

## Sunday January 3rd

## John 1:1-18

These opening verses of John's Gospel (called the Prologue) present a clear theological picture of Jesus. In seven statements we have John's statement of faith that will be expanded throughout his Gospel. He begins by stating that Jesus is the Divine and eternal Word. While he is an historical person, he has existed from before the beginning of time. He uses the Greek notion of "Word" for Jesus, meaning that he is the very nature of God made real in the world. All things come through him, making Jesus the reality by which all things in the world must be interpreted. This is why he is the Light of the world. By viewing the world through his teaching and ministry, everything takes on a new meaning and in him has a new and more powerful life. The Word is not the same as the world, even though he became man in the world and the world was made through him. He stands apart from the world and the world did not know him. The Word was also rejected by "his own", though accepted by the Samaritans and sought out by the Greeks (12:20). Most important of all was how John understood that the Word became a man, taking on human personality and the fullness of what it means to be a human being in the world. With images of Exodus the text says that he "pitched his tent among us", meaning he dwelt among us. But it is only a temporary dwelling. The role of the Word as he dwells among us is to reveal to the world the Father's love and divine will. The world has been separated from God by sin and it is the Word of God made man who will overcome the separation of the darkness of sin. This is important in John's theology for the Word did not live a life of separation from the sinners but was among them bringing light to their darkness.

The Incarnation, God becoming man in Jesus, is the gift in which we all find new hope and meaning to life. It is not simply an historical fact, something that took place two thousand years ago. In becoming man Jesus forever transformed what it means to be human. Now all human activities, all human qualities and ways of thinking and acting are to be understood in the light of Jesus. It is because Jesus has gone through all that we have to go through (with the one exception of sin) that we have hope. He knows and understands our struggles and our pains. He is also aware of our weaknesses as he has been there before us. That is why we can approach him without fear, knowing that as we stand before him tainted by our silly ways, he will deal with us with patience.

### *Prayer*

We worship you, Lord Jesus Christ, here in our lives and in all your Churches throughout the world, and we bless you, because by your holy cross you have redeemed the world.



# **BIBLE STUDIES DECEMBER 2009**

**+ Michael Hough  
with Fr Robert Newton**



## 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)

**Saturday January 2nd**

**John 1:19-28**

In all the Gospels the story of John the Baptist serves as an introduction to the ministry of Jesus. The Jewish authorities sent a delegation to find out just who and what John was claiming to be. He does not answer them but rather testifies to another who is greater than he is. That one is:

[a] The Lamb of God.

[b] The one who is filled with the Spirit and who will baptize in the Spirit.

[c] The Son of God.

In the early Church there were people who had only been baptized by John (Acts 18:25), and in some parts there had grown up an excessive veneration of the Baptist. It was therefore important for all the Gospels to set down clearly the relationship between John and Jesus. In his Gospel, John presents the Baptist as representing the Old Testament and all its hopes and expectations. He shows him to be only the voice crying out in the wilderness and presents his ministry of baptism as having no independent significance. His baptism merely points forward to something it cannot achieve on its own. It is only the Lamb of God who will take away the sins of the world. More importantly, while John appears in his ministry in and around Galilee before Jesus, it is really Jesus who existed "before" him (v 30) because he is the Son of God. These points all make it clear that John only has significance in terms of his relationship to Jesus.

What is significant in John's story of the Baptist is that he is presented as a "voice crying out in the wilderness". In this way he presents us with a picture of discipleship. Christ is the one sent by God to proclaim the Good News of the coming of the Kingdom of God with its gift of salvation. It is in the ministry of Jesus that all other ministry finds its roots and its power. As disciples, the way we live is meant to be a proclamation (a crying out) to the world of the presence of Christ in its midst. As a community of believers we should be attractive to people who are searching for light and hope. As people wandered off into the desert to see John the Baptist and to listen to what he was saying, so our worshipping communities should be beacons of hope and life to the world around us. There is the challenge of the story of Christmas. It is a call for a more faithful life of discipleship. Let's ask ourselves, what efforts have we made since the beginning of Advent to live out our faith in a more dynamic manner? Or are we the same as we were before Advent started. That call to repent and believe was one that was given to all of us.

**Prayer**

34

Father in heaven, guide us with your Holy Spirit that we may reflect on our lives and seek to faithfully live in your Kingdom.

**Friday January 1st**      *The Naming and*      **Luke 2:15-21**  
*Circumcision of Our Lord Jesus Christ*

In this section Luke records three reactions to the angel's message of the birth of the Saviour: that of the shepherds, the community that received the message from them and that of Mary. The shepherds responded by going to see what was happening. What they saw was the baby in the manger with Mary and Joseph around him, a picture which paints a stunning theological statement. These shepherds are important for Luke, not because they are eyewitnesses to the birth of Jesus, but because of the spontaneity of their response to the angel's message. This is something that Luke will highlight throughout the rest of his Gospel. These shepherds leave the scene giving praise and glory to God, a similar kind of response that their news elicits from their friends and neighbours. Mary's response in verse 19 is different to that of the shepherds. She locks "all these things" away in her heart and ponders on them in keeping with the image as a handmaid of the Lord. Luke presented Mary in 1:45 as the first Christian believer. She is shown as believing her child to be the long awaited Messiah and Son of God, but Luke pulls up short of portraying her as fully understanding all things. It is an understanding that grows with the ministry of her Son (see 8:21 and Acts 1:14).

The shepherds were the first to worship the Saviour of the world and it presents us with a valuable insight. When we think about shepherds we can see that they were not spiritually important. While their work was vital to the community, the nature of their work would have made it difficult for them to remain ritually clean. They mixed with the animals, ate with the animals and very often slept in the same place as the animals. Their animals were taken to the markets for sale and so they were exposed to pagan shoppers and out in the isolated grazing areas, where would they find water for washing. There are also writings from the time that suggest that around the big cities this particular occupation held more than its fair share of rogues and crooks. Yet, these are the very ones to whom it was revealed that the Saviour of the world was born. Where were the leaders of the Jewish people? Where were the priests and the Pharisees? It was left to the young virgin, the baffled carpenter and the rogue shepherds. At the beginning of the Gospel of Salvation that is Good News for all of us who are less than perfect.

*Prayer*      Glory to God in the highest, and peace to his people on earth.  
Father, we pray that as we continue on with our celebrations of  
the birth of your Son, we may share that peace with others.

**Tuesday December 1st**      *St Andrew*      **Matthew 4:18-22**

In the time of Jesus there would have been many fishing boats on the Sea of Galilee, (there is a note in the writings of Josephus that says that on one occasion he managed to get together two hundred and forty fishing boats for an expedition), and it was a profitable form of business. Matthew implies that it was the arrest of John the Baptist that led Jesus to move to Galilee (4:12). John was removed by Herod, but then Jesus stepped in to continue that ministry in a new and higher way. We do not know much about the men called by Jesus but we can safely presume that this was not their first contact. From John 1:35 we suspect that some of the disciples of Jesus were already disciples of John the Baptist, suggesting that they were men searching for the Messiah or at least for renewal of life. Matthew writes the way he does to highlight the authority of Jesus. He speaks and people respond. In the case of the disciples it was a truly radical abandonment of all that was in their past. This is the nature of the Kingdom in Matthew's Gospel. The Kingdom has drawn near and things cannot continue on as they were. The apostles understand this for they left their nets "at once" and followed Jesus, not waiting to sort out their domestic situation or their livelihood.

The twofold aspect of discipleship is clearly laid out by Jesus. They were to be fishers of men. That was the vocation, but such a ministry was only possible if they were prepared to "come follow me". It is the following of Jesus that makes the fishing possible. When he says "follow" he does not just mean that they were to travel with him on his journey around Galilee. The following meant "imitating". They were to do as he did, live as he lived and be prepared to die as he was going to die. The success of the fishing would depend on their faithfulness to that calling. Throughout the Gospel we see the Apostles struggling with this with varying levels of success. This is the same situation for those who seek to be disciples today. Our own success in proclaiming the Gospel will depend on our own union with Christ. The more we reflect Jesus in our daily living the more the Gospel will be planted in the hearts and minds of those around us. Mission will always depend on spirituality. Jesus chose as apostles those who were uneducated and of low standing to make this point clear. Their greatness as Apostles came from his grace and life within them.

*Prayer*      Loving Lord, we know too well our weaknesses and failings  
and how we are too often unfaithful in our discipleship. Help  
us to repent and turn to you for the graces we need.

