

Tuesday June 30th

Matthew 8:23-27

There was a short break in Matthew's story (8:19-22) and now he gets back onto his main theme. Those who continue to follow Jesus have made their decisions about the challenges offered and are presumably prepared to leave all they have to follow Jesus and now are ready for the next challenge. Matthew brings this point out by use of the word "follow" in verse 23. Jesus took the initiative, moved on and the disciples followed after him. The word Matthew uses for the storm is the Greek word for earthquake and in the minds of Matthew's Jewish community would have brought to mind thoughts of what would happen at the end of the world (Ezek 38:19). Matthew has taken the words of Mark 4:38 and turned them from a statement of fear into a prayer. He gives Jesus the title "Lord" and in using the word "save" opens up the actions of Jesus to events and actions beyond merely surviving the storm. In Mark Jesus rebukes the disciples for having no faith, whereas Matthew softens the reply of Jesus so that he acknowledges that they have some faith but that their faith is less than perfect. They have a long way to go. Jesus then does what Psalm 107:29 attributes to God: "He made the storm be still, and the waves of the sea were hushed". It is no wonder that when all is still, they raise the question that goes throughout the Gospel and which all readers of the Gospel must eventually answer: "What kind of man is this?".

This boat has been seen as a picture of the Church down through history. It is tossed around on the storms of the world in which it is called to preach the Gospel. It is not just the universal Church that is signified, but each and every believer. In the boat (Church) Jesus seems to be asleep, indifferent to what is happening to the vessel and the fear and anxiety that is aroused in the hearts of the disciples. But that is not what Matthew is conveying. The sleep of Jesus is a sleep of great faith and hope. He is comfortable amidst the wind and the waves because he has complete confidence in God his Father and is content to rely on his divine love to bring him safely to the other side of the lake. That is why he gently rebukes the disciples. They have faith, but they do not use it. How could they become anxious about perishing in the storm when Jesus is there in the boat with them. Our Church today is no different. It will not perish at the hands of history and its survival is not dependant on the strength of her disciples. It is all a matter of our ability to believe.

Prayer

Loving Father, as the storms of life rage around us, let us never feel that we are alone, but remind us of your presence there in the midst of those storms, leading us to safety.



BIBLE STUDIES

JUNE 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

Monday June 29th

St Peter

Matthew 16:13-19

This is the Feast of St Peter the Apostle and Martyr. In Matthew's Gospel the profession of Peter marks a turning point as it enables Jesus to go on and explain the kind of messiah he is and to set out the purpose of his mission. The question he asks brings out the expectations of the world in which he lives. People see him as a prophet come back from the dead and so a messiah who would lead the people of Israel back into a new Davidic kingdom. Jesus then challenges Peter to make his commitment and to state clearly what were his expectations of Jesus. Professing him as the Christ is an accepting of him as the Messiah, the long awaited gift of God who would lead the people to freedom. Having come to this point, Jesus can now prepare them for what lies ahead for him and for them. When Jesus is called "Son of the Living God" it ties the work of the Messiah into the work of the God who lives. The Living God is the God of the Exodus, for he revealed his name to Moses as the God "who is, who was and who is to come". That is a name which means the same as "the God who forever lives", or Yahweh.

The rock on which Jesus will build his Church is not Peter. The rock is the profession of faith that Peter makes. The Church is built on Jesus the Messiah, the promised one of God. The Christian community gains its life, its hope, its strength and its mission from its belief that God sent his only Son Jesus to become man so that we might be saved. The lives of all believers is forever changed by this reality. The world has a Messiah. We are a people who have been healed and saved and who have the chance of living in the Kingdom of God with all of its blessings. This is why we are people of great hope. We fear nothing, not because we are brave or powerful, but because Jesus is the Messiah. The next part of the reading goes on to proclaim that nothing can stand against this reality. The gates of hell cannot stand when faced with the onslaught of the Kingdom. It is not that the faithful can withstand attacks by the Evil One. The promise is that if believers build their lives on the Rock which is Christ, then they will be able to overcome evil in the world. Overcoming may not mean wiping out. It may mean making evil unable to destroy, to incarcerate or to tie up in chains. It is a wonderfully powerful promise, but it depends on faith.

Prayer

Loving Father, you revealed yourself as the God who is ever present in your creation and so as the power in our lives in whom we can place our trust. We ask that we make Christ Jesus your Son the rock who is the anchor and foundation of our lives.

Sunday June 28th

Mark 5:21-43

Fr Robert Newton

This Gospel Reading from Mark is two stories entwined together. Separately, they are powerful stories but when they are combined their force is greatly increased. Here, in one episode, we have Jesus, the healer, raising a little girl from the dead and curing a woman who has suffered for twelve years from her affliction. While these two healings are wondrous in their power it is the status of the ones who are healed that gives the story its power. It is difficult for us today to understand the social structures of Jesus' time. Women and children on the whole did not fare very well anywhere. The understanding of the broader culture was that men, slave owners, and adults were the powerful while women, slaves, and children were to be used. Combine that with the current Jewish obsession with ritual cleanliness and it was not a good time to be a woman. It was really not a good time to be a girl. Into this very lopsided cultural situation strides Jesus. In these two stories he heals a woman who has a continual menstrual flow and raises a dead girl to life.

In this double story, Jesus leads us to understand that there is no one who is not worthy of the love and grace of God. Many young people wear the WWJD bracelets to remind themselves that they need to ask "What would Jesus do?" in each situation of life. Perhaps we should wear HWJJ bracelets to remind us that another question is, "How would Jesus judge?" the value of the people we see and meet? We know that there is no one whom Jesus would not judge as worthy of the grace and love of God; that there is no one whom Jesus would not judge as worthy of justice; that there is no one whom Jesus would not judge worthy of having enough to eat, having clothes to wear, a place to live, and the respect of their neighbours. In spite of what people may say about someone, no matter how vile they seem, God declares that they are God's own beloved child. No one is seen as being beyond redemption. No one is seen as not worth the time or resources it might take to reach out to them and touch them with God's love. If these twin stories are not enough to bring us to that realisation, then Jesus will offer us time and time again the example of his eating with tax collectors, prostitutes, and known sinners. We will see him reach out and touch a leper. We will see him asking for a drink from a woman of Samaria. No one in Jesus' eyes is beyond the love of God.

Prayer

Almighty God, lover of your creation who gave your only Son to the world, enable us to see that we are all equal in your sight and you call us to reach out and bring to your world that love that knows no boundaries.

Monday June 1st

Mark 12:1-12

This parable continues as a part of the response of Jesus to the questions raised by the Jewish leaders. Mark was writing to a community of Christians after the crucifixion and they would have understood the vineyard as being Israel, the tenants the Jewish authorities, the servants the Old Testament prophets and the Son and heir being Jesus. It clearly mirrors life in Palestine at that time where many estates were owned by foreign landlords and rebellious tenants were a constant problem. Other literature gives examples of revolts by the tenants and accounts of violence visited upon the representatives of the owners. The parable opens with language that comes from Isaiah 5:1ff where the vineyard represents Israel. Usually the tenant farmers would pay their expenses and send to the owner a quarter to a half of the produce. As many of the owners were foreigners it was not uncommon for those sent to collect the rent to be attacked. The fact that the owner (God) continues to send his deputies even though they are greeted with violence is meant to highlight the goodness of God and the evil of Israel's leaders. The expectation that the tenants would respect the Son brings out the belief that God, even when faced with brutal rejection, continued to look for great things and a sense of repentance from his people Israel. Their killing of the Son is an irrational act because it could not possibly bring about the peace they seek especially as they treated him with the ultimate form of contempt in throwing him out of the garden and leaving him unburied.

