that have been together for many, many years. This story, among other things, reminds us that in the Kingdom, all are brothers and sisters through Christ.

*Prayer*

Merciful Lord, we have failed in our duty of love. Around the world there are many of your children suffering and dying and yet we notice not their passing. Forgive us and teach us to love, not just in words but through acts of compassion.

**Thursday August 6th** *The Transfiguration of Our Lord Jesus Christ* **Mark 9:2-10**  
*Fr Robert Newton*

The Transfiguration was certainly a very important event as it is one of only a few that are related in all three synoptics. Many scripture scholars believe that this event may have actually occurred after the resurrection, but was placed by the evangelists at a time during Jesus' life to convey an important message. The message, many say, is that Jesus' disciples must learn to change, adapt, drop the past and look to the future. Rather than concentrating on what happened to the Lord, the event is best understood by centring on what befell the apostles. What happened to the apostles? While there was no physical transformation, as far as we know, what they observed must have changed them on the inside. After seeing Jesus in all his radiant glory they would never be able to see him again as a mere man with whom they walked. Certainly they understood Jesus to be their Messiah and Lord, but after seeing Jesus transformed on the mountain there could be no doubt. They had seen his luminous body, observed him in conversation with Moses and Elijah, two great figures of the past, and heard the Father speak from the heavens, "This is my Son, listen to him". Seeing and hearing Jesus in a new light transformed their thinking about him, but it also challenged them to realize that as Jesus changed, so must they if they were to continue as his apostles.

Yes, the lives of the apostles Peter, James and John, the inner circle who are always present at the most important events in Jesus' life and ministry, were forever altered. They would now have to move in another direction. Whatever baggage the apostles had taken from their past, their lives before their call from Jesus, would have to be changed. Christ was now a new person and so, too, they must become new men. By dropping the baggage they could become transfigured, not in body, but in spirit. By dropping the past and taking a new direction they would become enlightened. Christ was inviting them to walk a new road. The road was uncertain, but they were asked to have sufficient faith to let go of the past and move forward. Dropping our baggage, letting go of the past and moving in new directions is never easy and thus we will need assistance along the way. The help we need must come from within, but it is generated from the outside, namely through faith. Only through complete trust in God can we let go and move into our future. Who do we trust when we are challenged to drop the past and move in a new direction? Do we trust others, our father, or our God in heaven? Only you can answer!

**Prayer**

Heavenly Father, give us the courage to drop our baggage and follow your only Son, Jesus Christ.

**Thursday August 27th** **Matthew 24:37-51**

The Hebrews used the 'age of Noah' as a type of faithless and sinful generation which stood under the judgement of God. Matthew shapes the story to bring out the point that as no one knew when the flood was coming in the time of Noah, so nobody knows the time of the return of the Son of Man. He does not focus on the sins of that generation but is more interested in noting that the people were eating and drinking right to the end. They were consumed with the importance of their bodily needs, and with survival. He points out that if people do not repent and change then they too will be eating and drinking as the Son returns. The Christians are exhorted to avoid living irresponsible lives while they await the return of the Son of Man in glory. What they are supposed to be doing is serving others (v 45), fulfilling the ministry given to them by Jesus and walking the path he walked. Those found serving when the master returns will be blessed by God and be found worthy of entering into the Kingdom. According to Jewish custom and the example of the Exodus story, salvation would take place on a Passover night which is possibly what Matthew has in mind here. The next three parables will further develop this theme of being prepared and being on watch, both important theological points in Matthew.

It is not too often that we think about the end of the world. Our sense of history is such that we can so easily forget that one day this world will end. All people will be called into judgement and there will be a separation of sheep and goats, with the goats going to their eternal punishment and the sheep to their eternal reward. For the early Church it was a matter of vital interest and it shaped most of the writing of the New Testament. Imagine how you would live if you knew for sure that the end of the world would take place sometime over the next ten days! I am sure that all of us would change our ways of thinking and acting to reflect that imminent end. The Church was no different, for they expected the end within days of Pentecost and eagerly looked forward to its coming. As time has moved on, however, the urgency has become less and less and we seem to have become certain that it will not be in our own lifetimes. But it may well be. Matthew is exhorting his people to be living as if it were tomorrow, as if today were our last day on earth.

**Prayer**

Almighty God, our bodies and our place here on earth are not our final homes and one day we will stand before you to be judged. Help us to repent today and turn from our sins that with hope we may be ever ready to welcome our end.

## Wednesday August 26th

## Matthew 23:27-32

Again we see Jesus on the attack against the Pharisees and he uses some very powerful images. It was not unusual to see tombs located along the side of a road and over a period of time they would become grubby and dirty so that they would not have been easy to distinguish. The Jewish purity laws forbade the touching of tombs. It could make a person unclean and unable to take part in Temple celebrations and so when major feasts were coming up, these tombs were whitewashed to make them stand out to avoid accidental contact. Hence the image painted by Jesus. On the outside these tombs looked quite pretty and clean but inside there was nothing but bones. The Pharisees were like that. On the outside it appeared as if they were religious men who faithfully kept the laws of God. But on the inside they were filled with sin. The sins Jesus had in mind were the sins of pride, of arrogance, of the abuse of power, of self-centredness, sins that he lists in verses 29-36. Jesus presents the history of Israel as the history of the murder of the men of God. He says that if the Pharisees were alive in the days of their fathers, they too would have been killing the prophets. He chooses the example of Cain killing Abel because that is the first book of the Bible and the story of the murder of Zecharias (2 Chron 24:20-22) from the Book of Chronicles which in the Hebrew Scriptures is the last book of the Bible. So he says, from the beginning of time until the present, the slaughter goes on and now, of course, as we see in verse 32, Jesus is on his way to his death in Jerusalem at the hands of these very same leaders.