## Wednesday December 2nd

## Matthew 15:29-37

This is the second account of Jesus feeding the crowd. This activity takes place, not in a "lonely place" as earlier (14:13ff), but in the desert. For Matthew and his Jewish audience this is an important note because it would bring to mind the feeding of the people of Israel during their wanderings in the deserts around Mt Sinai, after their escape from Egypt. The role of the disciples also seems to be more pronounced in this account than in the earlier one. Jesus blessed the bread and gave it to the disciples and it was they who then distributed it to the hungry crowds. It also seems that Matthew has in mind the later Eucharist, with the crowds sitting down to eat and the bread being taken and broken before being distributed. He is possibly also drawing on the Hebrew tradition of anticipating the messianic banquet in heaven when God will sit down and eat with his chosen people. Through Jesus God is shown as dealing abundantly with the needs of his pilgrim people. They are hungry and in danger of collapsing along the way and in response to their situation he moves in and provides them with food to eat. This time there are not twelve baskets of scraps left over but seven. This is a number that means abundance or completeness. God's feeding of his people does not end there, but is an ongoing sign of his love.

The Exodus story seems to hover in the background throughout the Gospel of Matthew, just as it is an important part of the spiritual background for Judaism. For many of the prophets, the time of the Exodus was the only time that the Hebrews were truly God's people. This was because they needed him and depended on him. There was no way that they could survive in the desert without him. They could never have left their state of slavery in Egypt unless God set them free. They would have died from starvation or thirst in the desert unless he fed and watered them and they would have been slaughtered by the bands of warriors that created havoc in the wilderness unless God fought with them. It is this thought that is brought into the story of salvation by Jesus in this miracle. To be fed by God means that we need to first of all acknowledge that we are hungry for what God alone can provide. We can only know our need of God when we humble ourselves before him and admit to our fragility, weakness and inability to make sense of our lives.

**Prayer** Merciful God, you heard the cries of your people Israel as they struggled as slaves in Egypt and you led them to freedom. Hear us as we call to you for help and feed us with your grace.

## Thursday December 31st

## John 1:1-18

This opening section of the Gospel of John (called the Prologue) presents in nucleus the message that the rest of the Gospel will expand. In all interpretations of subsequent passages, the prologue needs to be on one side as a rule and guide. Verses 1-5 present the message of the mission of Jesus. Above all else he is the divine Logos (an important Greek term that means the Word), the Word who is made man. As we read the story of his life in and around Galilee and Jerusalem, it is this divinity that we are asked to keep in mind. John makes some quite profound statements about Jesus. He is the source of all that exists in the universe and nothing can exist apart from him. The word "life" in verse 4 is used in the sense of Jesus being the one who has the power to make alive. This is not just in the sense of being born, but as also having a fullness of wisdom and understanding. He is light, not light that might come from a lamp standing in the corner of the house, but an inner light that illuminates all that a person thinks, says and does. There is also a warning put there reminding the community that darkness does exist. It will try and extinguish the Light of the World but will fail (an important point when the Gospel comes to the crucifixion). The darkness exists, not as a separate power, but as a consequence of people not wishing to live according to the light. In verse 10 we are told that the world and his own people did not accept him and they remained in darkness. Others did accept him and were filled with the power of the children of God.

The prologue (John 1:1-18) is one of the great passages of the Bible and deserves to be read over and over again by believers. It is an invitation to belief and it paints a picture of life that is enlivened, enlightened and invigorated by Christ. It is only in Christ and with Christ that sense can be made of life and all the many things that happen in the world. Darkness only comes into a person's life when they ignore Jesus, as men and women were not created to live independently of God. They need him to be fully alive. This makes darkness a choice but also means that there is a way to end it. That way is Christ who is light. There is no need to allow ourselves to live in darkness of any nature or kind. Through faith Light can be seen to shine through the darkest of human experiences to offer us hope.

**Prayer** Father, through your creative power you pushed back the darkness and the waters of the deep and a new creation began on the earth. When we feel overwhelmed by darkness of any kind, help us to see the light of Christ shining in our lives.

**Wednesday December 30th**

**Luke 2:36-40**

In Anna we find a pious woman who has been led by God to find the child Jesus and to give testimony to him. She is called a prophet and as such is one through whom God gives revelations of his will. She is of the tribe of Asher, one of the "lost tribes" of the house of Israel. She had been married for only seven years before being widowed and had remained unmarried for the rest of her life. Her faithfulness is shown in her attendance at prayers and sacrifices offered in the Temple. Along with other pious Jews she is shown as looking for and awaiting the coming of the long promised Messiah. It was when she found the Christ child that she knew that she had found the one for whom she had been searching all these years. This is why she broke into thanks and praise. All the righteous people coming to the Temple were made aware of what had been revealed to her. There is no mention of the Wise Men from the East or the flight of the Holy Family to Egypt because they are not a part of Luke's theological vision. Instead he places the family in Nazareth where Jesus lives a hidden life. The only indication that there is something different about him is the note of Luke that says "the child grew to maturity and he was filled with wisdom; and God's favour was with him".

It is amazing to think of Anna going to the Temple for more than half a century to pray that God would send his Messiah. In that time she must have come across all kinds of pretenders and had her hopes raised and dashed many times. Yet she persevered. She offered her prayers and she made her sacrifices and held her fasts, but nothing happened. But still she prayed with her hope undiminished. How hard is that kind of prayer? In a world where instant gratification is expected, if not demanded, the idea of persevering in prayer seems difficult to preach. Yet that is precisely what is expected by Jesus. Believers are to pray "constantly". They are to persevere in prayer, understanding that God will bring about his will in his own time. It is Anna's patience that stands out most of all. She was prepared to wait, conscious that in the baby Jesus was the fulfilment of the hopes of Israel. Nothing much changed in the world around her, but in the Christ child she had enough of an answer to believe that her prayers were answered and she could now go in peace.

*Prayer*

Now, Lord, let your servants be at peace, for in our hearts we know the salvation that you had promised for all peoples, a light to enlighten the nations and a gift that represents true glory for all who believe in you.

**Thursday December 3rd**

**Matthew 7:21-27**

Jesus now moves to directing the disciples towards taking action on all that he has said. He has warned them about the dangers of false teachers and now points out the danger of them deceiving themselves about their standing in the Kingdom. In a beautiful image, he notes that the gates of Heaven are not set up to be automatically opened when someone calls out "Lord, Lord". They respond only to those who go out and actually perform the will of God. This is the will of his Father. He goes on to make this point very clear. Even if someone were to perform great works in the name of Jesus, performing exorcisms and miracles with divine authority, it is not enough to qualify them for entrance into the Kingdom. In Matthew's world miracles were seen in terms of good and evil. If a person was ill, the cause was to be found in sin and the presence of some evil spirit. Cures were sought through exorcisms, where the power of the spirit over the person was broken and the illness removed. In terms of the message of Matthew, it is important to note that Jesus claims for himself the power of expulsion from the Kingdom of those who fail to carry out the will of God.

There are two important teachings to be found in today's text. The first stresses the importance of listening to God. This is very different to presuming that we know the will of God. When Jesus says "the person who hears these words of mine" he is not talking about a once in a lifetime hearing, or an occasional listening. He is talking about a person who builds their life on listening to God on a regular (daily) basis. Who is a person of prayer, used to opening themselves up to God each day. God speaks in all kinds of ways, in every situation in which we find ourselves. The disciple is the one who tunes in to what it is he is saying. It is no use simply turning to God in times of crisis and hoping that a Divine message will be heard. Prayer is something that needs to be a habit for the disciple, in good times and in hard times, so that at all times they can walk in peace knowing they travel in the presence of God. The second point that Matthew makes is that the teachings of Jesus are more than just good ideas. For the power of the Kingdom to be experienced, those who believe need to set out and explore ways of putting the teachings of Jesus into action. They have to be more than good ideas and good intentions. Faith without action is no real faith at all.

*Prayer*

Loving Father, you reveal your will to us in the person and the teachings of your Son Jesus. Help us to hear him speaking to us in the events of our lives, and strengthen us to do his will.

## Friday December 4th

## Matthew 9:27-31

This story has some elements that are similar to the story of the blind men at Jericho (20:29-34). In both of these Matthew uses the title "Son of David" for Jesus. This is not a surprise given that the people of the time were waiting for the promised messiah. He would come from the line of David and would restore them to their freedom, to glory and to greatness and he would be known by his powerful actions and teachings. Given the miracles that were being performed, it is not surprising that the people saw in Jesus signs of this messianic ministry. There were two blind men outside the house of Jairus. This would have been a normal thing as one would support the other in their travels and their begging. Jesus ignores their cries because again he seems to wish to avoid the possibility of the people wanting to make him a messiah who would fit into their own expectations. It is only when he reaches the house that he turns and addresses them. They come to him asking for mercy, mercy that would be expressed in terms of healing them of their blindness. Jesus sets out the terms for this gift: faith in his ability to perform the cure. Once they express that faith, Jesus touches their eyes and they can see again. The way the story is presented here, it is not the faith that performs the miracle. It is the precondition necessary before the miracle can happen. As is common in the Gospel, Jesus tries to limit news of his power from being spread throughout the countryside, presumably to stop people from pursuing their own messianic agendas.