The scary thing about this reading is the realization that it is quite possible to go along thinking that you are doing the will of God and being a faithful son or daughter but are really killing the work of God in the world. It is much easier to think of the Jewish leaders as being evil men who live hypocritical lives and are full of their own self-importance. Most of them were not. Most were deeply spiritual men, steeped in the Law and the traditions of their ancestors who were dedicated to their faith. Their problem was that they were closed to the possibility that God was working in other areas than the ones with which they were so comfortable. They had forgotten the broader picture of the salvation of all peoples and were concentrating on their own internal petty problems. It is the old problem that we have seen so often of religion stifling faith and mission.

Prayer

Loving God, help us with the power of your Holy Spirit so that we may be open to all of your movement in our lives and able to respond and follow you wherever you want us to go.

Tuesday June 2nd

Mark 12:13-17

It is hard to find the proper setting for this story as it is inserted into the Gospel without introduction or warning. We are warned in the opening verse that this is meant as a trap for Jesus. Tribute payments were imposed by the Romans in Judea in 6AD. For the Zealots this was an affront to God who was the only one they saw as having dominion over them and so it was presented as a religious issue rather than as an economic problem. The Pharisees did not like the humiliation the tax brought with it and the Herodians accepted it, at least in principle. The question is worded in an extremely cunning way and was meant to catch Jesus on the horns of a dilemma. If he supported the unpopular tax he would alienate many people and if he opposed it he would come under the scrutiny of Rome. The inscription on the denarius read: "Tiberius, Caesar, son of the divine Augustus", and in Syria it added "the majestic son of God". Jesus' reply was based on the principle that what belongs to another person should be returned without asking about how it had been obtained. Caesar owned the coin (it was his name on it) and so it was reasonable that it was returned to him. The problem was whether or not using the coin was the same as acknowledging Caesar as king.

There is much in Jesus' answer which flows over into our daily life. He is telling us that the world has its limits. Not everything that is said and done in the world is good and acceptable. Just because it is expected of us does not mean that we have to fulfil those expectations. Giving to God will inevitably mean that we are in opposition to what is being demanded by the world and its decision makers and image makers. What belongs to the world should be given to the world. As Christians we need to take our part and to shoulder our responsibilities, but there are limits, and these limits are set down by God in his Law and especially through the life and teachings of his Son Jesus. Everything belongs to God and he has a right to have a say in how it is to be used, and everything we have should in one way or another be put to use for the work of the Kingdom. What is important in this is that for Jesus the world is not the enemy, that there is no distinction between the Kingdom and the world. We live in both and our call is to extend the Kingdom throughout the whole of the world. The hidden warning is to not shape the Kingdom according to the world.

Prayer

Heavenly Father, we thank you for all that you have given to us, and ask that we are so strengthened by your graces that we can share them with others, and at the same time use them so that your name can be praised.

Saturday June 27th

Matthew 8:5-17

Matthew has just shown the power of the Teaching of Jesus (a new Moses) and now moves on to show that he is equally powerful in Deed. These miracles are important and follow a similar kind of outline. There is a healing of a leper, a paralyzed servant of a Roman soldier and Peter's mother-in-law. In two of these Jesus makes contact with the sick person and each story speaks of the faith of the sick person or of their friends and family. They are not spectacular cures, the point of having them here is to raise questions about the identity of Jesus: "Who is this man?". Matthew is also concerned about identifying the source of Jesus' power and these miracles point the reader to the Father in heaven. There were many similar stories in the Rabbinic writings and a couple that sound very similar to the miracles of Jesus in these sections. There is a major difference. In the Jewish writings the Rabbi heals because God is a merciful God and listens to the prayers of his beloved disciple. What Matthew presents is Jesus healing because of his own power. Jesus is more than just a mediator of the power of God, he is the divine Son of God in his own right. Further, in our text today, we see Jesus setting out the basis on which non-Jews could find their way into the Kingdom of God. It is not by observance of laws and circumcision, but through faith in Jesus Christ as the Son of God. Equally important is the link Matthew makes with Isaiah's Suffering Servant (Isa 53:4) which is his way of joining the ministry of Jesus with his death on the cross. As the Suffering Servant of God, he "took our sicknesses away and carried our diseases".

This is a wonderful story because it is such a shock. Here we have a Gentile and one of great standing in the community who is prepared to acknowledge the divinity and power of Jesus. He clearly had access to all of the medical powers of the time and yet chose to come to Jesus. At the basis of his decision was his faith and that is why Matthew makes it clear that "nowhere in Israel have I found faith like this". Again, here at the start of the Gospel, we have the clear message that discipleship means that the individual must have complete and consistent confidence in Christ. He is not an option that can be used when it is convenient and then put on the shelf to gather dust while we opt for something else in which to put our trust for a time. Christ heals and sets free all who dare to believe in him.

Prayer

Lord God, you sent your Son Jesus to set us free from all that is darkness in our lives. Strengthen us in our discipleship that we may make him the foundation of all that we do.

Friday June 26th

Matthew 8:1-4

Jesus comes down from the mountain and his teaching of the Sermon comes to an end. Lepers were not just physically ill but in the East were seen as people who were unclean and so separated from others in the community. They were outcasts. Leviticus 13:45ff demands that they be kept outside the camp. The Law could not cure. It could only limit his ability to transfer the disease to others and expected sacrifices to be offered if the leper was cured. This man comes to Jesus and kneels down before him in an act of faith and he is cured. Jesus is able to take the Law a step further. The story is placed here in Matthew because he has Jesus urging the man to carry out the demands of the Law by offering sacrifice. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus was saying that he was not abolishing the Law but fulfilling it. Note that Jesus heals by his command but he also touches the leper, an action that should make him unclean, but because he is the Lord, he has an authority and a presence above the Law. All of the Law now needs to be reinterpreted in the light of Jesus.

It is hard to appreciate the life of a leper. Many of those who were classed as lepers according to the Law, in fact, had other diseases. A whole range of skin lesions could be classed as leprosy and lead to their being cast out. They had to live outside the city and depended on the charity of the townsfolk to survive. They could not even be in contact with members of their own family or they too would become unclean. Imagine the joy of this person when Jesus came before him and did not flee. Not only that, he spoke with him, reached out his hand and touched him, and then joy of joys, he cured him. One of the things that Jesus is saying by this miracle and the next one is that the words spoken on the mountain only make sense when they lead to love down in the valley! It is no good Christians locking themselves away in holy places and speaking of the wonders of the Gospel if it does not lead them to action among the poor and needy. The leper represents not only sick people, but all people who have needs of any kind. On the other side, there are times when we too may feel like the leper. We are aware of our weaknesses and failings, our sins and limitations, and wonder where we go from here. The man's faith and his willingness to come and express his need to Jesus were the qualities that led to his cure and new life.

Prayer Merciful God, you are a loving Father and you desire that people everywhere know the blessings of your Kingdom. Help us to be ever aware of your presence in our lives and to make use of the many gifts you offer us in your Church.

Wednesday June 3rd

Mark 12:18-27

The early Church had to speak about both of the positions presented here. The Pharisees had detailed presentations on what the resurrection would be like and the Sadducees rejected the resurrection altogether. The Sadducees were the priestly group and were considered as the aristocracy within Judaism. They only accepted the authority of the Law of Moses (the first five books of the Law). For them the resurrection was not scriptural as it did not appear until Isaiah 26:19. The Levirate marriage (see Deut 25:5ff) which is the situation under discussion in the debate with Jesus was designed to protect a man's property. The Pharisees had an elaborate range of beliefs about what the resurrection was like: angels did not drink or eat, they did not marry and people became angels after they rose from the dead. In this way Jesus' answer is not that much different to many other answers of the time. His answer is different in two respects from his contemporaries. He begins by asserting the right of God to act beyond human expectations. God can do something radically new. In replying to the Sadducees he uses Scripture to explain Scripture. God pledged himself to be the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. If these men are dead and if there is no resurrection it is absurd to claim that God is their God. They must be living or his pledge to be their God is without any meaning. Death does not annul this commitment.