How is it that such religiously motivated men could do such harm to the Kingdom of God? They were not evil men. Their movement was one that was conceived in a passionate love for God and his saving works. If we look back through history we can see equally painful examples of men and women doing exactly the same evil deeds in God's name. Is it that easy to get the Gospel message wrong? What was the primary sin of the Pharisees? In their pursuit of pure religion they lost their view of faith. In fact, religion and religious observances ended up becoming more important than what God was telling them to do and their life in the community of faith. Love is always more important than observance and listening to God more important than telling him what he should be doing.

### *Prayer*

All-powerful God, keep us from a self-centred religion where the most important thing is our own religious life and guide us with your graces that we may share your love with others.

## Friday August 7th

## Matthew 16:24-28

Matthew links this with the earlier story by the word "then". This means that having spoken about who he is, Jesus then goes on to talk about what it takes to be a disciple. There are three parts to discipleship. The first is "renounce yourself". The second is "take up your cross". The third is "follow me". The three follow on one after the other. Given what is said in verses 25-28 it is clear that the key requirement is "renounce yourself". Neither of the other steps will be possible until the disciple is prepared to take the road of renouncing the importance of **their** needs and **their** demands. An earlier step may be found in the opening line where it says that there is a matter of choice involved. The teaching that "if anyone wants to be a follower of mine", indicates that discipleship begins with a response to an invitation by Jesus to follow him. It depends on a personal desire to be a disciple. Once that step has been made the person is then able to move along the path of being a disciple. The choice is also to be made between "winning the whole world" and saving your life. Winning the whole world suggests a pursuit of worldly possessions. Saving your life suggests a concern about the matters of the Kingdom of God. These two themes — personally choosing discipleship and taking up your cross — are key themes in all of the Gospels, but particularly in Matthew.

What is of concern in this section is the ending (vs 27-28). There we find that Jesus speaks of a judgement that will come to each and every person. At that judgement we will be assessed by Jesus and rewarded (and presumably punished — see 25:31ff) according to how we have lived. But what is the basis of the judgement? How are we to assess our lives? Biblically we are unable to put aside the teachings of the Ten Commandments. They remain a part of the foundation of our lives. But in the teachings of Jesus we are taken quite a way further. In the context of the earlier part of today's text it could well be that we will be judged in the light of our willingness to renounce ourselves, take up our crosses and follow after Jesus. It is not just a judgement on the sins that we may have committed. It will be a judgement on whether or not we have faithfully taken up the callings we received at our baptism. We have to **actively live Gospel lives**, praying, sharing together, worshipping, loving, forgiving and giving a clear witness of the Kingdom to the world. Therein we find the grounds for our judgement.

### *Prayer*

Father, our lives are filled with all kinds of temptations providing us with excuses for not being faithful disciples. Help us to take up the Gospel challenge and so know your life.

## **Saturday August 8th**

## **Matthew 17:14-20**

In the first three Gospels this cure takes place immediately after the story of the Transfiguration. Epileptic fits were understood in the ancient world as consequences of demonic forces (some ascribed it to the impact of the moon on a person, hence the word "lunatic"). Clearly the power of God over that of Satan is an important part of the Gospel. Jesus had already shown himself to be victorious in the story of his temptation in chapter 4. Jesus is the Son of God in name but also in reality and before him the forces of evil cannot exist and cannot continue to imprison God's people. The boy's father addresses him in language that is liturgical "Lord have mercy" and in a posture (kneeling) that suggests humility and a willingness to place himself in the hands of Jesus further acknowledging him as divine. The disciples were unable to either cure the boy or drive out the demon. This is not because they do not have the power (at least potentially) but because they are unwilling to have faith. To believe would be to unite themselves with God and so to be caught up in his divine power. Faith the size of a mustard seed is faith that is planted in the hearts of the believers and which will grow and bear fruit. The miracle of moving the mountain is possible once the journey of faith begins. For Matthew it is not the result of a life of faith but is there for all who allow the seed of faith to be planted within them by God.

Of course the disciples could not expel the demon and could not cure the sick boy. Who are they to dare to presume that they could manage these great signs! Remember the story of the feeding of the five thousand? In that story we saw that the disciples could not feed the large crowd because their resources were too small. What made their meagre supplies of food adequate for the task was that they brought the little that they had "to me". By bringing them to Jesus they were suddenly enough. We have the same words here. At the end of verse 17 Jesus, in a tone that suggests exasperation, tells the disciples to "bring the boy here to me", and it is "here with me" that the miracle happens. There is the central meaning of our Christian living. True and powerful discipleship is only possible "here with me". It is by living with Jesus at the centre of our lives that life changes. Working away at a distance will only bring frustration and disillusionment.

### *Prayer*

Merciful God, with much of our lives we struggle to find peace and know true happiness. Help us to keep Jesus at the centre of all that we do so that through him we may know and experience the gifts that you want us to have.

## **Tuesday August 25th**

## **Matthew 23:23-26**

The Laws of Deuteronomy (Deut 14:22) demand "You shall tithe all the yield of your seed, which comes forth from the field year by year" and "All the tithe of the land, whether of the seed of the land or of the fruits of the trees is the Lord's; it is holy to the Lord" (Lev 27:30). These tithes were important for they helped support the Levites in their Temple ministry. The concern of Jesus here is that while the Law clearly talks about crops grown in the field, herbs like cummin and dill were usually grown in a family garden in a tiny patch of ground and many of them were usually a single plant. It would be an extraordinarily strict interpretation to expect a tithe to be paid on them. What made it so wrong was that the same men who were enforcing these trivialities were guilty of arrogance and cruelty and themselves used their knowledge to find ways around the Law. They were guilty of forgetting what truly mattered and why God gave the Law in the first place. When we think of something being unclean we think in terms of it being in some way dirty. For the Jews, uncleanness was a matter of ritual impurity. If they were unclean they could not enter the Temple or the Synagogue and so could not offer sacrifice and prayers to God. The cleanliness of vessels was therefore of great importance. For Jesus though, it opened itself to abuse, for the Pharisees could fuss over the purity of a glass and then drink stolen wine from it without any feelings of sin!