At first it seems a little strange that Jesus does not immediately cure the men of their blindness. He waits. If we read the dialogue correctly, it may well be that he is trying to encourage them to assess just how strongly they want to be cured. As with the sick man in John chapter 5 he seems to be asking them: "Do you want to be cured?". That may sound strange but there was a certain security in begging. They had no work, no debts to pay off, no responsibilities and received charity from lots of people. Not a perfect life but one with which they could have become comfortable. Not unlike some of our sins! Remember the prayer of St Augustine: "Lord heal me. But not just yet!". He wanted to begin a new life, but still had a few good sinful ways he wanted to enjoy for a bit longer. The demands of the Gospel are that we repent **now**. This is not an option that we can exercise when we like or when it is convenient.

*Prayer* Heavenly Father, we are often blind to your will in our lives. Help us to turn from our sinfulness and seek the healing powers of your forgiveness that we may be free and at peace.

5

## Tuesday December 29th

## Luke 2:21-35

As the infancy story unfolds, we see Jesus going through the normal stages a pious Jewish youth would follow. The Law demanded three major ceremonies. The first was circumcision. Every male child was to be circumcised on the eighth day after birth. On this day he received his name. There was also a service of the redemption of the first born child (Exodus 13:2). The Law made it clear that every first born male (either human or beast) was to be considered as sacred to God and therefore was to be sacrificed to him. As set out in the book of Numbers (Numbers 18:16) the parents could "buy back" their son from God, the money being paid over to the priests. Finally there was the purification after childbirth. If a woman gave birth to a male child she was considered to be unclean for forty days (eighty days if a female child was born). She could move around her house but could not go to the Temple or take part in any religious service. At the end of this time she was to bring a lamb to the Temple for a burnt offering and a pigeon for a sin offering. If she could not afford a lamb (and that would represent a huge cost) she could bring two pigeons instead (this was called the offering of the poor). This is what Mary brought along to the Temple. All these were meant to remind the people that a child was a gift from God (or as the Stoics claimed, was lent to them by God). It also helped them to appreciate that God was involved in every human life and that people were here for his purpose.

What comes through the whole of this section is how much Jesus, Mary and Joseph built their lives around the expectations of God. They could have easily found excuses for not carrying out all the demands of the Law but chose instead a life of faithfulness. That is something that is so easily overlooked in our modern world. Being a Christian means that there are some minimum requirements that must be met. Christianity is not something believers can map out according to their own likes and dislikes. It has been established by Jesus in his preaching and teaching and these demands are every bit as binding as were the precepts of the old Jewish Law. What we find in Matthew chapters 5, 6 and 7 must be reflected in the daily lives of those who call themselves disciples. This is not a matter of convenience but of necessity. God expects Christians to be living in a particular manner and to be doing specific things and there are some things that must be evident in the way the believer lives in the world.

*Prayer* Loving Father, we thank you for all your good gifts to us and ask that we show how grateful we are by the way we live out the demands of your Son Jesus Christ.

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**Monday December 28th**    *The Innocents*    **Matthew 2:13-18**

The angel appearing to Joseph is a reminder of the ongoing presence of God in the events taking place. They are to head off to Egypt which was outside the control and influence of Herod. It had been a traditional place of refuge for Jews fleeing persecution and hardship. As Pharaoh had sought out Moses in order to kill him, so Herod was seeking out Jesus in order to put him to death. Pharaoh had decreed that all Hebrew male children were to be killed (Exodus 1:16; 1:22) but Moses is saved by a miracle. Herod has decreed that all male children be murdered and Jesus is saved by the intervention of an angel. Afraid of the Pharaoh, Moses flees to the land of Midian until the king dies, after which God directs Moses to return to Egypt (Ex 4:19). Joseph takes his family to Egypt until Herod is dead. In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus emerges as a kind of new Moses and in the author's mind there is a continuity in their ministries. The salvation and new life of the Exodus is to be found, on a higher plane, in the life and ministry of Jesus. As God did great things through Moses, so greater things are being prepared for in the life of Jesus. From the start it seems that the ministry of Jesus is associated with suffering and death and here at the beginning of his life we have an introduction to the theme of his suffering and the Passion. The story of the death of these innocents seems out of place in the Christmas story, while for Matthew it is an important part of the story of Jesus.

It would seem that Matthew is making it clear that there is no way for the Kingdom to be proclaimed without some form of suffering. The death of these innocent children is an extreme way of portraying this message, but it is central to the Gospel story. There will always be people and groups who will not like what the Gospel says and will resist the demands of Jesus. Being a disciple will always be difficult and will always demand some kind of sacrifice and for some may even demand a martyr's death. Why then is it that Christians so easily pull back when demands are made of them in the name of the Gospel? Of course it is going to be inconvenient at times to faithfully serve God. There will be times when it may be a little embarrassing, inconvenient, demanding, difficult and sometimes even dangerous. It has been so from the beginning and it is a part of the price we are asked to pay for life in the Kingdom.

**Prayer** Merciful Father, all too often we find it difficult to remain faithful to the demands of discipleship and find ourselves watering down our response to your calling. Strengthen us that we may serve you, whatever the cost.

**Saturday December 5th**    **Matthew 9:35-10:1**

In verse 35 we have a neat summary of the ministry of Jesus. He was a teacher. For Matthew this was not just someone who passed on certain information about the Kingdom. As a teacher, Jesus showed by his teaching what the Kingdom meant in their daily lives. This is why it seemed that he taught them with authority. He was also a teacher by the way he lived and the way he carried out his ministry. In Jesus they met the Kingdom in action. He was a herald. In the ancient world the herald was the person who brought a message from the King. In the Gospel we see that the message Jesus is proclaiming comes from God his Father. As with his teaching, the message that was preached by Jesus had a power and an authority about it because of its divine origins. Finally, Jesus was a healer. The Gospels present the miracles of Jesus in such a way that they elaborate on his teaching and give a clear witness to the meaning of the coming of the Kingdom. People are set free by the miracles. They are given the chance to begin again, which is found in his call to repentance and the promise of the forgiveness of sins. Jesus then moves to address his disciples, passing on to them the ministry which he himself had received from the Father. The leaders of the Jews had failed in their ministry, leaving the people like sheep without a shepherd.

This is a special section of the Gospel because in it we have a clear glimpse into how Jesus sees the people around him. In our English Bibles, we are told that Jesus is "moved with pity" upon seeing the crowds, but that is nowhere near the Greek word. In Greek the word used is from the word for "bowels", which in the ancient world represented the deepest depths of a person's whole being. We can presume that what has moved him here are the people who were listening to him preaching and teaching, heralding the Good News and receiving the blessings of his miracles. He was moved by their suffering. He was overcome with compassion and mercy for their stumbling around in darkness and fear, for seeing them caught up in the pain of sin and uncertainty and under the power of incompetent and wicked shepherds. If there was ever a message of great joy for the greatest of sinners among us, it is the thought that Jesus is "moved with compassion" for us. This is what leads him to offer us forgiveness and mercy. It is because he cares and loves us so much.

**Prayer** Loving God, ever lasting Father, we thank you that you have given us a share in your love through the person and ministry of your Son Jesus. Show us how to share that love with others.

**Sunday December 6th**

**Luke 3:1-6**

In Acts 1:22, Luke expresses the ministry of Jesus as “starting from Galilee after the baptism that John preached”, making this event the public beginning of the work of salvation. The main purpose of this section is to present John as the one who has been called by God to prepare the community for the time of salvation and to present him as the prophet/preacher who will “prepare the way of the Lord”. By using the quotation from Isaiah 40 Luke introduces the important theme of fulfilment, that what is unfolding is according to the plan of God. Isaiah’s great message of hope and consolation is now to be understood in a new way. But the contrast with the traditionalists within Judaism could not be greater. The ultra conservative Essenes went off into the desert to “prepare the way of the Lord” (they too used Isaiah 40) by living a life of rigorous discipline and obedience to the Law. God’s way was smoothed out by a strict observance of the Law. John’s way was different. He preached a message of reform, of salvation to come and a baptism of repentance and the turning away from sins. There is also a clear link between the baptism (washing) preached by John and the ritual washing (baptism) that was carried out in the Essene communities. But there was also a major difference. For the Essenes, contact with outsiders, even their fellow Jews was a source of defilement and meant that they were breaking the Law. John’s message of Baptism was preached to anyone who was prepared to listen, a message repeated time and time again by Jesus and presented as central to life in the early community in the Acts.