God's powers are beyond our wildest expectations and the real mistake of both of those groups was to try and tie God into what made sense to them and to their interpretations of Scripture. God is always greater. Even death, which seems so final and all-powerful, is unable to contain the actions of God. This is why Jesus in this reading is calling his followers to be ready to stretch out beyond their own sense of their limitations, and what they may see as their inability to perform, and trust in God to make his power available to them. The key thing is the call to move forward in faith. Rising from the dead seems to be an impossible hope. The Pharisees tried to make sense of it in terms of what would be good for them. The Sadducees rejected it because it did not fit in with the way they understood Scripture. Both sought to tie God into human ways of thinking and understanding and so were condemned by Jesus. God is more than we can ever hope or devise and through his power we can do great things.

Prayer Lord God, never let our uncertainties and insecurities limit what we think we can do for the life of the Kingdom in our world. Help us to move forward in faith, confident of your strength.

Thursday June 4th

Mark 12:28-34

Palestinian piety delighted in distinguishing between what they considered to be the weightier and lighter matters among the 613 individual statutes. These were worked out according to whether they were commandments or prohibitions and in terms of the satisfaction that would be demanded if the commandments were infringed. At the base of this question is an understanding that God's blessing could somehow be obtained through human effort. The reply of Jesus goes deeper than the concept of there being 613 statutes, for he addresses the underlying purpose of the Law. This is a very Jewish question, for Hillel the Elder was asked by a Gentile to sum up the law in a single sentence. He said "what you yourself hate, do not do to your neighbour: this is the whole Law, the rest is commentary". The reply of Jesus turns this around and makes it into a positive command. Hillel told people to avoid doing harmful things while Jesus commanded the disciples to act positively in a loving way. The opening words of Jesus' reply comes from a daily prayer and confession of faith called the *Shema* (Deut 6:4).

This is a wonderful story which is rich in messages. It tells us that we can never reach the stage where we can say we are "fulfilling" the commitments we made at our baptism. We are always called to be doing more, to be giving more and to be loving more. Our faith lives tomorrow should be an advancement on how we are living out our faith today. How we live in the Church should be always growing and always expanding as God is forever calling us forward in our relationship with him. But there is another important message as well. This is made clear to us when we are told that we need to love "with all our heart, with all our understanding and with all our strength". Our love of God cannot be limited to one small part of our lives. Our lives of faith have to involve all that we do. We have to find ways of allowing God to permeate all our activities as human beings. If an activity has an impact on our lives then there is a need for an input from God. Our Christian responsibilities cannot be met by an hour of worship on Sunday. It is through daily prayer, through a daily listening to God in the Scriptures, that we allow him to have an impact on what we do. That is the only way that we can say that we are truly "loving". We need to remember that Christianity is a "doing" religion which involves our daily "doing" to God and "doing" for others.

Prayer

Loving Father, we are sorry for the times when we have served you half-heartedly and served you with only a part of our lives and our energies. Help us to love you fully and generously.

Thursday June 25th

Matthew 7:21-29

The theme of bearing fruit continues as does the comparison between the demands of discipleship in the Kingdom of God and the righteousness of the Pharisees. Jesus presents himself as the Messiah who will stand as Judge on the last day. The standard that he will use in assessing those who stand before him is "doing the will of my Father in heaven". This is seen as being far more important than even performing great miracles and signs. Jesus then preaches his parable which picks up images of building processes of the time. The land was uneven and most towns were on hills. Before building, a builder would need to break rock and raise the level of the ground so that the walls could be placed on an even surface of rock. Shonky builders existed at the time who would simply fill in the low areas with soil and build the walls on top of this filling. When it did rain this soil would be washed away and the whole building would then be made unstable. A house needed a rocky foundation all the way around. Someone hearing the word of God but refusing to make it the guiding light of their lives was like the builder of the unstable house. The wind and the rain and the floods that shook the house represent all the trials and temptations that threaten the life of a disciple.

Jesus is presented here as being the teacher and he is setting down a clear path for those who seek to be disciples. Contrary to the thinking of many in the world, belief is not a matter of what the individual thinks and feels is the truth. For there is a divine content that has been set down by Jesus. He has an expectation that disciples will live in a particular way. It is never a matter of deciding what is possible or acceptable and what is too hard or too embarrassing. Jesus set down a clear programme for living. And what is more it is simple. It is different from the Laws of the Old Testament but it is nevertheless a clear presentation of what is expected. The parable tells disciples to "go out and build your lives" on the rocks which are the teachings of Jesus. That is a proactive step demanding that disciples do what they need to do in their lives to bring the Gospel alive. It requires taking clear positive steps in this direction. The consequences are that if life is built on the teachings of the Gospel then the "storms" and "cares" of the world may shake the believer but will never destroy them.

Prayer

Loving Father, your Son Jesus came among us so that our lives would know your healing and protecting love. Fill us with the gift of your Spirit so that we can move more enthusiastically towards a faithful living out of the Gospel law.

Wednesday June 24th *St John the Baptist* **Luke 1:57-66**

With the birth of John we come to the fulfilment of the promises of God. In it Luke continues the parallels between the birth of Jesus and that of John. John points forward to the coming of the Messiah in the form of the Christ child. The story is told in a way that is similar to that of the birth of Esau and Jacob (Gen 25:25-26). According to the Law circumcision took place on the eighth day after the birth of the child. According to the custom they wanted to name the boy after his father. To the Jewish audience this is important. Throughout history we see that significant events began with the giving of a name. God revealed his name as Yahweh (YHWH) at the beginning of the Exodus. He changed Abraham's name from Abram, Jacob's name to Israel, and so on. When we come to the New Testament we see something important in the names. Zacharias means "God remembers his covenant". Elizabeth means "God is the truly faithful one". John means "God is merciful" and of course the name Jesus means "God saves". Thus in the way Luke sets out his opening he provides us with his theology: God is faithful and so we can rely on the promises he made to Israel of old. He is merciful and seeks to bring salvation to all peoples.

Both the Gospels of Matthew and Luke go to great lengths to show that what is happening is happening because God said it would. He had promised that he would send a Saviour to bring salvation to the world. He shows his concern for his children and his determination that they would have an opportunity to choose life and to be freed from all those things which can crush them. In the Gospel the Baptist is important because he points outward to Jesus and in doing so highlights the central role of discipleship. Disciples are called to make Christ known. John had two ways of doing this. The first was through the way he lived. He went off into the desert, lived on locusts and honey and was truly a wild man. It made people stop and think. The second was his life that gave credibility to his words. No one would have listened to someone who was nothing more than another flamboyant preacher. That is the model his Feast offers. We have no way of being able to convince the world of the power of the Gospel and of the great gifts of the Kingdom if they cannot see it lived out in the way we live. Our words are a waste unless they can see the content of our faith at work in what we do and say.

Prayer Ever faithful God, we thank you for your faithfulness and that you make your love for us known in our lives. Help us to respond faithfully by putting into action all that we profess.