This again could be directed towards modern disciples. There are people who make sure that they wear proper clothing for church, put their offering on the plate each week, never miss a Sunday Mass and yet at home and work are bad tempered, intemperate, jealous, dishonest and lazy. Some of our Church family are in all kinds of organizations, take part in working bees, come along to just about every parish event, and then gossip, pass judgement and exclude others from their little groups. How easy it is to see the faults of the Pharisees and yet how hard it is to see where we can be doing exactly the same things. The measure of our human living cannot be the Law, for no law can ever spell out in detail every aspect of human life and cover all the variations possible. We have the Beatitudes and we are commanded to love God and love our neighbours and it is this love that must determine our actions. You cannot have one commandment without the other.

### *Prayer*

Almighty God, you sent us Jesus your Son that we might know you and obey your will. Help us to walk in the way he directs for us and strengthen us as we seek to be faithful to your will.

**Monday August 24th**

*St Bartholomew*

**John 1:45-51**

*Fr Peter Yeats*

The first obvious question about this reading, on this particular day, is: what on earth has it got to do with Bartholomew? The answer is that there has always been a long tradition within the Church linking Bartholomew with Nathanael, that they are one and the same person. This is not as odd as it sounds; often different names are used for the same person: Simon/Cephas/Peter; Saul/Paul.

First of all, note how the witnessing to Jesus takes place. First of all, a few verses before this, Andrew follows; he goes to his brother Peter and tells him. Later, Jesus finds Philip who, in turn, goes to Nathanael. Witnessing to Jesus is about going to others, and asking them to come and see.

Nathanael's reaction is interesting; first of all his comment about "Can anything good come from Nazareth?" is an indication of small-town rivalry, as much around then as it is today! But then Jesus actually speaks to him, commenting on his character; Nathanael asks how Jesus knows him, as they have never met, and Jesus makes the odd statement "I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you." Nathanael's reaction to this is incredible: "Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!" What brought about this change?

One possible explanation is that, for Jews, the phrase "sitting under a fig tree" means to pray in silence: so if Jesus knew about this before he met Nathanael, then he must have heard Nathanael; and, of course, only one person hears silent prayer – God! This must have been a real shock for Nathanael. Jesus goes on to say that he will see even greater things.

We all encounter Jesus in different ways; sometimes through others, sometimes with an abrupt call. But as with the first disciples, and especially Nathanael, our encounter with Jesus must in some way change us and change our lives. Do others see the change in us, and want to know more, or do we keep our relationship with God so secret that others think that we are just like them? To each of us Jesus says "Come, follow me", and each of us has to make that decision. Whatever we choose, our decision will affect our lives, and our eternity.

***Prayer***

Father, like your servant Bartholomew, may we hear you call and be willing to follow; when we follow, may we never look back.

**Sunday August 9th**

**John 6:35, 41-51**

*Fr Drew Hanlon*

From the 1st century Jewish perspective the writer of John has Jesus being deeply offensive and heretical. Jesus is seen to be in effect placing himself above the tradition of his fathers. Jesus is saying that he is above the Law, above previous revelations of God to the people of Israel, including the Exodus, the experience that brought about the Jewish experience of the one true and liberating God. Those who ate the bread in the wilderness have died, but Jesus is showing that those who see and believe that God is fully present in him have already begun to experience eternal life. Therefore this text is highlighting a tension and paradox. That is, Jesus comes out of the Jewish tradition, stands firmly in it, and yet breaks previously held beliefs that God cannot be seen, touched or felt. But Jesus brings eternal life because he shows the very nature of a God who is loving and compassionate and who lives with his people. It is, if you like, an evolutionary leap in the experience of God. There have been times that this text has been used to justify anti-Semitism. We would be wise to be critical of such interpretation.

This is a very rich text with images that are overlain on one another. There is the imagery of Jesus, grounded in his tradition and yet revolutionising it. There is a developed theology of the incarnation along with images about food and what really gives us life. There is also that problem of not being able to see the reality of the divine because we are not comfortable with the familiar revealing God to us. This text might raise questions for us such as "What is the nature of God that Jesus reveals to us in John's Gospel?" "How do we get fed spiritually?" "How do we feed others?" "Do we fail to see God in the familiar?" It is easy for us to not see that God often encounters us in the simple things of life. The experience of being cared for, of reaching out to those who are on the margins, seeing the presence of Christ in those who we generally find annoying or difficult. Readings like this one remind us that it is easy to take others, life and God for granted. The bread of life encounters us all the time calling us to experience the fullness of life, a liberating life in the here and now. It is this God of eternal life that Jesus reveals and lives out fully. What is more, it is important to know that the process of moving into eternal life is not something that happens when we die but begins now.

***Prayer***

Jesus, you are the bread of eternal life, help us to know your presence in friend and stranger and to share your life-giving bread in our lives now and for eternity.

## Monday August 10th

## Matthew 17:22-27

This section begins with the second of the prophecies of the Passion and the title "Son of Man" which it uses can be understood in a number of ways. In its Aramaic form it could be read to say "God will deliver up the man to men". This places the whole story of the Passion into the hands of God. It was something that took place with the permission of God and which could not have happened unless his Father allowed it to happen. It was a part of salvation history and not a consequence of men taking power into their own hands. This was an important point for Matthew to highlight because once handed over, Jesus would end up in what seemed to be the ultimate of prisons — the grave. It is because God was never out of control that this grave was not his final home: "...and he will be raised on the third day". The other message in the way this prophecy is put together is to be found in its link with the story of the Suffering Servant of Isaiah (Isa 53:6-12). It is no wonder that the disciples were "distressed". In other prophecies they argued with him, but here they are silent. This is possibly because what Matthew wants as the focus is the approaching death of Jesus. It remains a frightening possibility, especially as in other places he has also told them that they were to follow him.