John’s ministry highlights one of the great sins of the modern Church. Like the Essenes of old, it is so tempting to see the community of believers as being the central focus of our ministry. We spend more time ministering to the needs of those inside the Church than taking the Gospel message of love, healing and hope to those who have never heard of the name of Jesus apart from its use as a swear word or who have wandered from life in the Kingdom. Of course it is easier to find ways of improving the life of the parish than it is witnessing to Jesus before those who are closed to the Gospel. We might not run away and hide in the Judean desert, but we can lock Christianity away in our hearts and our churches so that no one else can see and experience its beauty and power. That, for Luke, is a great sin and not what our lives as disciples demands.

***Prayer***

Loving Father, fill us with the power of your Holy Spirit, that we may be filled with the courage and strength we need to live the Gospel in the face of an unbelieving and hostile world.

**Sunday December 27th**

*St John*

**John 20:2-8**

All four of the Gospels come to their climax in the resurrection but each of them presents it in a different way. John has Mary encountering the risen Lord in the Garden and then rushing off to tell the men. She went to Simon Peter and John and told them that the body of Jesus had been stolen (note that there is no thought in her mind that he had risen from the dead). Both of these men immediately raced off to the tomb and John, arriving first, stood outside and observed the linen lying on the floor. Peter, in a response more typical of him, went straight in and they found the clothes lying, folded, to one side. John’s detailed and orderly description is clearly meant to indicate that the missing body was not the result of grave robbers. John saw what had taken place “and he believed”. His faith did not arise from biblical proofs (20:9) but from his own experiences there in the tomb. It is quite probable that the enemies of the early Church had spread rumours and stories about the body being taken by the Jews and so John has here three eyewitnesses – Mary, Peter and John.

According to tradition, Mary was a notorious sinner and was much loved by Jesus, these two points going hand in hand. Mary sinned greatly, was loved greatly and was forgiven a great deal by the compassionate Jesus. It was love that enabled Mary to be the first to the tomb and it was the disciple whom Jesus loved who was the first to have faith in the risen Lord. Love really is the key to understanding the Gospel message and to responding as disciples. It is love that makes faith possible. It is love that makes discipleship a reality and it is God’s love for us, even though we are sinners, that makes it possible to continue on in the face of doubt and hardship. The women would have rushed off to the tomb in the early hours of the morning because, in Jewish custom, the spirit of the deceased person stayed around the grave for three days and they wanted to properly prepare his body for the spirit’s departure for Sheol. This was the right and proper procedure for the pious Jews. Importantly for John, it was love that brought them there and opened up the possibility of an encounter with Christ. They could have stayed in the upper room, filled with fear and neglected their traditional duties. But their love for Jesus forced them to face the dangers of the journey to the tomb and that love was rewarded. Faith is not possible without love that flows into action.

***Prayer***

Heavenly Father, touch our hearts and open our eyes that we may find the presence of your Son in all of the empty and seemingly meaningless moments of our lives.

**Saturday December 26th**    *St Stephen*    **Matthew 10:17-22**

This is the second part of Matthew's missionary teaching and we find that Jesus is warning that suffering will be an inevitable part of following him. Those who wish to be disciples will have to suffer as he will suffer. The difficulties will come from both outside the band of disciples as well as from divisions within. This should not have come as a surprise for the Jewish Christians of Matthew's community for there was a long tradition of religious persecution, starting from the Exodus and continuing on down through history to their present situation under the Romans. The first communities also bore the brunt of persecution and even martyrdom, something of which Paul boasts (2 Cor 11:23-27). But it was not just opposition from outside the community. The demands of the Kingdom would also put enormous pressures on family life and they would be divided. For the community's "Jewish ears" this would have brought to mind thoughts about the end time, for in many writings divisions in the family were thought to be signs of the coming end of the world. But there are also two messages of consolation and reassurance. The first is the promise of the Holy Spirit who will provide the persecuted disciples with the help they need in the face of persecution. The other promise is that the Son of Man will return and bring an end to their sufferings. That is a hope to which they can look forward.

One of the great gifts for disciples is the gift of hope. There is no situation so bad that there is not to be found some way forward, some hope for the future. The early communities may have faced persecution from the Jewish leaders and have been thrown out of the synagogues, but that did not mean the end. It may have appeared to them at times that the opposition to them was enormous and that there was no way for them to continue as a community. But Jesus here promises them that in and through the Holy Spirit there is to be found a way. The same with divisions within the family. These represent deep sufferings and as the family crumbles around a person they may despair of ever being able to survive. When all else fails, says Jesus, God will provide a sure rock of security from which to begin again. The world around may turn against the disciple and they may be abandoned by those they thought loved them, but God will never abandon them and is always prepared to love them.

**Prayer**

Loving Father, when things become difficult in our lives and we search the world for signs of hope, help us to discover in your Word and Sacraments a firm rock on which to anchor our lives.

**Monday December 7th**    **Luke 5:17-26**

Here we have one of Luke's controversies. There are two elements in the story. The first is the miracle of the cure of the lameness. A paralysed man is brought to Jesus on a stretcher, which has to be lowered down through the roof by the man's friends. It is not an easy process and Jesus is impressed by the extent of their faith in him. In response to this faith he commands the man to "pick up your bed and go home". When people see what has happened they give praise to God for Jesus. Into this story we have another miracle story, that of the forgiveness of sins. Up until this point we have seen Jesus curing people of their diseases, casting out evil spirits and working miracles over nature. What we now have is him using his authority and his power to overcome sin. This is something that has only been seen as the work of Yahweh. What we see now is that Jesus is seemingly being equated with God. Jesus is not here linking the man's paralysis to his life of sin, though this was the common belief of the time. The two miracles are joined here to highlight the true nature of the person and ministry of Jesus.

One of the truly amazing things about this story is the way Jesus heals the man's illness. The man's friends go to a lot of trouble to bring the sick man to Jesus. In fact, Luke seems to stretch out the drama by having the house full and surrounded by a large crowd. There are so many people that they have to climb onto the roof and dig a hole into the house. It is not hard to imagine the impact that such actions would have on the people crowding around. They would not be happy and only a steely determination on their part would have kept them going. What a surprise it must have been when Jesus turned to the sick man and told him that his sins had been forgiven! It is unlikely that such a thing had been in his mind. The sick man and his friends were seeking a cure. They wanted the man's legs fixed so that he could walk again and here is Jesus telling him that his sins are forgiven! What they wanted and what Jesus knew they needed were two different things. He should have been able to know a true peace, lying back there on his bed knowing that his sins had been taken away. He did not have to be physically cured to know that God had blessed him. Having his sins taken away was a much greater gift. How hard is that to believe!?!

**Prayer**

Merciful Father, all too often our prayers are attempts on our part to try and convince you that we know what is best in our lives and what it is you should do for us. Help us to be so filled with faith that we confidently leave our lives in your hands.

**Tuesday December 8th**

**Matthew 18:10-14**

This is one of the clearest of the parables in the Gospel. Jesus is talking about the attitude the disciples are to have towards "these little ones". They may be powerless and outcasts in the eyes of the world, but they have "angels in heaven" to look after them and to represent them before the throne of God. This was a common enough belief among the Jews who believed that both nations and individuals had their own angels in the heavenly court pointing out to God the needs of their charges. Every just man was accompanied by two good angels when he went on a journey and the wicked by two evil angels. It is from this belief that the later Church taught the notion of each believer having a Guardian Angel to look after them (Acts 12:15). What gives a person status on earth is not their position in the society but their presence before God, and so they are to be treasured and not abused. These "little ones" are presumably the ones that are referred to as sheep in the main part of the parable and they are precious to God. The straying by the sheep refers to their wandering off into sin. The attitude of the Shepherd, and therefore of God, is to go off in pursuit of the one who is lost so that it might be brought back to the fold. This represents quite a risk for the shepherd as he has to leave the other ninety-nine behind. No price is too high for the shepherd, just as no price is too high for God to pay for the chance of saving one of his lost children.

In our modern world it is not reasonable to believe in angels. It is hard enough believing in God. But in the biblical world the angels are very important and tell us something about our lives with God. They were the mediators between God and his creation and are found in the Bible bringing God's will to men and women. The point is obvious: God is no distant God, but is a God who reveals himself to his people. The idea of a heavenly court is found at the beginning of the book of Job and the picture tries to reassure us about the nature of God. He is a God who acts out of love and concern for his people. The angels are present to make sure that we are heard (not that God needs reminding). God has put an angel in charge of each one of us to plead our cause. Whether or not we do believe in angels is neither here nor there. What is important is that we understand that God has our lives constantly before him and is engaged in all that we do. All we need to do is be aware of his divine presence.

***Prayer***

Loving God, as we go about our daily work and struggle to live in the world, reveal to us your presence and your power in all that happens, that we may be at peace and always filled with hope.