Friday June 5th **Mark 12:35-37**

Jesus is presented here in his role as teacher. The expectation of the people was that the Messiah would return and re-establish the two Kingdoms. The nation would be delivered from her enemies and all of this would be achieved through a messiah in the line of David. This grew out of the promise given by God in 2 Samuel 7:11-16 and the hope of a Davidic messiah has a long tradition in the prophets. Jesus takes up the question in the sense "What do the scribes mean when they say that the Messiah is the Son of David?", with the challenge: How can he be human and at the same time divine? Mark then goes on to the initial statement by David. He is presented as a prophet and affirms that the prophecy is about a coming messiah and not about himself. Importantly, Jesus quotes the Greek text and not the Hebrew text because in the Greek text the one to whom David is referring is much greater than he is. This makes Jesus the one who fulfils the prophecy made by David. Jesus is the Son of David, but more importantly he is David's "Lord". But as Lord he has come not to extend the work begun by David but to proclaim a very different Kingdom, the Kingdom of God. The Scribes were anticipating a political and nationalistic restoration and Jesus is proclaiming that this is not the mind of God.

One part of the problem for the Scribes and the leaders of the Jews was their attempts to understand the demands of God in parcels that could be easily understood. The messiah would be someone in David's line. This meant that God was tied to that lineage and process. Once they started down that line they were also tied to the idea that he would be a particular kind of messiah doing a particular kind of work or activity. Jesus rejects that. It then becomes a question of faith: Can I believe in Jesus as Messiah when things in my life do not go the way I want/expect/feel I need them to go? There is much in our lives of faith that may disturb us, or annoy us, or challenge us, especially as we live it out within a sinful Church community. We are invited to look beyond our own expectations of ourselves, others and God and allow the possibility that God is working out our deliverance in his own way. That should take an enormous concern and pressure from our shoulders as it means that what we need to do is to concentrate on our lives with God in Christ and leave the details to him.

Prayer Almighty God, David was your faithful servant who did great things through his relationship with you. Unite us in Christ so that we remain at Peace as your will for us unfolds in our lives.

Saturday June 6th

Mark 12:38-44

Scribes were distinguished by their linen robes, a long white mantle reaching to the feet and provided with a long fringe. White linen clothes were regarded as a mark of distinction and men of high position (Priests, Levites and Scribes) walked around in white and left the bright coloured clothes to the ordinary person. Scribes in particular were given great respect because they were seen as speaking as persons holding sovereign authority. When they walked through the market people would stand and only workmen working on their projects were exempt. These Scribes did not receive any payment for their work as it was thought inappropriate for them to benefit from the Word of God. They survived by the generosity of the community and it was considered to be a highly meritorious act for people to help support a Scribe. This clearly opened itself up to abuse and they did indeed "devour the property of widows". The core problem here is that they moved their service of God to the periphery while they focused on raising the money they thought they needed to sustain the type of life they wanted to live. Verses 41-44 is a story that Mark has included here to act as a kind of commentary on this section.

This is the last of the teaching section of Jesus. From here he goes into his final sermons and then to his Passion and death. The focus is on what is important in a person's life. The Scribes were holy men but their problem was that they allowed their concerns about their daily life to push their spirituality to the background. They were worried about how they would eat, where they would live and what they needed to do to make sure that the money came in. This led to excesses. What they should have done was to get on with their lives of faith believing that God would care for them. They lacked the ability to truly trust in God's benevolent care and compassion. The end result was that their lives were primarily focused on their needs and God was moved to the periphery. Even when they were carrying out their religious practices or activities, they did so with an eye to attracting the support of the people. It was not so much a sin of pride as much as it was a problem of faith. If they had concentrated on their lives with God the other areas of their lives would be blessed. With God at the centre, all of their human activities would feel the effects of his grace.

Prayer

Merciful Lord, we come before you as people who are in need of your love. Help us to live out our lives of faith with a strong sense of confidence and trust that, as we strengthen our union with you, all that we do may fill us with a sense of Peace.

Tuesday June 23rd

Matthew 7:6-14

For the Jews "swine" and "dogs" were terms that were used to symbolize the Gentiles and foreigners. "Pearls" were symbols of religious truth. Not giving dogs what is holy refers to the meat that was sacrificed in the Temple. The interpretation is difficult and it probably stood as an independent saying in a different context. In the East dogs were seen as the scavengers that wandered around the towns eating refuse and unclean things. They were happy with whatever they could pick up in the streets. Pigs were simply disgusting and not only is it a waste giving them good and precious things, such objects would be abused by them if they could get hold of them. It possibly reflects the situation of the Jewish-Christian Church to which Matthew was preaching and the whole question of the place of Gentiles in the faith community. If we go down to verse 13 we see that Jesus is setting out the possibility of there being a "way" to salvation. The way is set out by Jesus throughout the whole of the Sermon. But by putting it in here he links us back to the theme of his disciples needing to choose between options. They are to love (without any restrictions) and to pray constantly, thus acknowledging God as their Lord and Master in all that happens in their lives.

This is a notoriously difficult passage to interpret. If we look at it in its setting in the Gospel it could be that the real concern of Jesus was that disciples live out their faith. Casting pearls before swine could mean that they should not be calling themselves Christians but living in a way that is contrary to the Gospel. If they do this then they will find lots of people around (dogs and swine) who will rejoice in the chance to tear the Church to pieces. The world loves to attack with contempt what it sees as hypocritical. If we claim to be followers of Christ and fail in our call to love, to welcome, to be peacemakers and healers; if we also fail to have communities where these gifts are obvious, then the whole of the Church suffers. When we go to Church on Sunday and come out and gossip or ignore someone with whom we have fallen out, or neglect the needy in our community, then we are casting our pearls (gifts of faith) before the swine (those who are opposed to the Gospel). This makes it a very tough and demanding Gospel and reminds all of us as baptized believers of our very real responsibility to take seriously the demands of Christ in the Gospel.

Prayer

Loving Father, we thank you for the gift of faith given to us through your love. Strengthen us through your Word and Sacraments that we may faithfully live out all that we profess.

Monday June 22nd

Matthew 7:1-6

We continue with our reflections on the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus says that disciples are not to judge others and what he has in mind is not just the legal judgement, but the assessment of people in general. There is a Rabbinic saying that warns "in the pot in which they cooked others they will be cooked themselves". This leads into the next statement that presumes that all people have "planks" in their eyes and the focus of their attention should be on the removal of the planks rather than worrying about the "specks" in the eyes of others. The focus of discipleship should be on the personal pursuit of perfection rather than the presumption of perfection in self. Again, this saying is found in various forms in the writings of the Rabbis. The holy things given to dogs refers to the meat that is offered in sacrifice in the Temple. Not only is it inappropriate but the person giving the food to the animals runs the very real risk of being torn apart by the starving dogs. This saying was used later on in the Church to keep the unbaptized from receiving Communion and similar sayings were used by the Rabbinic writers to keep the Law from Gentiles.

Verse six is a provocative statement in whatever way we view it. If we take the meat and the pearls to be the Good News of the Kingdom of God, the pearls of our faith and the offerings of our religion, and hold them up for ridicule before the unbelieving world, then we will be "torn apart". We see this in much of the modern attitude towards the Church. Far too many Christians live comfortable and lukewarm Gospel lives. We go to Church when it is convenient, water down the moral and ethical demands of the Gospel, dispute and fight among ourselves, spend more time worrying about the politics and internal workings of the Church and not enough time reaching out to the poor and needy in the world around us and then have the audacity to try and tell the world that they need the Gospel of Jesus Christ. They look at the way we live out the teachings of Jesus (they are supposed to be our pearls and meat) and they ridicule us and are hostile towards us. When we are not faithful we treat the precious gift of faith with contempt. Jesus says that if we are not hot (or cold) then he will vomit us out of his mouth! (Revelation 3:16). Faith is a gift and we have a serious obligation, taken up at our baptism and confirmation, and renewed each year at Easter, to live out the Gospel as Jesus insists. It is a tough demand for it insists that discipleship makes daily demands on us.