This whole section is about the power and authority of Jesus. For the Jews, the Temple and the city of Jerusalem were the two all-powerful signs of God's love for them. If these were to be destroyed then the nation itself would be lost. They were therefore reassuring sources of comfort and strength. Then along comes Jesus and offers the people a new link with God, one that was personal and human. He came offering forgiveness of sins (something that was achieved through the sacrificial system) and life in the Kingdom (something the Prophets looked forward to with hope). He was short circuiting what was seen as the normal way of having a relationship with God and to talk of being raised from the dead gave this a new potency and promise and we can understand why the message was so popular after Pentecost. That same power is there for all believers who are prepared to put aside those things in which they normally seek comfort, reassurance, confidence and hope and turn once more to Christ. The Temple and its sacrificial system was destroyed and it is only Christ who goes on until the end of time. There is hope.

### *Prayer*

Merciful and loving Father, reassure us that in all that happens you are with us as Lord of creation so that we can always move forward full of confidence and hope, sheltered in your strength.

## Sunday August 23rd

## John 6:60-69

*Fr Peter Yeats*

Just before this passage, Jesus has been talking about himself as the Bread of Life, and trying to explain that people must eat that bread, just as the Israelites had done in the desert during the Exodus; that was how God had saved them. So, what Jesus claims is that he himself is the saving power of God, that it is through him that people are able to reach God. It is no wonder that the disciples say that this is difficult teaching! It's worth noting that the word used in Greek does not mean 'difficult to understand' but 'difficult to *accept*' – and also that it is the disciples who say this, not the crowds. Many people are put off the Christian faith not because it is too difficult to understand but because of the demands that it makes in terms of how we live our lives. It is so easy to ignore the fact that our faith is one not just of *believing* but of *doing* as well; our belief, our faith, leads us to become something. Jesus hears the disciples *complaining*. This word immediately takes us back to the Israelites in the wilderness, who complained how God was not looking after them; how they could not trust him. The Exodus was a time of learning for the people of Israel. Learning to trust that God was the best person to control their lives rather than themselves. Jesus asks them if what he has said offends them. One of the great realities of the Christian faith is that it causes offence by confronting people with the reality of God and his desire to be followed.

We sometimes feel that as Christians we should never offend people, that somehow that is an uncharitable thing to do. Sometimes it is, but sometimes people, and societies, need to be confronted with things they do not wish to hear. The Church, and Christians, must never fear speaking out when they need to, even if others do not like it. Jesus himself was quite ready to speak against the religious authorities and against the injustices that he saw, and he was crucified for doing so. Jesus sees that some still do not believe, because they are relying on 'the flesh', the human experience, rather than 'the Spirit', the way of God. They have to choose and, we are told, some choose to leave him; it is all too much; he fails to live up to their expectations; he expects too much of them. It was supposed to be easy, but Jesus makes it difficult! The Twelve remain; they see that Jesus is the way to eternal life. They, like us, have to choose, and they choose to follow, even though they do not understand the consequences; and will even turn back on their choice at times. But they are willing to go with Jesus, wherever he leads. We have to make that choice too.

### *Prayer*

Father, help us to accept your Son Jesus as the Way, the Truth and the Life and focus our lives on him.

## **Saturday August 22nd**

## **Matthew 23:1-12**

*Fr Robert Newton*

Jesus spends considerable time in these twelve verses discussing our penchant for wanting to keep up appearances. We sit on Moses' seat (v 2). We make our phylacteries broad and their fringes long (v 5). We sit in the place of honour at Church affairs (v 6). But is there any reality behind all this showmanship, this pageantry? Next, Jesus points out the dichotomy between showing off and humility. In verse 5, he speaks of the deeds we do to be seen by men. In verse 12, he talks of how we "exalt" ourselves. Such spiritual peacocks we can become! Geoffrey Chaucer, writing in *The Canterbury Tales*, observed that preachers and roosters have a lot in common. They are both given to strutting and preening themselves in public and crowing about the same hour each day! Oh, how self-important we can become — like Shakespeare's character in *Twelfth Night* who shouts, "I am Sir Andrew Augercheek. And when I speak let no dog bark!".

Jesus reminds us that only God is great. The rest of us are just equals. In verse 8, he says, "You are all brothers". And in verses 11 and 12, twice he mentions humility. Next, Jesus talks about our focus. Is our focus upon ourselves? Or is our focus upon others? There are two ways to walk into a room. I can walk in saying, "Here I am!". Or I can walk in with the attitude, "There you are!". Many people in today's world are "church shopping". They consider themselves spiritual consumers out in the world's "spiritual market place" bargain hunting for the things of Christ. They walk into a church saying, "Here I am! Court me! Entertain me! Meet my needs! Or I won't be back!". Some of us are addicted to the process. We love being singled out, pursued. We thrive on the new and being in control — "Maybe I will. Maybe I won't." Jesus discussed this type of "Here I am!" person in the text. "They bind heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on men's shoulders; but they themselves will not move them with their finger." They are here to "be seen" (v 5), but not to commit and serve. They crave the "place of honour" but not the basin and towel of washing dirty feet. Such is Jesus' servant leadership. "The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve." In his example of leadership Jesus warned us of the gulf between what we say and what we do, between pompousness and humility, between being me-focused and you-focused.

### ***Prayer***

Heavenly Father, teach us the way to serve and not to count the cost, to glory only in the cross of Jesus Christ, to be you-focused and not me-focused.