**Friday December 25th**

*Christmas Day*

**Luke 2:1-14**

There is little evidence that in the reign of Caesar Augustus there was a worldwide census of the kind mentioned by Luke, where people had to return to their home towns to register. He seems instead to have used the idea of the census (of which there were a number though limited only to provinces) to link together Joseph (from Galilee) with Mary (from Nazareth) and the town of Bethlehem, the town of David. It is also important from his own theological point of view that Caesar Augustus, the mighty ruler of Rome, should become an agent of God through proclaiming his edict to carry out the census, so bringing Jesus to Bethlehem. It was Augustus who was widely considered by the people to be the emperor who brought peace to the world of the time (the Pax Augusta). In Rome the feelings of peace were so strong that the doors to the shrine of Janus, which were usually open in time of war, were closed. Behind Luke's construction we can see his message that the real agent of peace in the world was not the Roman emperor but Jesus. Augustus' role was that of co-operating by arranging for the census. The Roman saviour (the emperor) was a King with great splendour and power, while the real Saviour was born in a stable and wrapped in swaddling clothes. Jesus was born under the peace that had been established by Augusta but would himself bring "Peace in heaven and glory in the highest heaven" (Luke 19:38).

Luke, in the story of the birth of Jesus, continues the themes that he had used in the first chapter of his Gospel. There is a clear contrast between the ways of God and the ways of the world. The Roman Peace, *Pax Romana*, good though it was, had its limitations. It was neither universal nor permanent. It depended on the strength of the reigning Emperor or Senate. The Peace that was on promise with the Kingdom of God was gained through a humble obedience to the will of God. It was gained by stepping back and allowing God to move as he wanted. Later on in the Gospel this will be described as "dying" to oneself and it really is the key required to enter into God's Kingdom. The kingdom of this world is gained by wealth, by power and by force. The Kingdom of God is a gift given to those who are prepared to repent, to amend their ways and to live in humble obedience to God's will. Christ comes to those who prepare themselves in that way.

***Prayer***

Glory to you Almighty God, that in the fullness of time you sent your Son Jesus Christ to live as one of us that we may share life in your Kingdom. Make us truly worthy of that great gift.

**Thursday December 24th** *Christmas Eve* **Matthew 1:18-25**

*Fr Robert Newton*

If love requires equality, how can we say that God loves his creatures? The relationship between God and his creatures is as unequal as can possibly be. To say that God loves his creatures is a bit like saying that a man loves his car. We can say that God cares for his creatures and looks after them, just as we can say that a man cares for and looks after his car. But in neither case can we rightly use the word love. The required equality is not there. And yet we do say that God loves us, and rightly so. How can we say that? The answer lies in the Feast of Christmas. In the birth of Christ, God enters our world. As our reading today puts it: "They will call him Emmanuel, a name which means 'God is with us' ". In Jesus God is truly with us. He is truly human and yet truly divine. In Jesus then, God the Father can recognise an equal whom he can love: an equal in divinity who is also a partaker in our humanity. In the Incarnation Jesus embraces us within that love which the Father has for him. Through the Incarnation we share in the love that exists between the Father and the Son. By being united to Jesus, through the Holy Spirit, we share in the very life of God. In other words we are raised to equality with God: that equality which enables us to say that God does truly love us. Of course there is a difference between ourselves and Jesus. He is divine by nature. We are raised to divinity as a gift of God — the gift which is none other than the Holy Spirit dwelling within us.

Our reading today reminds us of that great statement from St Athanasius who said: "God became man that man might become God". This then is the meaning of the Incarnation. This is the central message of our faith. God gives us a share in his divine life; he raises us to equality with himself. When we celebrate the birth of Jesus we are not primarily celebrating the birth of one who came with a sublime teaching. Nor are we celebrating the birth of one who came to give us special inside information about God. We are celebrating the birth of the one who reveals the Father's love for us by taking us up into that love. Jesus represents a meeting between God and ourselves. That is where his uniqueness lies. Of course in this life we do not fully understand the new life of God which has been given to us. We enter into it in the darkness and dimness of faith, not in the light of understanding. But in our faith we believe that, through Jesus Christ, the love of God is poured into our hearts.

**Prayer**

Through Jesus Christ we are assured of God's everlasting love for us. May we always stay close to him.

**Wednesday December 9th**

**Matthew 11:28-30**

There is in the background to this passage a conflict of understandings between the life of faith as understood by the Pharisees and the life of faith that was being demanded by Jesus. For the Jewish teachers, the Law was the ultimate authority. Jesus on the other hand laid claim to an authority that was given to him by God his Father. The Pharisees turned the Law into a heavy burden. They talked about the yoke of the Law onto which the faithful Jew could place his life. But it was a burden to be carried and the Law in their presentation did not make life any easier. In contrast, Jesus presents himself as the yoke and the purpose of his yoke is to make the burdens of life easier to bear. The Law for the Pharisees was not just the Law as it had been handed down to Moses at Mt Sinai. For centuries they had been adding interpretations to these original laws and it was their interpretations that were crushing the people. Jesus came and taught that he was the one who fulfilled the Law and in doing so he set the people free from all these other human additions. The Pharisees used the Law to despise and condemn the ordinary men and women in the community, for they were neither learned nor well versed in the Law. Jesus came and revealed the Truth to mere children and the sinners came to him and ate with him because in him they found God speaking and acting.

One of the main problems with the Pharisees was that they had too closed an understanding of God. Most of what they said was in one way or another quite true. But it was not the complete truth and it did not allow for other ways of understanding the same truth. God was their God and any variations would not be tolerated. They tried to do to God what they did to the Law, tie him up in a nice neat package. That is why they could not see Jesus as the Son of God. It was asking for too great a change in their traditional way of looking at God and understanding religion. That is a problem that did not end with the Pharisees. Today too there is a real danger of locking ourselves away in a comfortable and familiar understanding of God and how we are to express our faith and our beliefs in the Church. When someone suggests a change, or does things differently, they are judged harshly. God's ways can never be summed up and limited by human theology and spirituality.

**Prayer**

Father, you are a God of surprises and sometimes that makes us uneasy. Through your Holy Spirit, keep us ever open to your presence and movement in our lives in whatever way you choose to act. May we never be closed to your presence.

**Thursday December 10th**

**Matthew 11:11-15**

John fulfilled the prophecy of Malachi and heralded the Messiah, an action that gave him a special prominence in the community. He was the last of the prophets of the Old Testament, but for all his greatness, the least of people are greater in the Kingdom. Perhaps what Jesus has in mind here is that it is better to be someone entering the Kingdom than to be a famous herald of the Kingdom. John may well be privileged in the local Church community, but being a part of the Kingdom is a much better status to have. The violence suffered by the Kingdom refers to the persecution of John and his ultimate execution by Herod. It also brings to mind the wide range of persecutions under which the Church suffered after the day of Pentecost. When Matthew says that "the Kingdom has suffered violence" he possibly has in mind two forms of assault. That of the Pharisees who resist the Kingdom and also a more passive resistance from those who are unwilling to draw near and build their lives on the teachings of Jesus. The Kingdom cannot be snatched away by crowds rushing forward to receive the healings and benefits of the Kingdom, just as it cannot be torn down by its opponents. Matthew himself provides the best commentary on the passage with the saying in 21:31: "The tax collectors and the harlots go into the Kingdom of God before you".

It seems that Jesus is addressing this teaching to the crowds of people who have been following him, listening to his teaching and waiting for another miracle. He asks them to think about what it is they are seeking. They went out into the desert to look at John the Baptist. What did they see? Did they see the prophet pointing the way to the Messiah or did they see a madman ranting and raving? Did they find what they were looking for or are they still searching for the Truth? When they follow after Jesus, what is it they seek? Do they find the Son of Man, the one of whom the prophets of old spoke, or do they simply see a miracle worker and a great orator? Do they find in Jesus the answer to their searching? Curiosity is not enough for a disciple. The proof of having found the Kingdom is to be found in changes in behaviour, in our way of living, thinking and acting. Those who found in John the great Prophet would have repented and changed their lives. Those who find God in Jesus would change the way they live. That is the real proof of faith.

*Prayer*

Merciful God, down through history you have raised up men and women who have proclaimed your will to the nations. Fill us with your grace that we too may reveal your love and your mercy by the way we live out the faith we profess.

**Wednesday December 23rd**

**Luke 1:57-66**

The story of the birth of John is part of Luke's preparation for the Gospel story. In it we can see God as showing mercy (favour) to Elizabeth in taking away her barrenness. This would have been a particular burden for the wife of a priest serving in Jerusalem. It is also important for the name of the Baptist — John. His name means "Yahweh has shown favour" (Yehohanan). This favour is not only shown to Elizabeth but to the whole nation and indeed to the entire world. What has begun with Elizabeth is offered to everyone. The hand of the Lord was on John (1:66), indicating divine protection as well as divine direction to what it is John is to do in his ministry. This divine protection does not mean that John will suffer no hardships, for it did not protect him from the wrath of Herod who put him to death. What is protected is his calling and ministry. It will be fruitful, because the hand of the Lord is upon him. In a dramatic fashion, naming the baby John results in Zechariah being able to speak once again and he confirms the name the mother wanted to give to the newborn. Hesitancy in believing the will of God had led to him being struck down. Instant obedience to the will of God led to him being able to speak again.