Prayer

Loving Father, we thank you for the gift of faith and for the life we have in the community of believers. Strengthen us with your Spirit that we may witness to your love for all peoples.

Sunday June 7th

Holy Trinity

Matthew 28:16-20

This is an important passage as it brings the Gospel to a conclusion and brings to focus major Gospel themes: Jesus' authority, his divine sonship, his teachings and the continuation of his ministry through discipleship. There is also a suggestion there that Matthew sees as important the link between the historical Jesus and the risen Christ. The final word is a promise of his return. It is not all over! Two commands are worth noting. The first is to "Go out...". This formation of the Church community is about the world and not about the Church membership. It is formed for a purpose...the spread of the Gospel to others who do not believe. The Church is not just for the benefit of believers. It is there for the world. The other side of this message is that they are to go out to baptize peoples around the world. The mission is a spiritual one for all disciples. It is not a matter of choice or a mission that can be left to a handful of people. The disciples here are meant to be representative of the full Church. What is said of them is said of all baptized people. What is also important to note is that there is a "content" to the faith. Jesus wants the world to be living according to his teachings. Being a Christian means living according to a certain set of norms and teachings rather than as the world wants them to live or as they themselves want to live.

These five verses sum up the whole of Matthew's Gospel message and are a powerful command to all of us. Every baptized person has a mission to carry out in the world. It comes with the baptism and is not dependant on what we feel are our gifts and abilities. How do we define what it is to be a Christian? A Christian is someone who lives in such a way that the Gospel message is shared with others. This does not mean necessarily that they preach the message in words, or that they go out and teach lessons on the faith. It does mean that all Christians have a primary responsibility to share the faith. In how they live, in what they do, in what they say, in how they relate to others the Gospel message of love, healing, forgiveness and so on, must be obvious. People need to experience Christ by the way we live with them. Failing to do this is failing to carry out this command of Jesus. If we meditate on this we will become aware of the great challenge set before us and the enormity of the task given to us.

Prayer

Father, strengthen us in our mission. Remind us always, that as we go about our lives in the community, we are called to be Christ to them. Help us to take seriously the Gospel commands and witness to the joy and hope they bring.

Monday June 8th

Matthew 5:1-12

Jesus sits in the customary position of the Jewish teacher. In presenting him in this way Matthew moves him from the role of preacher and healer to that of teacher. Thus he takes over the role of the Scribes, making his teaching authoritative. Matthew has the section located "on the mountain" (Luke has the same teaching given down on the plain, Lk 6:17ff). Jesus is thus presented in the light of Moses and the handing on of the Law on Mt Sinai. It is important to associate the authority of Jesus with that of Moses, for later on (in 23:2) Matthew will talk about the Scribes and Pharisees as sitting on "Moses' seat". Another important note for Matthew is that while the crowd had gathered around him he was joined by his disciples and the sermon is addressed primarily to them. This is the first time that the term "disciples" is used in Matthew and presumably it applies to the four fishers who had left their nets and "followed him". The crowds too are presented in this way (4:25) as being people who followed him from Galilee and elsewhere. This means that the crowds are either seen as disciples or possibly future disciples.

The Sermon on the Mount goes through from 5:1 to 7:29 and it is meant as a kind of blueprint for Christian living, setting down the broad outline of how Christians are to see the world and their lives in that world. The key starting point is to be found in the nature of its audience. These are people who are searching for meaning, who have needs and hopes and aspirations that they believe will be met and fulfilled in Jesus. The demands expressed in the Sermon are so contrary to the ways of the world that they can only be lived out by people who passionately desire to live a new life and who want the gifts that the Kingdom of God offers. What Jesus has on offer can only fill up those who are empty and satisfy those who have needs. The disciples come to Jesus because they believe that he teaches with authority. The crowds follow him because they need healing and hope in their lives. The teachings in 5:1-10 paint a picture of a different world, one that is possible if people are willing to live in a certain way. It is not a teaching that talks about people getting to heaven, but a programme that offers us a new way of life. If we are prepared to "do" what Jesus demands, then life changes.

Prayer

Father, you have always taught your people the way you want them to live and in the Sermon on the Mount Jesus sets out for us the way of the Kingdom. Strengthen us, so that we can follow your Son and take your blessings out to others.

Sunday June 21st

Mark 4:35-41

Fr Robert Newton

If it was not Jesus who was asking the question, our reaction to the speaker would probably be something like, "What? Are you mad? There's a storm out here!". Of course the disciples were afraid. They are in an open boat on a large stormy lake without life rafts, or the Surf Life Saving nearby. The lake is big enough that they would have little chance of being able to swim to shore in a dead calm and here the waves are high and breaking over them while they are still in the boat. It is only prudent for them to be afraid. To not be afraid in this situation would be proof that they are not in touch with reality. And yet Jesus asks the question, "Why are you afraid? Have you no faith?". Jesus was a master teacher. He used the common, everyday things that people were familiar with to teach them about God and spiritual realities. When he told parables about sheep and farmers and mustard trees they were probably in sight of the people as they listened. Even though this was a terrifying event for the disciples, Jesus used it to teach them about the things of God. In the midst of a terrible storm, when it seems that all was lost, Jesus calmed them by stilling the storm and then while they could still taste the fear in their mouths he asked, "What are your priorities? Where have you anchored your lives?".

Do we really spend time with God or do we just go through the motions of a devotional time if we have a spare minute? Are we really honest and open with God about who we are, about our dreams and our fears? Do we ever take the time to listen to God so that we can know God better? If we are truly to base our lives on our faith and trust in God then we are going to have to develop a relationship that will support that trust. Otherwise, when things begin to get tough, our doubts and fears will rob us of our faith and we will be left with nothing to hold on to. God will still be faithful and will still be with us, but we may not be able to recognise the divine presence because we know God so little. Our efforts to have a deep, abiding relationship with God is not so that God will be convinced that we are worth taking care of, but rather so that when things get rough in life and we go through the dark times we will recognise the voice of God and God's gentle touch as we are led. Just as an infant begins to know and trust its mother as it learns to recognise her voice and smell and touch, so we begin to know and trust God as we come to know God more fully. God invites us into such a relationship.

Prayer

Ever faithful God, may we learn to know you through prayer, through study and worship, that you will become the anchor of our lives.

Saturday June 20th

Matthew 6:24-34

You cannot serve both God and Mammon (the word means wealth, possessions and is much more than just money). The word also means "hidden" and so refers to the "hidden treasures" in the prior section. The meaning of verse 24 is powerfully clear, the people have to make a choice. There can only be one master and for the disciple that master has to be God. It is not that these earthly things are evil in themselves. Jesus here is concerned about the matter of choices that a person has to make. It is in this context that the remaining section of chapter 6 is preached. For the poor of Jesus' time, much time and effort went into the process of finding things to eat and drink. Clearly such efforts were necessary just to survive, but the problem was that for a disciple it could overshadow the demands of the Kingdom. They cannot trust in God because they are busy making sure they have all the things of life that they think they need. For Jesus, God is the Creator and Ruler of the universe, including the birds of the air and the lilies of the field and they get on with their lives leaving their care to him. That is how Jesus sees the life of a disciple. They are to live with a spirit of confidence and trust that the God who called them would care for them. This meaning comes out in verse 34 where he tells them not to let their hearts be "troubled". Once they become anxious they are displaying a lack of trust.