## **Tuesday August 11th**

## **Matthew 18:1-14**

There now follow five teachings of Jesus for the community of believers. In Matthew the term "disciples" means the Twelve and not the wider group of followers. Having said this, it is also important to understand that Matthew sees the Twelve as a kind of prototype of the Church. This is clear in this section, so that what Jesus says to the Twelve he is addressing to those who are represented by the Twelve — i.e. the members of the Church. Matthew is also gentler on them than is Mark. In that Gospel they are soundly upbraided by Jesus for their self-centredness. In his reply in Matthew the child represents a natural and spontaneous humility and a sense of unimportance and this is the mark of the disciple. If a person wishes to live in the Kingdom and enjoy its graces and blessings, then they first of all have to receive it. The only way to receive the Kingdom is through a life of humility, through accepting that they are people who are in need of the Kingdom. A disciple must feel that he needs to be redeemed, that he is weak and sinful and that he cannot be at peace without God. It is only then that the disciple is rightly disposed to receiving God's blessing.

This is no new teaching. There is a rabbinical saying that states: "He who makes himself small in this world for the sake of the Torah will be great in the world to come; he who makes himself a slave in this world for the sake of the Torah shall be free in the world to come". This is most surely one of the hardest struggles of discipleship. It grows out of an understanding of sin as being a purely selfish attitude on the part of the individual. It is so hard to let go of control of our destiny. It is almost impossible to live and love as God wants us to live and love for we spontaneously look to defending ourselves, our own views, our own feelings, and ultimately our own lives. What Jesus suggests here is a radical path of trust and hope. The temptation is for us to focus on things other than God, to respond to our burdens, the complications and difficulties in life by taking positive steps to resolve them. The first step should be to pause, to do nothing except deepen our relationship with God. Prayer and meditation are the powerful tools of the disciple, for such a response acknowledges their weakness and powerlessness and their confidence and trust in God. And the history of the Church shows it works!

### ***Prayer***

Loving Father, we acknowledge before you our need of your strength and your love. Keep us ever in your presence and may we bring all that we do before you in prayer.

## Wednesday August 12th

## Matthew 18:15-20

What Jesus did for the sinners is presented as being what is demanded of all disciples when they face members of the Christian community who have wandered away from life in the Kingdom. Jesus goes on to present a step by step process for reconciliation. It is worthwhile comparing Matthew's presentation with what Luke has to say in his account (Lk 17:3) which is short and sharp. Matthew seems to follow the Jewish guides (Lev 19:17). Matthew differs from Leviticus in that the Old Testament text is interested in bringing the sin out into the open, while Matthew is working on winning back the sinner through helping him to confront his sinful ways. The Church does not rebuke or condemn but works on being an avenue of healing and reconciliation. This leads Matthew to the central part of the passage which is about binding and loosing. This is addressed to the Twelve and the promise here is directed towards an authority that is given to them as leaders of the community, a power they share through their union with Peter. To Peter the keys of the Kingdom may have been given but all the disciples were called to be fishers of men (Matt 4:19; Mk 1:17). This is an important point because it makes clear that the authority of the apostles comes directly from Christ himself. Peter may be the first of the Twelve, but they too are empowered by Christ for their missions. What we see here is a collegial understanding of the exercise of authority in the Church.

The subject Matthew deals with here is one of the great treasures of the Church — the forgiveness of sins. Sin is destructive of human life, both for the individuals directly involved and for the wider community. Sin can so easily lead to feelings of guilt, unworthiness and failure. It can destroy hope and confidence and so many people are left with the uncertainty of how they can pick themselves up and start again. What Jesus is offering is forgiveness and healing and an invitation to begin again. Sins can be forgiven. A line can be drawn under the failures of the past and we can start afresh. How many times? Seventy times seven times. That is, as many times as we have the desire to repent and renew our lives. Of course it means that we have to do something the world finds difficult — we have to acknowledge that we are sinners in need of healing, and how hard is that! But once we do, peace and overwhelming joy are ours.

### *Prayer*

All-merciful God, many are the times we have failed and have sinned against you and against our brothers and our sisters and the thought of these failures can rob us of peace. Remind us at all times of the forgiveness offered to us in Christ Jesus.

## Friday August 21st

## Matthew 22:34-40

Once again, we can trace Matthew's intent by comparing his version with the earlier account found in the Gospel of Mark (Mk 12:28ff). Matthew seems to be using this in his controversial struggles with the Pharisees. They come to "test" Jesus after having come together to plan their attack (similar to Psalm 2:2). Matthew also changes the question from "which commandment is the first of all" to "which is the greatest commandment in the Law?". While the Gospels all have slight variations in their quoting of the law in Deuteronomy 6:5 they all have the same thrust. What is involved is that the loving and following of God involves all aspects of a person's life. It is not enough to worship him in word if actions speak of different values and ways of looking at the world. This is what "with all your heart" means in Hebrew thought, for the heart stands for all the faculties of man's inner self. In verse 38 Matthew repeats that this is the greatest of the commandments, which is in contrast with the teaching of the Rabbis which saw all the precepts of the law as having the same value. Only Matthew introduces the second commandment in the way he does "and the second is like it" suggesting that for him the love of God is expressed in the love of a person for another. Matthew also makes the point by adding "On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets". While the Hebrew scholars would stress the importance of loving one's neighbour, only here do we find the two linked together where the one is measured by the other.

It is interesting to read through the Jewish Rabbi Hillel who wrote around the time of the Christ. He expressed this teaching in a negative way: "What you do not like being done to you, do not do to your fellow; this is the whole Torah, all the rest is commentary. Go and learn". This is not the way that Jesus understood the divine command. He turns it around and puts it into a positive light. Believers must go out and **do** acts of love. He makes it clear that if people are not loving their neighbour then they cannot be loving God. Loving others (that is, taking initiatives to go out and love) is what loving God is all about. This of course is why the Church has always had missions, missionaries and charities, why it started hospitals, orphanages and soup kitchens. Why we **must** visit the sick, worry about AIDS victims overseas, refugees and the stranger up the road.

