

Thursday April 2nd

John 8:51-59

John brings this section of his Gospel to a close with a powerful climax: the claim of Jesus to divinity. The Jews understand this, reject him and seek to stone him. Their attempts at murder fail because his time has not yet come. Their accusation (verse 48) that he is a Samaritan suggests that their concern is that Jesus is leading his followers along a path that will diminish the many traditions that had grown up in Judaism. As children of Abraham and inheritors of the teachings of the prophets they have been faithful for generations and can put forward the law to prove their faithfulness. Jesus counterclaims that while they claim to know God their actions prove otherwise. He knows God because he comes from God and he knows Abraham because he existed before Abraham. That is the guarantee they need. God was working in Abraham and he is still working now in the Son – the same God – the same power and the same purpose. The difference was that Abraham heard and responded, and they are refusing to listen to what God is saying. The key figure in all of this was not Abraham, as they insisted, but the God who called Abraham.

There are two messages of hope in this reading. The first is that John reminds us that the Father never abandoned Jesus. Even in his darkest hour Jesus knew that the Father was in control and that is why the Jews could not put him to death....until his hour had come. God who created the world remains in control. For the early Church community, surrounded by suffering and persecution, this was an important message, that there was no such thing as an absence of God. What they had to do was be open enough to find him at work and be prepared for him to be working in unexpected ways. The second great message of hope comes at the end where Jesus says "I Am" (verse 58). This is the name of God given to Moses at the start of the Exodus, and the powers that God displayed in leading the people out of Egypt, through the desert and into the Promised Land, are there in Jesus. Faith in him brings with it the possibility of new life, a new beginning and freedom from the things that kill hope and enthusiasm. If Jesus is God, and that is the invitation offered to us again, then our lives can change....if we allow him to change us. The way that all this happens is by "keeping my word". Through our faithfulness to the Word of God, the Spirit makes all things possible in and through us.

Prayer

Loving Father, you have always been a God who has walked with your people, protecting them, healing them and leading them to new life. Through our efforts in this Lenten season, may we find our hope renewed and our life refreshed.



BIBLE STUDIES MARCH 2009

+ Michael Hough



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

Wednesday April 1st

John 8:31-42

This section is addressed to those who "believe" and yet who do not fully believe. They lean towards belief, but struggle, and this puts them into a dangerous spiritual state. To deny Jesus is to align themselves with the forces that are opposed to him. In John's presentation such people are under the influence of evil which is holding them back from belief. This makes them slaves. True freedom is to be found in the freedom which Christ alone gives. They claim ancestry to Abraham and that it is their faithfulness to their traditions that stop them from believing. In reply Jesus says that when it comes to faith, actions speak louder than their words will ever speak. Abraham was called a Friend of God, and by claiming links with Abraham they were claiming links to God as well. This is what Jesus calls a lie, because while they claim faithfulness to God they wish to kill the One sent by God. This is the Truth Jesus talks about in verse 32. Belief in Jesus as the Son of God will be the only thing that can free them from the chains of sinful disbelief.

Much of what the Pharisees say is true and faithful to their traditions but the problem was that it had become so powerful in their lives that they had lost contact with what God was trying to say to them in Jesus. Religion had taken over from faith. So strong were the restraints of their religion that they were no longer open to any new ways through which God may have been speaking. They could not believe in Jesus because their expectations were that God would speak through the law, the priests, the ancestors.....and so he did. But he was not to be limited by them. As God he was free to speak through any means he wanted, even the sending of his own Son. That is what they could not accept. For them it was so outrageous a thought that they planned to kill Jesus. While God spoke in traditional ways they remained faithful and loyal. When God moved in ways that would move them beyond the comfortable, when he extended the demands on their faith, they refused to obey. They believed but limited their belief to what suited them. Lent is about making sure that we are not walking that same path, and giving God room to move as he wills. It all becomes possible though, only when we "make my word your home", for only then will we be his disciples.

Prayer

Almighty God, we are sorry for the times when we have made the ways of our religion more important than the life of faith it was formed to nourish. Help us during this season of Lent to listen to where it is you wish to lead us and strengthen us that we may follow your calling.

Tuesday March 31st

John 8:21-30

The controversy over who Jesus was began in the earlier chapter and it continues here concentrating on his person and authority. Central to the argument is that unlike other men, Jesus knows his origin and destiny and so he can give a true witness concerning himself. It is because both of these are in God that he is to be believed. In our text he insists that he is not from this world but from above (from God) and therefore gives testimony to the Father, teaching as God would teach and always acting in obedience to him. When Jesus speaks we can be assured that it is the Father speaking through him. When Jesus does something the community knows that he is doing so because the Father told him so to act. This is a very Jewish argument which John uses to set Jesus apart as the eternal Son of the eternal Father. More than likely it reflects conflicts that existed in John's time between the growing Christian community and the Jewish Synagogue. The Church members are reassured by being reminded that Jesus was about his Father's business and that he had struggled with the same opposition while he was among them. He calls them to persevere in their faith. Biblical perseverance means to continually build the daily life of the believer on the teachings of Jesus, it is a life of faithful action.

We should not be surprised that John spends so much time on this question as it is a key one for any believer. At some stage we all need to respond to the question: "Who is Jesus?". By "respond" John would not mean a catechism type answer using the words of the creed. Who Jesus is for me will be answered by a reflection on the role that he plays in my life. If I have a deep and personal relationship with him and spend time praying to him, coming to understand him by reading the Scriptures and sharing his life in the believing community and its sacraments, then I am saying that Jesus is the Messiah, the one sent by the Father to bring healing, forgiveness and life. But I cannot claim to be a believer if he only has a peripheral role in my life. The Christ of the New Testament will only accept being the foundation of the life of the disciple. Anything less is a Jesus of my own making. The call during the season of Lent is to move from a Jesus of my own creation, closer to the one which Christ himself desires to establish within me. The invitation of the Gospel is to learn to look at our lives and the world from God's perspective.