This is an enormous ask by Jesus on all its levels of meaning. It is tough to trust in God when things are not going so well. It is also easy to forget the place of God when things are going very well. Both of these are not the way of discipleship. Trusting God does not mean that we do not have to do the work. It means getting on with life and discipleship, whatever the circumstances, and trusting that God will bring all things to his end, in his way and at his time. If time is taken to sort out our lives and to get everything organized before we reach out to God then the spiritual will inevitably get moved to one side. Jesus is also telling us that we need to learn to measure things that happen to us, and that go on in the world around us, from a heavenly perspective. That is the only perspective that will last. The worries and anxieties and cares that we had last year have mostly gone but God continues on. That is what Jesus is reminding us in the Gospel.

Prayer

Merciful Father, we thank you for caring for all your creatures and for sending us your Son Jesus Christ so that we can be reassured of your love. In all that happens to us may we be filled with trust and gratitude.

Tuesday June 9th

Matthew 5:13-16

Following on from the Beatitudes these next instructions help us to put the earlier verses into a proper perspective. There was a Rabbinical saying which proclaimed that the Torah (the Law) was salt for the people. Here Jesus is saying that it is the Gospel alive in the living witness of the disciples which is truly the salt of the earth. The same applies to the image of light. This is no ordinary light but is a light on a hilltop. The reason for being on the hill is so that all people can see the light. This salt and light comes from their life with Christ. This picks up on the mention of the prophets in the previous verse. They were the life of God in the midst of the people and in their ministry they brought God alive to the people. As with the prophets, so with the disciples and all who seek to follow Christ. The Gospel in this picture is clearly not something to be hidden away within the community or within the individual. It is there for the world to share, to enjoy and to come to understand. The way this is done is through the living witness of the disciples. It is worth noting that the salt is salt for the earth and not just for the small community of believers or the people of Israel. Similarly with the light, it is light for the world and not light that can be locked away and used just for those who happen to live in the house. These are both indications that the Gospel was meant to be used by Matthew to promote an attitude of mission to the early communities over which he had some oversight.

What is interesting in these sayings is that Jesus is making two things clear. The first is that it is the disciples who are the salt of the earth. Jesus has carried out his mission and has now handed it on to the disciples, and all who follow after them. The second is that they are now both salt and light. By the way they live and by the level of their faithfulness, Christians are speaking to the world of the Kingdom of God. This message can be helpful or harmful to the Church, but we all give a message in some way. If we are half-hearted or compromising, if we are selfish and self-centred then that says something to the world. If we are committed, happy, filled with peace and joy then that too says something. We need to make sure that the message our lives of faith proclaim is the one that we are called to preach.

Prayer

Lord God, we are sorry for the times that we have failed to bring your Gospel alive in the lives of other people, for the times when we have portrayed the life of faith in a negative way. Help us to renew your grace-life within us that we may become true lights and rich salt for others.

Wednesday June 10th

Matthew 5:17-19

Matthew presents the mission of Jesus as being one that would replace (and so abolish) the old Israel with a new people of God. He is also shown as having some severe criticisms of the Law and the Prophets and of those Scribes and Pharisees who have the task of interpreting them. But he did not come to abolish. He was sent to fulfil the law. This word "fulfil" has at least two meanings. It could be that he came to bring about the prophecies that are to be found in the Old Testament. What they spoke about come true in Jesus. But fulfil can also mean that he completes the Law's original purpose. In this way he teaches a way of righteousness that exceeds that of the Scribes and Pharisees. Verse 18 is one of the hardest verses in the Greek New Testament! It may mean that the Law is binding until the end of time. Alternatively it could mean that the Law was to stand until it was fulfilled in Jesus and thus it would no longer be binding on Christians. Verse 19 is not much better. What are the commandments about which he is talking? Are they the commandments of the Old Testament or the commands of Jesus which we are to follow? As Matthew was writing to a community of Jewish Christians it is probably the former that he had in mind. However, what follows as the "commandments" of Jesus are to be seen as directing them in the proper interpretation of those laws handed down to Moses on Mt Sinai.

This whole section is about righteousness. The righteousness of the disciples is to exceed that of the Pharisees. What Jesus has in mind is that faithfulness is never about the observance of laws. It is about living in a close relationship with God. Discipleship can never be a matter of not breaking laws. It has a positive drive. Disciples are those people who are living in a certain way, a way that is spelt out by Jesus in the Sermon. This is how the Law is fulfilled. The Pharisees concentrated on not breaking even the most minute demand of the Law and yet they failed to love. It was for this reason that they faced the challenge and condemnation of Jesus. This is the purpose of the Law. God wants us to be his people, to follow him along the way to a land of Peace that overflows with milk and honey and to allow him to care for us along the way. The Law was given to make that possible. It is now Jesus who is the Way to this Kingdom of Peace and our calling is to build our lives around him.

Prayer

Loving Lord, we thank you for revealing yourself to us and for teaching us the way that you want us to be living. We pray that we may be able to live out daily the faith we profess.

Friday June 19th

Matthew 6:19-23

We now come to the conclusion of the section which began in 6:1. Interestingly Jesus is talking to Galilean peasants but he is talking about the dangers of wealth. Clearly wealth is a difficulty for a disciple if the pursuit of it becomes a goal in his life. The poor man is not to seek to store up treasures for himself and Jesus uses some powerful images. A poor man's wealth in the East could well have been his best clothes and the moths loved to eat them making the collecting of them futile. Alternatively the thieves can break in (the actual Greek word is "dig" because the houses were made of mud and wattle and the way to break in was to dig through the walls). Jewish spirituality understood the idea of storing up treasures in heaven and would have responded well to this concept. Jesus does not condemn wealth or the accumulation of wealth. The point here is what the storing up of earthly treasures might do to a person's life. There is always the danger that they will be tempted to continue to seek ways of adding to the pile or that they will spend much of their time defending their possessions and protecting what they had. In the words of Jesus 'treasures' steal a man's soul. The people of the East believed that the eye was the window through which light entered the body. So it was that spiritual light came in through the eye. In the Jewish idiom "a good eye" is a way of speaking about a generous person.

What Jesus seems to be saying is that a lack of generosity in sharing with others is a hindrance to spiritual growth. As the light of Christ is blocked out more and more so darkness takes over a person's life. This is a real challenge to discipleship. It was clearly easier for disciples to be primarily concerned with their own lives and their own needs and to ignore the needs of others. When their treasures are here on earth they have to be protected. The radical demand of Jesus is for disciples to see that their real treasures were in heaven and it is the pursuit of these treasures that should occupy the efforts of the disciples and that the blessings of these treasures will flow to the disciples here on earth. The other real danger is that earthly treasures become excuses for not having time and resources available for the demands of the Kingdom and the family of God: "I'm too busy" is making a major treasure of something that should be shared among other priorities. All I have is on loan from my Heavenly Father for his Kingdom.

Prayer

Loving Father, in your generosity you created the earth and filled it with all kinds of good things so that our lives would be blessed. May we share the resources of the world with others.

Thursday June 18th

Matthew 6:7-15

This prayer is found in Luke in a different form and a different setting and is taught in response to a request by the disciples (Lk 11:1-4). All Jewish prayer began in the same way by offering praise to God and here it is done with the simple address "Our Father". When he says "Your name be made holy" he probably has in mind the words of Amos "to profane my holy name" (Am 2:7). Israel had profaned the name of God by doing all kinds of perverse and evil things under his name and so his name was ridiculed by the nations. Israel was to live in such a way that the nations would give respect and praise to God and accept him as the supreme God. This is what Matthew has in mind here. When Jesus prays "may your kingdom come" he is using a form of Aramaic that says "make your name be held in reverence" (see Ezek 36:23). This is the day toward which the people of Israel were looking, when God would set up his Kingdom. "Give us this day..." probably takes us back to the Exodus story when God provided Israel with food for their journey to the Promised Land. They could only collect enough manna for the next day. Sin was seen as a debt. If the people sinned against God they were in debt to God as they set about sorting out the consequences of their sin. The same applied to sins against other people.