### *Prayer*

Merciful Father, you show your love to us in so many ways and often we take this love for granted. May we live lives of gratitude and thanksgiving and share this love with others.

**Thursday August 20th**

**Matthew 22:1-14**

This parable continues on with the theme of the rejection of those who were called first. It needs to be read in parallel with the parable in Luke 14:15-24. There we see the list of excuses offered by the guests. They come from Deuteronomy 20:5-7 and relate the reasons that excuse men from taking part in a Holy War. Matthew’s parable has the same call of urgency as the nation confronted with a Holy War. There is a sense of urgency in his teaching as the Kingdom is at hand. Responses are urgently required. Matthew adds to the parable the account of the killing of the servants and the anger of the king as he responds by sending an army to destroy the murderers. Luke’s version is gentler as he sends his servants out into the streets to invite in the poor and crippled. The point for Matthew is that he is writing for a Church that is struggling under persecution and he takes a parable of Jesus and uses it to reassure his community. The Romans invaded the land and destroyed Jerusalem, the Temple and the Jewish leaders. Those first called represent the people of Israel (Proverbs 9:1-6) who were invited by the disciples to enjoy life in the Kingdom. The experience of the early Church was that many of these missionaries were persecuted and put to death by the Jews who rejected Jesus and he is reassuring them that if they remain faithful God will bless them.

The wedding garment is important though it is a new parable added by Matthew to the parable of the feast. In the East, when the king gave a feast for a wedding, he would provide suitable clothing to those who wanted them. We can now understand why the man without the garment was so harshly treated. He had chosen not to take advantage of the offered clothing. He had no excuse to explain why he was not properly attired and so is bound and thrown out. The wedding garment in Matthew stands for “good works” and “good fruits”. It is easy to get to the point where we are no longer conscious of discipleship as being a call to produce “good fruit”. Faith does not mean that we simply avoid doing wrong things. It is a call and an invitation to go out and to “do” the works of the Kingdom. These are found in the “Sermon on the Mount”. One of the things that is worrying is the severity of the judgement that is passed on the man who tries to enter the Kingdom without such works.

*Prayer*

Almighty God, we thank you for calling us to be your disciples and to live in your Kingdom. We pray that we may be so filled with your graces and your strengths that we may go out and live the Gospel we profess.

**Thursday August 13th**

**Matthew 18:21-35**

The idea of debt is part of the message of the parable and it is clear that we can exchange the word “sin” for “debt”. When we see the amount of the debt involved we can be a little shocked. To make the point abundantly clear, the man comes to the King owing what would be the equivalent of ten to fifteen million dollars. Clearly it is not a real number but is large enough to highlight the impossibility of it ever being repaid. When we add to this the idea of selling off the man’s wife, children and all his possessions, we are made even more aware of the absolute incapacity of the servant to settle his accounts. The response of the King (God) shows him to be rich in patience, forbearance and mercy. When the servant confesses his inability to pay, the King is “moved with pity”. In the Bible, it is this pity which arises out of God’s tender love for his people and which then leads to the blessing of his people. It is this same pity which drives Jesus towards the miracles he performs to relieve the suffering of their burdens in life (9:36; 14:14; 15:32; 20:34). The key phrase in the parable is to be found in verse 35: “from your heart”. This is another way of talking about repentance. Life in the Kingdom is not about obedience to laws (or The Law for Matthew’s Hebrew community) but about a faith-directed way of life. The heart is where Jeremiah (Jer 31:31) said the new covenant would be written. It would not be on stone (external).

This parable presents to us an insight into the nature of God. His divine mercy has been made real in an historical event — Jesus the Son of God. Men and women will now be judged, not according to the Laws of the old covenant, as proclaimed by the Pharisees, but **solely** by their inner desire to love, to forgive and so show the divine quality of love. Jesus is God’s great act of mercy towards us. We do not deserve to be forgiven, we have not earned salvation. These gifts come to us freely from the love of God who sees us as his children. Christians must be defined by the mercy they show to others. The servant coming before the King with his massive debt represents each and every believer. We come saddled with enormous debts and an obvious inability to pay. He asks the King for patience and promises to repay, but it is an impossibility. He cannot redeem himself. His problem was that he refused to go out and to show this same quality of mercy to others and it is for this he is condemned. He condemns himself.

*Prayer*

Merciful God, in your great love for us you sent us your Son Jesus to free us from sin and to share with us your gift of peace and life eternal. Help us to share this with others.

## Friday August 14th

## Matthew 19:3-12

This is the tenth section of Matthew's Gospel and it begins with the ominous words: "when Jesus had finished these sayings, he went away from Galilee and entered the region of Judea beyond the Jordan". This is the beginning of the journey towards Jerusalem and his death. The path here would take him through Perea, thus avoiding the area of Samaria. From now on we will see Jesus, not teaching the crowds (as he did in parables), but healing their sick. This is the second time the question of divorce has been raised (5:31-32) though the teaching is the same. What is new is that here we have an exception clause (found only here in the Gospels): adultery. The issue is raised by the Pharisees and by adding "for any cause" to their question we can understand their motives. Rabbi Shammai allowed divorce only in the case of serious misconduct while Rabbi Hillel was more liberal, allowing divorce for at times the most trivial of reasons (burning the evening meal!). In reply Jesus affirms the strict interpretation of the biblical material: no divorce. The exception clause, "for adultery" is Matthew's addition to the original teachings and we can presume that he is responding to a pastoral concern within his own community. The Greek word (porneia) is not the one usually used for adultery, rather it is used in rabbinical writings to refer to incestuous unions (Hebrew zenut which is applied to illicit marital unions between people who are too closely related for marriage). This would suggest that Jesus is not really making any exceptions to his call for the permanence of marriage for such unions would not represent valid marriages.