In the early Church Elizabeth played an important symbolic role. She is a woman who in biblical terms was "barren". Unable to conceive a child she would have been something of an oddity in the community. The view at the time was that such barrenness was normally a result of sin and even though both Elizabeth and Zechariah were righteous people, it is not hard to imagine the gossip and speculation down at the well! God certainly changed that with the birth of John. Her life was transformed and what was once barren is now filled with life and joy. In Luke's language that is the ultimate message of his Gospel. The world is without life and without hope. It does not matter what it tries to do, there is no chance of it rising from its barrenness through its own efforts. New life is not something human beings can accomplish through their own purposes or on their own. It is a gift of God and comes about as a result of an intervention by God. That is the promise of the Kingdom. In those areas of life that appear to be barren and without any kind of hope, God is ready and willing to step in and make fruitful. All that is needed is a living faith and what at one time seemed insurmountable is suddenly flourishing with new life.

*Prayer*

Loving and merciful Father, when our lives seem to be empty and filled with difficulties and sorrows, enliven your Spirit within us that we may find you at work in all that is happening.

## **Tuesday December 22nd**

## **Luke 1:46-56**

It is in response to the praise by Elizabeth that Mary utters this song of praise. This hymn seems to have been an early Christian hymn that Luke found going around in his community to which he added his own theological comments. Mary, like Hannah before her (1 Samuel 2:1-10), sings Yahweh's greatness and acknowledges him as her Saviour. He is now bringing about a new form of salvation that will come about through the birth of her Son. This picture of the God stands in stark contrast to the humble position of Mary which Luke adds in verse 48. All generations of peoples will consider her to be blessed, not because of her own special qualities and personal holiness, but because of him whom she is carrying within her. In verses 51-53 Mary presents the great deeds of Yahweh for his people in the past as an indication of how God will once more deal with his people in the present through the life and deeds of her Son. In the conclusion of the Magnificat (verses 54-55) Mary acknowledges that it is through the coming birth, life and death of her Son that salvation is to come into the world. This salvation is no isolated act but is caught up in the same covenant that God made with Abraham of old. By using such themes as the servant Israel, God's Servant and the patriarchs Luke locates this birth within the saving history that has been unfolding since God called Abraham.

This hymn clearly grew out of a Jewish Christian community which held to the belief that God's salvation was now coming to Israel in a new way. These communities were often a part of what were called "the Poor Ones". These were the unfortunate, the lowly, the sick and downtrodden. Their opposites were not just those who were rich, but included the proud, the arrogant and especially those who had no need of God (see Psalm 149:4; Isaiah 49:13; 66:2). This group emerged from the prophet writings which spoke of a "remnant" of faithful Jews who would survive the destruction of the nation by the Babylonians. Having been stripped of everything, their only hope lay in Yahweh. They could do nothing to ease their own pain, to shape their history or to appear victorious in any way. Their only hope was God and their peace came from their union in him and with him. Jesus is to preach the same message. Life in the Kingdom (then and today) is open to those who are willing to be like Mary and put their life and their future into the hands of God — without restriction.

**Prayer** Almighty and all-powerful God, show to us the strength of your arm today as we struggle with our human frailties, that we may know your peace and be comforted by our hope in you.

## **Friday December 11th**

## **Matthew 11:16-19**

Following on from the previous text it is clear that Matthew is stressing how the reception of the Kingdom by the leaders of the people was anything but favourable. The people are like petulant children who refuse to take part in what is happening around them and nothing will meet their expectations. The image comes from observations of what happens normally in the village. The children like to imitate adult life and sing and dance as at weddings, or cry and act solemnly as adults do at funerals. Only this time they refuse to follow along with the "game" that has been announced by John the Baptist and brought to life by Jesus. Instead, they see in John a crazy man and in Jesus a drunkard reveller. John is telling them to repent and mourn of their sins and they refuse. Jesus tells them to enter into the life of the Kingdom and rejoice with great joy at the blessings to be found there, but they refuse that as well. They seem to be unable to pick up and interpret the signs of the times and so stand condemned in their stubbornness. However, the truth and authority of the mission of Jesus does not depend on his acceptance or assessment by the people and the success of his saving works are not measured in terms of the numbers of people who repent. His credibility rests not on what people think, but on the works he does as God's Son (Matt 11:2ff).

There has never been a time when the majority of the peoples of the world have accepted the call to follow Christ as disciples. There have always been those who worship other gods, those who follow no gods, those who are nominal in their allegiances and those who faithfully strive to live the Gospel message. When we look at our parishes today and see dwindling and ageing congregations, it is easy to begin to think that perhaps the Church or maybe even the message of Christianity has had its time. The modern world does not seem interested in God and at times is even hostile towards his holy people. This makes it more difficult to stand firm in the faith and resist pressures to change the message so that it may be more attractive to modern minds. However, the Truth of the Good News, and the glory of salvation that is to be found in Jesus Christ does not depend on the level of its acceptance by people. All believers should have a firm hope and a sure confidence in the Truth that is to be found in him.

**Prayer** All-powerful God, we pray that you fill us with the courage that we need to faithfully live out the demands of the Gospel in such a way that the world may come to know your glory.

**Saturday December 12th**

**Matthew 17:9-13**

This story arises out of the vision (Matthew’s word) they had on top of the mountain of the transfiguration. We read in the prophecy of Malachi (Mal 3:23-24) that Elijah will return prior to the long awaited Day of the Lord. What is not clear from the Old Testament is whether or not Elijah would be the forerunner of the Messiah: “Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes” (Mal 4:5). We can see something of the concern that Matthew has for “faith” and “understanding”. Elijah was rejected because they could not believe in the saving work of God. The “Elijah” that Jesus was talking about was John the Baptist, the charismatic prophet who prepared the way of the Lord. John the Baptist’s language, ministry and even clothing resembles those of the great prophet. We should note that Matthew changes the order of the figures appearing with Jesus, labelling them Moses and Elijah (17:3), (Mark has Elijah and Moses [Mk 9:4]), because for him they are representatives of the Law and the Prophets whose mission Jesus is fulfilling. But John the Baptist, like the prophets and like the Messiah whom he is announcing, suffered at the hands of the people to whom he was sent to minister.

One of the main messages of Advent is the proclamation that God reigns and that in all things and through all things he is working to bring his plans to fulfilment. John the Baptist was not some accident of history. John was sent to announce the coming Messiah. God used the ministry of the Baptist to encourage people to look for the one who would bring them salvation. That is the way he works. He takes history and invites believers to find his hand at work through it. It is not that God is like some heavenly puppeteer who has mankind dangling on strings. What God does is to take our human activities and turn them to the achievement of his will. It is his grace in human events that brings his Kingdom alive and that is the message in today’s reading. By placing Moses and Elijah in conversation with Jesus on the top of the mountain we are told that Jesus is bringing all the previous history to its planned end. It is in Jesus that these things are completed. And so it is with us. It is in Jesus that our lives find their meaning and their fulfilment. It is only with him as the centre that we can truly know peace and contentment.

*Prayer* Lord God Almighty, through the history of your people Israel you revealed your plans and carried out your purpose of salvation. Through our union in the Body of Christ may all that we do be used for the proclaiming of your Kingdom in the world.

**Monday December 21st**

*St Thomas*

**John 20:24-29**

We need to keep in mind that in the Gospel of John, the cross is a moment of glory for Jesus. In Mark, for example, there are three predictions of the Passion, and each of them concludes with a promise of resurrection. It is the resurrection which is thought to make the death more palatable. Not for John. The great moment of glory is to be found at Golgotha, not at the empty tomb, for it is on the cross that he gives glory to the Father. When John writes of the Resurrection there are two things that he stresses. The first is the continuing relationship that he picks up with his disciples and secondly the links between the risen body and the resurrected body. They are one and the same body. We see in 20:20 John’s point that the risen Lord who has appeared to them is the same as the one with whom they wandered around Galilee as he preached and taught and healed the sick. But Thomas has troubles with that (as he had struggled earlier by trying to take a too literal an interpretation of the teachings of Jesus — 11:16; 14:5). His response to the invitation of Jesus is important. He could have simply acknowledged him as “My Lord” and in so doing would have made the link between the Jesus who stood before him and the Jesus of their time in Galilee. However he goes further when he says “and My God”. Now we have the statement that the “Word was God”, that the Word had actually become flesh, the message that we find in 1:1 at the opening of the Gospel. Jesus is not only risen, but he is the divine Son of God.