The whole of the Our Father places the person praying in the attitude that is necessary for discipleship. God is the initiator and the individual is the person who receives. We begin by acknowledging God as almighty, on whom the Kingdom depends. We are unable to do anything about our salvation beyond responding to an invitation by God. We pray that God will take action in our lives, inviting him to "do something" so that we might know his kingly power. That of course depends on us living in a particular way and shaping our lives to give him room to move. This prayer is impossible to pray honestly while we continue to live as if we were in charge of all that happened in our lives. Placed in the setting of the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew makes it clear that the only way for the Our Father to come alive is by living out all the other teachings as well. It is a two way thing. We pray so that we may be able to live out the demands and it is only by living out the demands that we are able to pray. The whole of our life is caught up in this spiritual programme and both are necessary to be fully alive in the faith.

Prayer

All-powerful God, we are weak and often fail to live up to the expectations you have of us. Guide us with your Spirit that we may do what your Son demands and so live in your Kingdom.

Thursday June 11th

St Barnabas

Matthew 10:7-13

The Gospels present the ministry of Jesus, in part, as a conflict with the powers of darkness. This is why Jesus begins his ministry with the story of the binding of Satan (Mk 3:27) and here in the sending out of the Twelve we see they are given authority to cast out these demons. The authority to heal comes as a concrete example of what the end of the power of Satan means in people's lives. They are to go out and "proclaim" the Good News about the Kingdom. This is to go hand in hand with the practical curing of the sick. Words and actions must go together in the Kingdom of God. Like Jesus they will perform extraordinary deeds, cleansing lepers and raising the dead and casting out the demons. These are all signs of the coming of the Kingdom of God. They are to travel lightly in their ministry. This presents them as people who have a long way to travel over a short period of time. They are to live in the way that was spelt out in the Sermon on the Mount for it is in living that way that allows God to take over the mission. The presumption was that this community would be a group who would be a "going out" group (v 7).

What marks these missionaries out from others is that they are heading out poorly equipped for what lies ahead of them. Normally we would sit down and think about the kinds of things we may have to face some time in the future and put into our pack the resources that we will need to tackle those problems. We like to plan for all possible contingencies. But that is not the way of the disciple. What Jesus wants them to do is to go out and trust in God to care for them. They need to trust that God will provide them with food, with shelter, with clothing and with whatever else is required. We can all think of a thousand reasons why we should not take a certain course of action in the Church and why we are ill-equipped to take up the challenges of discipleship. For Jesus they carry no weight. In our story we see that he deliberately strips the disciples of all that might make them think that they could rely on their own resources and made them dependant only on God. They then have no choice but to turn to him each and every step along the way. And so he reassures us. Each of us has a mission to undertake and each of us is in need of the graces of God to fulfil the tasks we are given. He is our guarantee.

Prayer

Father, we thank you for the faithful witness of the disciples who took the message of your Son out to the nations. As we seek to live out the calls you have given us at our baptism, may we learn to trust in your promise of care and shelter.

Friday June 12th

Matthew 5:27-32

As with the commandment on murder Jesus went back to the root cause of anger (vs 21-26), so with adultery he goes back to its fundamental cause — lust. When he says “if the eye causes...” then it should be torn out and “if the hand causes...” it should be cut off and thrown away, he is talking about the necessity of avoiding occasions of sin. It is not enough to simply avoid sin. One’s life has to be directed into those ways that avoid what may cause a person to sin. This is not a new teaching on lust as there is a Rabbinic saying that says “He who looks at a woman with desire is as one who has criminal intercourse with her”. What is new here is the equating of the authority of this position with the same authority as the Law. For Jesus it becomes a way to understand the truth of the Law. The use of the word “right” is not found in Mark’s version (Mk 9:42ff). It was seen as the dominant and most active side and so represents that which has the most influence on the life of a person. Cutting off the hand and plucking out the eye are dramatic responses but fit in with the Gospel notion of sacrifice. There is no way forward along the road of discipleship without sacrifice. Something has to go and choices have to be made.

We need to remember that Jesus is teaching about a lifestyle change. Being a disciple means much more than not breaking laws. It means changing the way we live. Here the options are set out starkly. If there are things in our lives that continue to come between us and a faithful living out of the way of the Gospel, then those things should be ripped out and cut off. It is up to ourselves to work out what the equivalents are of “the eye” and “the hand” in our lives. These are the things that soak up our time, our energies, our resources and leave no room for God in our lives. These are the things that set themselves up as alternative priorities and they are hard to put to one side. This is where the notion of Christian sacrifice comes into play. To be a faithful disciple means that we have to live differently and some things have to go and other things need to be shuffled around in our daily lives. We can see that sin so easily begins in subtle and apparently innocuous ways. A look here, a thought there, and slowly we move away from a focus on God. Jesus is trying to set down an understanding about the need for us to build a whole Christian lifestyle rather than live with occasional convenient Christian responses on the periphery of our lives.

Prayer

Heavenly Father, let the light of your Spirit shine on us so that we can clearly see what it is you want us to do and also have the courage and strength we need to carry out your will.

Wednesday June 17th

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-18

Fr Robert Newton

Whenever I happen to be in a conversation with someone about why they don’t go to church, it seems like the reason that they almost always give is that they can’t stand all the hypocrites. I don’t take this personally — they aren’t saying that *all* churchgoers are hypocrites — just that there are usually too many hypocrites for their liking. I guess their reaction is understandable. Who *would* want to go to a church filled with people who don’t practice what they preach? That would, at the very least, be disconcerting. Maybe they’ve been frustrated by the discrepancy between friendly relations on Sunday mornings and the kinds of tensions and outbursts that can happen at parish council meetings. Or maybe they simply think there isn’t enough of a match between how people behave in church and how they behave during the rest of the week in their daily lives. When I began to hear these comments, my first instinct was to come to the defence of the Church. “Hey, it’s not really like that, at least not where *I* worship!” But as time passed, and I heard the complaint again and again, my attitude began to change. I began to think that even if the complaint is true, maybe we shouldn’t be so surprised if not *everyone’s* a saint around here! After all, isn’t the whole point that we all fall short of the glory of God, yet we gather to seek forgiveness for those shortcomings and inspiration to push us on toward greater faithfulness? In other words, *of course* the Church is full of hypocrites — *none of us* fully practice what we preach. But wouldn’t you rather be in a place where people acknowledge that than in a place where self-righteousness goes on unchallenged, unprocessed?

The great Indian spiritual and political leader, Mahatma Gandhi, observed, “The only devils in this world are those running around in our own hearts, and that is where all our battles should be fought”. Sobering, but not discouraging. At least we have the proper focus. In view of this, doesn’t it seem appropriate to give the hypocrites in the Church the benefit of the doubt? None of us are saints, and it just may be that what looks like hypocrisy on the outside may actually be some Christian reconstruction on the inside. You never know. To keep people from getting disillusioned about all the hypocrites in the Church, maybe we’d better proclaim at every opportunity, “Beware: hypocrites on premises”. And that Jesus is present as well.

Prayer

Heavenly Father, let us ever be mindful of what we live and what we proclaim. May we learn and strive to follow the example of your Son so that the life of your Gospel is seen in our hearts.