Jesus' teaching on marriage logically flows on from his other teachings on human relationships. We are to love and respect others and at the heart of our unions is God who is love. This is what makes our relationships work, when we can look out at others and see God looking back. We are all made in the image and likeness of God and each of us carries within us the blessings of the incarnation. This was made clear when Jesus told his disciples that "whatever you do to the least of these little ones of mine, you do to me". Christ is the one who makes a loving relationship a union that is life-giving and sacred. Christ is the one who makes it possible for both of the individuals to overcome their limitations and failures. The best tool for a successful and happy marriage is a shared and dynamic life of faith.

### *Prayer*

Father, we thank you that we are made in your image and likeness. As we go about our lives of faith in the world, teach us to see your presence and your life within those people with whom we live and work, that we may love them as you do.

## Wednesday August 19th

## Matthew 20:1-16a

This parable is only found in Matthew and offers a range of meditations to those who spend a bit of time on it. The use of the vineyard suggests that Jesus has Israel in mind (Isa 5:1). The denarius was worth about twenty cents and was a day's pay (Tob 5:15). The hiring of labour began at 6am which meant that those who were taken on at 5pm only had an hour's work. As most farms were a little way out of town, by the time they walked to their place of work there would have been almost no time to work. Clearly the householder was not interested in just paying for work done or those coming last would have received almost nothing. He hired them not because he needed their labour, he hired them because he wanted to help them by giving them work and so an income. He saw them in the market square with nothing to do and felt sorry for them. Being hired meant receiving work as well as receiving wages and both, at least for last workers, is clearly a gift. Jesus has in mind the Pharisees and their attitudes. For them salvation came as a result of "doing work". They kept the Law and added a whole range of other laws to direct the lives of the people and provided that people kept those commandments they would receive salvation. Israel is presented in this light. They were the first people of God and yet here we have the Gentiles receiving the same blessings as the Jews. How is that possible? The parable tells us that salvation is something God offers to all people because he loves them, and not because they earn it by their works.

This parable picks up on a number of difficulties for those seeking to live lives of discipleship. It is easy to get to the point where we expect God to act towards us in ways that reward us for the good things we have done. We can pray, so that God will give to us the things we seek. We can keep the commandments, so that we will have eternal life. On the other side it is hard not to wonder about God's thinking when those who serve him still have problems and difficulties in their lives. Why doesn't God "pay" or reward us with a good life and give us many blessings when we obey and keep his commandments? This is the kind of thinking behind the first workers' demands and it is rejected by Jesus. God is generous and we are in his debt. He offers us life and the blessings of the Kingdom simply because he loves us and not because he is impressed with the life that we lead.

### *Prayer*

Father, you fill our lives with the fruits of your generous love. Make us ever mindful that all we have comes from you and that we remain ever in your debt.

**Tuesday August 18th**

**Matthew 19:23-30**

It is the previous episode with the rich young man that provides Jesus with the background for the present instructions. It is hard for a rich man to take up a life of discipleship (verse 23) for how can a rich man be poor of spirit (5:3) and still enjoy the power and privilege that money brings? How can he have an undivided heart (6:24) and yet possess treasures on earth (6:19ff)? In the Book of Sirach (also called Ecclesiasticus) the sage writes: "He who loves gold will not be justified and he who pursues money will be led astray by it" (Sir 31 [34]:5; cf 1 Tim 6:9). The camel and the eye of a needle are difficult to put together and there have been numerous attempts at interpreting it. Cyril of Alexandria corrects the text to read "It is easier for a sailorman's rope to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of God". The camel that the parable talks of is a common knot used by sailors in their sailing vessels. If this is true then we can see why Jesus would use it in talking to his sailor-disciples. Another view was that the "Eye of the Needle" was a low door in the walls of Jerusalem that was meant only for humans to go through. This meant that they could avoid the long lines to enter the city as people brought in their animals for market. It was a low door and people had to bend low to the ground, thus making it impossible for a horse and certainly for a camel. While such an interpretation is hard to justify by archaeological evidence, it does bring out the meaning. Only a camel with his nose squashed down in the dust has any hope of entering the door. So it is with the rich person.

It is no wonder that Peter asked "Who then can be saved?". The answer was equally stunning in its simplicity: "No one". That is the whole point Jesus was making. On our own we have no hope. On our own we are too filled with pride and weakness to have any hope at all of living within the Kingdom of God. The only way in is to be like the camel — with our noses in the dust, bowed down before God, seeking his merciful love. It is not that "riches" are evil. Their real danger is that they so easily become major distractions and absorb time and energy that should be given over to God. We cannot know the gifts of the Kingdom on our own either. They are dreams we will pursue forever if we pursue them on our own. The promise that Jesus is making here is that if we place our trust, our hope and our confidence in God, he will care for us.

***Prayer***

Loving God, it is not easy being a disciple and we often fail to live up to our callings. Fill us with the gift of your Holy Spirit that we may know your will and have the strength to fulfil it.

**Saturday August 15th**

*Mary,  
Mother of the Lord*

**Luke 11:27-28**

*Fr Peter Yeats*

These two verses come at the end of a passage concerning the authority Jesus has to cast out demons, and how that relates to the Kingdom of God. Jesus makes it clear that there can never be two rulers in a Kingdom – that people have to decide who will be at the centre. Verses 27 and 28 are a rather awkward piece of dialogue between Jesus and a woman in the crowd; a woman who obviously supports Jesus, and likes what he is doing, but it manages to say the wrong thing at the wrong time. And Jesus confronts her – and presents us with a warning. It is worth noting that some Bibles use the word 'happy' – "How happy is the woman who bore you ...". In fact the Greek word is *makarios*, meaning 'blessed', as in the Beatitudes. As one writer puts it: "*Makarios* then describes that joy which has its secret within itself, that joy which is serene and untouchable, and self-contained, that joy which is completely independent of all the chances and the changes of life". Happiness depends on chance; *makarios* is unchanging. What the woman says seems, on the face of it, to be a great compliment, something that Jesus should be pleased with. She refers to the pride a mother has in a successful child, and how that is a blessing; something that no-one could take offence at! But Jesus knows that this 'worldly' understanding can never be real; true bliss can only be grounded in our relationship with God.