It is easy to feel for Thomas. The claims made by the women and the other disciples were clearly extraordinary, even if they remembered the predictions about the necessity of Jesus dying and his subsequent rising from the grave. Having seen the miracles worked by Jesus and heard his teachings, Thomas should not have been too surprised by the story of the resurrection. What we find is one more person who is unable to be open to the possibility of being surprised by God. What was demanded of Thomas was faith, for it is only by faith that we can enter into a life of intimacy with God in the Kingdom. There are more than enough things that come up in our lives that test our belief in the ongoing presence of God in the world and in our lives. God does not need to sort them out and fix them up to prove that he is God and is in control. He will not do that as he has already proved his love by sending his Son.

*Prayer* Loving Father, you know how weak we are and how easy it is for us to lose heart in the face of trials. Fill us with your Holy Spirit that we may find your presence in all the events of life.

## **Sunday December 20th**

## **Luke 1:39-45**

Here we see Mary hurrying along on her way to visit Elizabeth after the angel revealed to her that Elizabeth was pregnant with John the Baptist. When they come together the child in Elizabeth's womb "leaps" and through a divine intervention she comes to understand that Mary is to be the mother of the Lord. Importantly for Luke, these revelations come about through a heavenly intervention and are not the work of human logic. Mary is pronounced to be "blessed", not because of her own sanctity but because of the child in her womb. She is also pronounced as being "blessed" because of her faith (verse 42, which has two different Greek words for "blessed"). Elizabeth, filled with the Holy Spirit, utters first a blessing over Mary (echoing either that of the prophet Deborah over Jael – Judges 5:24 or that of Uzziah over Judith – Judith 13:18), a blessing that comes about because of the presence of the Lord in Mary's womb.

Here in this passage we have the clearest theological understanding of Mary and the biblical source of much of our Marian devotions. There has been a lot of nonsense over the years about devotion to Mary that has grown out of reactions going back to the Reformation. But here we have all of the essential biblical points that should shape our understanding of Mary. Luke begins by recognising that Mary's child is "the Lord" making her the "Mother of the Lord". She is a believer and her condition has come about as an act of God following on from her great faith and hope in God. Throughout the whole of the story she is presented as one who responds to the initiative of God. As a believer she is the model for all who will follow her Son as disciples. In presenting Mary in this way Luke is once more picking up the lowly handmaid theme that we saw back in 1:38, making her a disciple right from the beginning of his account (see also 8:19-21 and Acts 1:14). The key to understanding Mary is Jesus her Son and her call is exactly the same as the call that is given to each of us. We are to first of all be open to God calling us to serve him in the way that he wants us to serve and not just pursue the vocations that we would like God to have given us. Like Mary, we are to live in a way that says to God, "let it be done to me according to your will". And like Mary, we are to live with a compassion that takes us out to rejoice with others. While all this was happening, Mary set off to minister to Elizabeth. It is these things that make her a model for all who seek to be disciples.

### ***Prayer***

21

Hail Mary full of grace, the Lord is with you. Blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb, Jesus.

## **Sunday December 13th**

## **Luke 3:7-18**

In 3:3 Luke presented John the Baptist as a prophetic preacher who called for repentance and who invited the people to come forward for baptism. In this passage we have three elements of his message. He speaks of the coming "time of wrath" (vs 7-9) and invites the crowds to reform and to live in a way that prepares for the imminent judgement of God. This is what he meant when he spoke of repentance in verse 3. The difficult part of this message from the part of the listening Pharisees was that John is saying that the Kingdom is a kingdom for all who live by faith and is not just intended for the children of Abraham (Jews). One does not have to be of the Jewish race to enjoy salvation. This is followed by a section that reflects John's moral teaching (vs 10-14). What he preaches is a selfless concern for others. There is no mention of a messiah, and again, no call to live the same style of life that he himself is pursuing. They are to live in a caring relationship to others, living lives of honesty and equity. All of the fundamentals of life are to be shared with the poor and needy and whatever their occupation, they are to act justly (even tax collectors). The final section (vs 15-18) is in some ways the most important as it speaks of the coming messiah. John makes it clear that the One Who Is To Come is more powerful and greater than he is. This was to be an important statement in the early Church where there is evidence that some of the followers of John continued to hold him up as the Messiah. Luke makes it clear here that John himself knew his place in the divine scheme.

It is important here to note that again Luke makes it clear that life in the Kingdom is not about the believers locking themselves away and awaiting the return of the Son of Man. Discipleship is about how we live in the world and the demands of discipleship flow over into our everyday life. Even if their occupations were as tax collectors and soldiers, they were to carry these out in a manner which reflected the demands of the Kingdom. There was no such thing as a way of life or a lifestyle which excluded anyone from the gift of salvation. Nor did life in the Kingdom depend on the avoidance of sin, for such a state is impossible. What John makes clear to us is that being in union with Christ meant an ongoing life of repentance and the turning from sin. We have to do this now, tomorrow, the day after and each and every day of our lives and we have to seek ways of sharing this with others.

### ***Prayer***

14

Father, help us with your grace to acknowledge our sinfulness, to repent of our sins and to make others aware of your love for them by the way we carry out our daily existence.

## **Monday December 14th**

## **Matthew 21:23-27**

The chief priests and the elders of the people were the main opponents of Jesus and what they are trying to do in this section is to force Jesus into making a statement that will be blasphemous. The expression "these things" refers to his actions in cleansing the Temple, actions which would have infuriated the Jewish leadership. But this is only the first of what will be five such points of conflict. One of the problems these leaders were struggling with was the great popularity of the ministry of John. A Jewish writer of the time (Josephus) records the ministry of John and says that the crowds were so great and the preaching of John so successful that Herod "...became alarmed. Eloquence that had so great an effect on mankind might lead to some form of sedition, for it looked as if they would be guided by John in everything that they did". The Jewish leaders had to work hand in hand with the Romans to make sure that a peaceful atmosphere existed in Jerusalem so that worship could continue. John's movement must have created some problems for them. He was not bringing people to the Temple but creating a centre of spirituality that left Temple worship out. But he was also potentially a political threat as his message could easily become seditious and he had a large following. If the Romans thought this was happening, the special status of Judaism could suffer. They could not therefore accept that John's message came from heaven (or the Romans would be anxious) and the people would not be happy if they were told it was only human.

The Jewish leaders found themselves in a difficult situation because their concern was to preserve the status quo. They had difficulty with John because his message attracted people into a kind of religious response that was different to their traditional ways. They also had real problems with Jesus because he spoke of a relationship with God that was deeply personal and went far beyond law and worship. Because the status quo was threatened the chief priests and elders were ready to reject the whole message. They were not open to God's ways and so were threatened by John and by Jesus. The sinners and tax collectors were coming into the Kingdom because they had need of salvation. The chief priests already had it and were no longer searching. How easy it is to close ourselves off from the movements of God because we feel that we already have enough, that we need nothing more.

### *Prayer*

Creator God, you constantly seek to renew the earth through your acts of saving love. Keep us ever open to what it is you are calling us to do and ever willing to obeying your call.

## **Saturday December 19th**

## **Luke 1:5-25**

The time of Herod could refer to any time between 37BC and 4BC, when Herod died, but a more precise date can be established by the reference to the census by Quirinius. Zechariah was a member of the eighth division of priests who served in the Temple. Each division of priests served in the Temple twice a year for a period of one week at a time. Zechariah was not a high priest but a simple priest of the division of Abijah. His wife was of the line of Aaron, thus giving John priestly links on both sides of his family. Both are described as being "righteous" to make it clear that their childlessness is not a result of sin. Barrenness is used by Luke to link Elizabeth with Sarah, Rebecca, Rachael, the mother of Samson, Hanna, all of whom were mothers of famous leaders of the people of God. This is extended when we are presented with an "angel of the Lord" appearing, making it even clearer that what is taking place is a revelation from God, an intervention into human history for the purpose of salvation. The news is good, for Elizabeth will now bear a son and they are to name him John, a name that means "Yahweh has shown favour". His role will be to live out his name, making it clear that the favour of the Lord has been shown to the people of Israel in the birth of Jesus. He is to be consecrated to God (a Nazarite). He will be filled with the Holy Spirit (the same Spirit who was there at the beginning of creation) and his role will be to turn people towards the Lord. He is an instrument of God to convert Israel to a life of repentance.

It seems harsh that Zechariah should be punished for asking what seems to be a reasonable question: "How shall I know?". Part of the reason for this is theological. Luke does not want the news about what God is doing to be proclaimed by human lips. At least not just at that time. It is also a punitive miracle. Zechariah should have been open to God speaking to him and as a priest have been willing to accept even the most unlikely of his plans. Even though he was a righteous man and he and his wife were strict in their applications of the Law, he was unable to see how God could possibly be acting in this way. Even though an angel of God appeared to him in the Temple during worship he still struggled to see God's hand in what was happening. This is going to be the way of the Gospel. The unrighteous will reject Jesus but the righteous too will struggle when they are being pushed into new directions and demands.