Tuesday June 16th

Matthew 5:43-48

In Leviticus 19:18 we are told that the Law demands that the people love their neighbours and defines neighbours as fellow Israelites. Now, there is to be no distinction between Israelite and Gentile. To love means to seek out what is good for anyone who is in need. They are not to discriminate in their love. The model they have for this is God himself. He pours down rain because the world needs rain. That rain goes to the saints as well as to the sinners because God looks at needs and not what people deserve. That is in turn the call of discipleship. Disciples are to love as God loves and not to love just those whom they feel are worthy of their love. The disciple is to live and love as God deals with his creatures whom he loves. The Old Testament does define neighbours in a narrow way that limits love to fellow Israelites but nowhere does it say they are to hate the Gentiles. It is only in the Dead Sea scrolls and other works outside the Bible that these sentiments are to be found. The key to the interpretation of this whole section (chapters 5-7) is to be found in verse 48. Disciples are to be perfect as God is perfect.

The perfection demanded by Jesus in his Sermon is not something that they can live out on their own. The perfection is possible only when they are living the way of the Sermon on the Mount. When they live that way they are allowing God to take over their lives. The self is put to one side and the demands of the Kingdom of God are given priority. This perfection is something that God does to them. It is in and through their union with God, through their life in the Kingdom of God, that perfection shines out in their lives. It is not a badge but a way of living. The Pharisees saw perfection as the living out of the demands of the Law and when they managed that then they would hold their heads up high and be proud of their achievements. Perfection for the disciple is something that God brings about in us if we allow him. When we move into the rest of the Sermon we shall see that the way to allow God to move into the centre of our lives will be through a spirit of sacrifice and of prayer. Jesus himself is the model here. His response to the needs of the poor and suffering, to those who persecuted him and put him to death, is the way we are to live. Living in that way is perfection. How is it possible when we are so weak? Only through our intimate union with/in him.

Prayer

Loving God, we thank you for your many gifts to us and are aware of our unworthiness. We ask that you bless us with your life and light so that we can reveal to the world your love for all people and your call to repent and to believe in you.

Saturday June 13th

Matthew 5:33-37

Disciples are to be men and women of truth. The demand that "You shall not swear falsely" is not an exact quotation from the Old Testament. The third commandment requires that "You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain" (and Leviticus 19:12 — You shall not swear by my name falsely). The disciples are not to swear at all because the things that they might swear by all belong to God and to swear by them is to swear by God. Here we are close to the core issue which is about honesty. The Pharisees and Jewish interpreters of Scripture had all kinds of levels of meaning in interpretation of the binding nature of some of their swearing. It allowed them to say "yes" but mean "no" or to say "yes" but mean only a qualified "yes". Jesus is telling his disciples that they are to say "yes" and mean it. The Jews would avoid swearing by the Divine name but would use all kinds of other words that meant the same thing: the Temple, Jerusalem, the throne of God. They were therefore, in Jesus' terms, saying one thing but doing another and this was not to be the way of discipleship.

There is a line in the Revelation of John where God says that if the followers of the Gospel are neither hot nor cold then he will vomit them out of his mouth! Tough and unpleasant words but something of what Jesus is talking about here. There was, in his eyes, a difference between the faith professed by the Pharisees and the life they were living. They have to be honest. Discipleship is all about living out the Gospel message in such a way that the love of God and the salvation he offers is visible in our daily life. At baptism we all make a faith commitment but the question Jesus asks from the hillside is this: Is there enough evidence in our daily lives to show that we are disciples? To know the answer to this we need to read through the whole of the Sermon and see what things Jesus demands. Are we dependant on God for our peace and life? Are we gentle? Are we hungry and thirsty for righteousness? Are we pure in heart? Do we show mercy? Do we go out to make peace and heal hurt and wrong? And later on he will ask: Do we pray? Honour? Love? Forgive? Trust? Obey? Avoid judging? And more. Discipleship is a gift that is to be lived out in action and shows itself clearly in how we live. That is what Jesus is asking for here: Honesty in our faith as we seek to live what we profess.

Prayer

Father in heaven, we place ourselves and our lives in your hands and ask that you strengthen us with your grace so that we can show to the world your love for all your children.

Sunday June 14th

Mark 4:26-34

Fr Robert Newton

Jesus spoke to the people in parables about the reign of God. He compared it to the plant life that was all around them, to wheat fields and mustard plants. The growth of the reign of God in the world is like a plant that may start out small but can grow and become a magnificent place for shelter. It happens like the farmer who plants the seed but the growth comes when he is not looking. He participates in it but he doesn't know how it actually happens. The growth comes and he participates in and enjoys the result, but he does not control it, nor can he make it happen on his own. Such is the reign of God. We are the ones who scatter the seed of God's reign in creation. We do it in many ways and in many places. Sometimes there is a bumper crop and sometimes we see no results at all. When the results are numerous and available for all to see, it is easy for us to take credit for what we have done. When the results are few or none at all, then we are quick to blame the soil that has yielded no crop. Jesus invites us to give up taking the credit or assessing blame in the coming of the full reign of God. Our task is to be faithful in the planting. God's task is to finally bring it all to harvest.

We plant the seed of God's reign in our welcoming others into our community of faith and making them feel that this is a place where they belong. Our welcome includes giving the stranger enough space to feel comfortable. This means more than sliding over in the pew. It means allowing them time to settle in and get to know us before we begin asking them a million questions or pressuring them to join up. If our welcome is to be the sowing of the gospel seed it must be done so that the stranger feels our respect for them. We continue to sow the seeds of God's reign in our caring for one another. While this is not limited to our own members, even the caring we do within the congregation is part of sharing the Gospel as we help create a community where people feel cared for and loved. There is something attractive and, unfortunately, unusual about a group where people genuinely care about one another. However we must guard against the danger that we become a closed club that only cares about its members. Probably the hardest seeds for most of us to sow comes in sharing our walk of faith with others. We are hesitant to speak about things so personal partly to protect ourselves and partly to avoid offending others, but our faith is our greatest treasure and it is one of those things that the more we give it away the more of it we have.

Prayer

15

Heavenly Father, give us the courage to plant your seed, so that you may bring it to harvest.

Monday June 15th

Matthew 5:38-42

Jewish law placed an emphasis on the punishment fitting the crime. When a person brought a complaint to the courts an element of the justice handed out would include some kind of retribution. What we have in the teaching of Jesus is a radical reversal of this position. Not only are they to not seek punishment but are to accept the wrongs that may be done to them. When he is speaking about being struck on the right cheek it means that you are being hit with the back of your opponent's hand and so the offence is more of the nature of an insult than a physical abuse. When they are asked to "go one mile, go two miles with him" Jesus is talking about the use of time and about being available. Discipleship is not about what is convenient at any one time, it is about what is needed to "lift up" those who are crushed and about the easing of burdens of those who are weighed down (cf Heb 10:34). This is reaching into the original intent of the Law. It was given by God to Moses so that the people would be able to live in the Promised Land and know his love and blessing. Over time it had become a set of codes that had to be endured and which ended up isolating people from God's love.

It is important to understand that the difficulty of this teaching comes not so much from being asked to avoid all violent resistance to physical attacks, the real problem is that we are being asked to accept humiliation for the sake of the Gospel. Even when we are in the right we need to be prepared to be take a step back and accept the abuse of others so that they may know the love of God and be forced to come face to face with a different view of the world and what gives us value in the world. In a world that is filled with a concept of "my rights" this is a most timely message of Jesus. Instead of seeking opportunities for advancing "my" position and "my" power, we should be allowing others to know what it is to be loved. This all depends on the disciple being able to see and to accept that their real value lies in their acceptance by God. It does not matter what the world thinks or feels. What matters is God's love and if I have that then I can easily step back from conflicts and petty squabbles for the sake of the other person's eternal salvation. Instead of being an occasion of sin for them, by not stirring them up to acts of anger, jealousy and violence we are instead giving them opportunities to know God's love. That is a tough ask.

Prayer

16

Merciful Lord, we thank you for loving us despite our sinfulness and our constant failures in discipleship. Strengthened by your loving mercy may we in turn show love and mercy to others.