We have to start by hearing the word of God; as a start, the study of scripture is an essential – founding our faith on the revelation found in the Bible. We must hear God speaking in our worship, in our prayer and in our fellowship with our fellow Christians. Sometimes we make religious observance without actually 'hearing' what is wanted of us. Hearing the word is essential but it is not enough; we must then act upon it. Being passive might make us feel comfortable; it might give us the happiness that the world can give, but it is only in being obedient to God that we can find the bliss that he offers. Bishop Tom Wright says, "When the word of God is at work, what is required is not applause but obedience." It is easy being an audience, watching what God does, and being happy that we can see. It is not so easy to be a part of what God wants, to leave the audience and take the stage; that is what being a Christian is about. Being human is about being what God wants us to be; when we fail to obey, we can never be what we were created to be; we can never aspire to the infinite joy that comes in living to our true selves.

***Prayer***

Heavenly Father, you call each of us not just to serve you and each other, but to be a part in your work of salvation. By your Spirit, help us to hear your will for us, and obey it, so that we and all the world might be truly blessed.

## **Sunday August 16th**

### **John 6:51-58**

*Fr Robert Newton*

Sometimes people have difficulty understanding Jesus, or say they do. Today's Gospel deals with this issue. Jesus tells his audience that he is the Bread of Life. And they counter with, "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?". We could excuse their resistance to Jesus if we thought that they were incapable of understanding more than the literal meaning of words. But this is not the point of this passage from John. The crowd appears to deliberately pretend Jesus is speaking nonsense, when we would assume that the message of Jesus would be welcomed. Oh sure, there were those who always saw Jesus as a challenge to their security. People of wealth were put off by Jesus' insistence that wealth and possessions are obstacles to the cause of God. Again, those holding political power would resist Jesus because he insisted that in God's coming Kingdom, the poor and downtrodden will be the rulers instead. This caused many of the Temple authorities, scribes and Pharisees to oppose Jesus, conspiring with Pilate to put Jesus away. And certainly Pilate would take a dim view of Jesus. His job depended upon keeping order and silencing any rebellion against Rome. We can easily see why Jesus became for Pilate a very suspicious character, and why he quickly ordered Jesus' execution. Certainly Jesus would offend anyone thinking they had earned their good standing with God. When Jesus began to include moral and religious outcasts in his following they were disgusted and outraged. Even more, they vilified Jesus when he invited women to follow him and be a part of his entourage, and even when he offered healing to a Roman officer's son.

Because these religious pious types saw their religious achievements were not acceptable to Jesus, they resisted him with all their power and might. His teaching affronted their very being and challenged them to reflect on the comfortable world their minds had created for themselves to live in. Are these resisters restricted to the New Testament story of Jesus, or are they people like us all these centuries later? We can keep these Jesus-resisters back in time, avoiding an admission that their sad story is also our story, too; or choosing not to understand what is clearly before us. However we can risk seeing them as types whose resistance to Jesus is still very much alive in us, which calls for reflection, repentance and faith in every one of us.

### ***Prayer***

Heavenly Father, give us the strength to see how we resist you through our lack of humility and unwillingness to hear you in our everyday lives.

## **Monday August 17th**

### **Matthew 19:16-22**

Once again we find that Matthew has significantly changed the Marcan text of this story (Mk 10:17ff) and it is in the changes that we can see the direction of Matthew's theological intent. The commandments that are listed are those that relate to social obligations. We presume that this is because it is in this area that the young man has difficulties. Matthew adds the command "you shall love your neighbour as yourself". He does this because in his theology the Law is fulfilled through love of neighbour (7:12; 22:39). Once this is accepted it is easier then to demand that he go and sell all that he has and give it to the poor. This is why in verse 21 Matthew has added the young man's question "What more do I lack?", to which Jesus replies, "If you want to be perfect...". We can see, in this call of the young man, echoes of the call of the Twelve. Like them he has been invited to abandon his present way of life and join with Jesus in his ministry. Peter and the others left their boats and nets, Matthew left his tax collector's table and all of them left family and their usual ways of living for the sake of the Gospel. So it is with the rich young man. The obvious difference is that he is unable to take up the challenge that Christ presents to him. In the Gospel this way of renunciation is the way of the Cross and is essential to the life of discipleship. He goes away sorrowful, emotions that were very different to the enthusiasm he felt at the opening of the encounter.

When Luke uses this story (Lk 18:18ff) the young man asks Jesus what he must do to "inherit" eternal life which brings out the meaning more powerfully. There is nothing anyone can do to "inherit" something. An inheritance comes about because of something over which we have no control: we are born! We do not earn an inheritance, it comes to us unearned. And such is the Kingdom of God. We can do nothing to earn salvation. It comes to us as a free and unearned gift from God. What we can do is grow in our relationship with God and place ourselves into his hands. It is by living our lives out in the love of God (and we do this by following the teachings of Jesus) that we find that the Kingdom of God envelopes us. It is not a reward for good living but the consequence of living in God. Jesus tells the young man that it is by loving that he finds his way into the Kingdom and so into eternal life.

### ***Prayer***

Heavenly Father, through your compassionate and merciful love you offer a share in the gift of your life and your love to all those who come to you. Fill us with your grace so that we can repent of our sins and turn to you with joy filled hearts.