### *Prayer*

Father, we pray that you open our eyes, so that strengthened by faith, we may see you at work in the world around us and take up your invitation to proclaim your Kingdom by our lives.

## **Friday December 18th**

## **Matthew 1:18-24**

It is important for Matthew to make it clear that Mary was a virgin and that Joseph, while the legal father of Jesus, was not the physical father and the birth of the Messiah came about in an unusual way. The role of the Holy Spirit is a link back to the story of creation where the Spirit was hovering over the waters of the deep (the Greek word used for the birth is genesis). The law said that if a man married a woman and found that she was not a virgin she was to be returned to her father's house (Deut 22:13-21) and stoned to death by the men of the city for she had brought shame to the house. Joseph wanted to avoid this process and to quietly divorce her. The angel's proclamation puts a different picture to him. By calling Joseph "Son of David", Matthew is establishing again the line of Jesus, making him Son of God and Son of David. The angel also makes it clear that the paternity of Jesus is to be traced back through the intervention of the Holy Spirit. Being engaged to Mary meant that they were already married. All that was required to complete the process was for Joseph to take her to his house. This is what the angel encouraged. Joseph was to give the child the name Jesus which in Hebrew is Yeshua, a shortened form of Joshua. This name means "Yahweh saves", neatly summing up his ministry. Matthew says it all so neatly: Joseph awoke from sleep, and did as the angel of the Lord commanded him...

The name Jesus is important in the story of salvation. The great religious movements of the time placed an enormous emphasis on the observance of the Law as the means of salvation. They looked to political and military solutions to the problem of their occupation by Roman soldiers. They went off into the desert and set up new communities of very strict observance hoping to encourage God to act. But God sent his Son with the name: God saves. There is the summary of the Gospel message. It is God who offers salvation. It is God who will set free; God saves; God is the source of life, of hope, of healing, of forgiveness, of love; God is the way for communities to come together in a new way. God, in all the Gospels, is the one who loves his people and wants to bring them into his Kingdom. It is all about God and this is the central theme of these opening chapters of Matthew. Discipleship, then, is about stepping back and allowing God more of a say in how we live and what we do. Life in the Church is all about listening to and obeying God's will.

### ***Prayer***

Gracious and loving God, fill us with your graces that we may see your hand at work in all that happens to us and serve you faithfully with lives of love.

## **Tuesday December 15th**

## **Matthew 21:28-32**

This is one of three parables that speak of Israel's refusal to accept Jesus as the Christ. He also notes that John the Baptist, the one sent by God to announce his coming, was also rejected. The word repent is used twice, in verse 29 and verse 32, and it provides a key to interpreting the message of Jesus. Many people, including the tax collectors and sinners, listened to John and accepted his word. They repented of their sins and prepared for life in the Kingdom. The Pharisees, on the other hand, who were the spiritual leaders of the people, refused to listen to his message. For this reason they were to be refused entry into the Kingdom. This is another one of the reversals of the common perception that we find elsewhere in the Gospel. Those whom the world may consider to be first and most important (the Pharisees) may find themselves last and least important in the Kingdom. There is now a new and different way of measuring human beings and human life and behaviour. The Pharisees say that they love and obey God but their actions show that this is true in word but is not backed up by their deeds. Earlier, Jesus noted that just because a person says to him "Lord, Lord" does not mean that they will enter into the Kingdom of God (7:21ff). It is doing the will of the Heavenly Father that guarantees salvation, and the will of the Father is that Jesus is his Messiah.

This "attack" by Jesus must have caught the Pharisees off guard. They were the ones who thought of themselves as the keepers of the Law. They prided themselves on knowing the commands of the Torah and were the ones to whom the task of interpreting the Law had been given. Yet according to Jesus they were being excluded from the Kingdom. This was because they said they wanted to do God's will but would not listen to the One sent by God. But look who finds their way into the Kingdom: the tax collectors and prostitutes. These were sinners who were considered to be unclean, men and women who broke the commandments of God. Yet here they were marching into the Kingdom. Why? The key is to be found in the word "repent". This means not just a confession of sin but a change of life. Sinners, even of the worst kind (as this is how the harlots and tax collectors would have been understood), have a chance of finding God. Their sins do not keep him at a distance. All that is required is that they commit themselves to a struggle to change.

### ***Prayer***

Father, through the gift of your Spirit within us, help us to be faithful to our callings and to make sure that our actions reflect our faith, so that we worship you in word and by our actions.

**Wednesday December 16th**

**Luke 7:19-23**

*Fr Robert Newton*

John ended up being in prison because, with his usual offensive audacity, he has spoken the truth to the powerful. Yes, John has told Herod that it was wrong for him to commit adultery. It was wrong for him to steal his brother's wife and then sleep with her. Such judgement has got John in deep trouble, and today he languishes in a prison cell awaiting his death. And while he sits there, he begins to hear all the things that Jesus is doing. And he has lots of time to think. Yes, John has lots of time to begin to realize that Jesus is not acting the way the Messiah — according to John — should act. Rather than blazing with the fire of indignation, Jesus seems to be telling stories and playing with children. Rather than railing against the sins of the world, Jesus is eating with tax collectors and prostitutes and poor people. Rather than tossing people into the blistering cauldron of hell, he is listening to them, forgiving them, and changing them from the inside out. What John expected in a Messiah was a rottweiler, growling and attacking the sinners of the world. But what he got was a puppy, changing hearts with warmth and affection. No wonder John has started asking the question and ended up sending messengers to Jesus, "Is this the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?".

It is clear that in his preaching and teaching, Jesus combined John's prophetic criticism with his own prophetic enabling. He railed at the legalistic religious authorities of his day, calling them "hypocrites" and "broods of vipers". He gently criticized Martha for her anxious busyness and the woman at the well for her promiscuous lifestyle. But he constantly forgave the ones he criticized and then energized them with visions of new chances, new beginnings, new opportunities for abundant living. I believe that Jesus took the prophetic vocation of John, Elijah and the Old Testament prophets and carried it one step further. He combined prophetic criticizing and prophetic energizing by embodying them both. Through *prophetic actualizing*, Jesus became the incarnation of the dream, the embodiment of the new social order, the one who walked the walk and lived the vision. And, brothers and sisters, as the Body of Christ, we are called to do the same. To not only talk the talk of Christ's vision but walk the walk and model his promise of new beginnings, new opportunities and abundant living. That others may see in our lives what wonderful opportunities Christ offers to all.

**Prayer** Heavenly Father, through the example of your Son may we learn to speak out in witness to the evils of our day and yet forgive our neighbours as ourselves.

**Thursday December 17th**

**Matthew 1:1-17**

The first two chapters of Matthew's Gospel are about the birth and infancy of Jesus. They explain Jesus in a very Hebrew manner, by using a genealogy that links him back through Abraham and David. Joseph is shown to be his legal guardian but not his physical father. In chapter 2 we will see Matthew making some important geographical notes. He is born in Bethlehem and is visited by the Magi from the east who travel first to Jerusalem but then go on to Bethlehem as the child is not born in the City of God. The Holy Family flee to Egypt but then eventually return to settle down in Nazareth. These are all important Jewish notes and it is meant to locate Jesus in the middle of the history of Israel. Joseph is there as a pointer. He provides Jesus with a paternity going back to David, but equally important is his role as a man of faith who trusts in God and who acts on what God says to him. The genealogy of Matthew locates Jesus as a Son of David (and Abraham) as the messiah was expected to be. The genealogy is also broken up into fourteen generations making his birth as coming at "the right time". What is interesting in the genealogy is the inclusion of five very interesting women: Tamar who disguised herself as a prostitute, Rahab the prostitute from Jericho, Ruth the Moabite woman and Bathsheba the wife of Uriah who became the wife of David after Uriah's murder by the king. Then there was Mary. It is a kind of warning that in the Gospel to follow there is going to be a kind of tension between tradition and the new works of God. Be prepared to be shocked and challenged!

One of the forgotten characters of the Christmas story is Joseph, yet in the story of Christmas he has an important role as a model of discipleship. He was asked to accept the most outrageous demands from God. To take the pregnant Mary as his wife, knowing that the child she bears is not his. Then he was to pack up in the dead of night and flee to Egypt and when the time was right to come back again believing that all would be well. Then he fades from history. He is clearly presented as someone who was open to being used as an instrument of God's saving works. It must have demanded enormous changes in his thinking and in his expectations, but his faith was such that he was prepared to allow God to move him along in this direction. His life was God's, for God to do with him whatever God so wished, and that is the call of discipleship.

**Prayer** Almighty God, we thank you for the witness of your servant Joseph. Help us to put aside our own wills and to be open to what it is you want us to be doing, whatever the cost.