Prayer

Heavenly Father, as we continue in our Lenten observances help us to put into our lives the things we need to move closer to your Son Jesus Christ, and leave behind the failings of the past and the restraints of our sinfulness.

Sunday March 1st

Mark 1:9-15

This is often called the "Baptism of Jesus" though a read through the text will show that there is very little about the actual baptism. The focus is on what Jesus saw and heard after the baptism. They are a part of what could be called the prologue or introduction of Mark's Gospel and highlight the true identity of Jesus as the Messiah, an identity that will from now on be only gradually revealed. The same voice will appear again in the story of the Transfiguration, though there the voice will address the disciples. Here, it is Jesus who is being addressed. Each Gospel's version varies in their telling of this story and it is worthwhile examining the differences. Here we see "the heavens torn apart". This is a recurrent theme in biblical writings (Ezek 1:1; Jn 1:51; Acts 7:56; Acts 10:11; Rev 4:1; Rev 19:11). Ezekiel's version also takes place on the bank of a river and it provides a possible background for the presentation of this story. The word Ezekiel uses for "torn open" is only used by Mark at the other end of the Gospel, when the curtain of the temple is torn open at the crucifixion. It is also the word that is used in Isaiah 63:19 (or in some versions Isa 64:1) in a prayer asking God to tear the heavens and come down so that the fortunes of the people can be restored. The other feature is the descent of the Holy Spirit, another biblical image. This fulfils the prophetic expectation of a messianic figure who is filled with the Holy Spirit (Isa 11:2; Isa 61:1). This is to be understood as the Spirit of God equipping Jesus for the task in a manner that brings to mind 1 Samuel 16:13. The Spirit in the form of a dove takes us back to the opening images of Genesis where the Spirit hovers over the waters of the deep.

Jesus is presented as the one who initiates a whole new era in human living. This is shown in our present story by the two images: the baptism taking place in the wilderness (the Exodus and the journey from slavery in Egypt to new life in the promised land) and the Spirit hovering like a dove (the transformation of the darkness and the deep and the beginning of creation in Genesis ch 1). Jesus is sent by God to bring about the same kind of transformation in the lives of people and he sets out the agenda that must be followed for people to enjoy its blessings. Disciples must "repent and believe in the Good News" (1:15). That is the same invitation on offer to us. A new life is possible but not without the journey through the "wilderness" and a leaving behind of areas of our lives ("Egypt's").

Prayer

Father of Light, guide us and strengthen us by your Holy Spirit, that we may see where we need to repent and have the will to actually do so.

Monday March 2nd

Matthew 25:31-46

This is in many ways an extraordinary teaching of Jesus. One thing that stands out is the impressive collection of titles that he applies to himself: Son of Man, King, Shepherd, Lord and Judge. On what is just about the eve of the crucifixion we have a message of reassurance. Whatever their eyes may tell them about the end of the ministry of Jesus the truth is that he is the All-powerful King and Judge of all and it is before him that all men and women will one day stand in judgement. What will be the grounds of judgement? Their good works. Faith is not mentioned here, nor are words. What the judge will be looking for is whether or not the tree has borne fruit (Matt 7:17ff). They were told that they had to be lights giving light to all peoples, and salt giving flavour to the world and it is their "lighting" and "salting" that will be called into judgement. In this Gospel story Christianity is a "doing" religion that is meant to be the tool used by God for the transformation of the world. In this way it follows on naturally from the parable that goes immediately before it, the story of the talents. God gifts believers at baptism and expects those gifts to be used for the sake of the Kingdom of God.

Our parish communities are families rich in gifts and talents. Each of us, through the goodness of God, has gifts that he means to be used for the whole community. As a body does not function properly if one part of it is sick or diseased, so the Church does not function properly unless all of its members contribute their gifts. Of course it is very easy to find reasons for not being involved. All of us have too much to do and too many responsibilities and demands on our time and energies. But this tough Gospel allows for no excuses. Each of us has to bear our share of the burden of Church life and be ever prepared to extend ourselves according to need and demand. We are also reminded that our faith needs to be lived so that others may know God by seeing him alive in what we do. The Christian faith has never been just one more philosophy of life amidst many philosophies. It is the way of living out our humanity in response to the call of God and is meant to be based on relationships. On our own relationship with God and on the way we live with our brothers and sisters in this world. If our faith does not reach these depths, then it remains little more than just another religion and will be powerless to change us.

Prayer

Lord God, we thank you for the many gifts you have given to us and to our Church community. We ask forgiveness for the times when we have failed to use them fully and pray that through our Lenten observances we may be strengthened to more fully live out our faith.

Monday March 30th

John 8:1-11

It is highly unlikely that this story of the woman was a part of the original Gospel text. This does not mean that it does not have an authentic origin in the mission of Jesus, just that it does not appear to be a part of John's writings. It was probably added to illustrate the point made in 7:24: "Do not judge by appearance" and 8:15: "You judge according to the flesh while I judge no one". Jesus came to save, not to condemn, and his treatment of the woman makes this abundantly clear. This does not mean that he in any way approves of what she has done, or suggests that there may be occasions when such behaviour might be appropriate. Yet while he does not judge the woman, his very act of mercy brings judgement on the Pharisees who brought her to be killed.

The Law of Deuteronomy and the traditions of the Jews made two things clear. The first was that if someone was going to accuse another person of a capital sin, they were obliged to be the first to come forward at the execution. Equally clear was the position that if someone accused another of sin with mixed motives (here, the Jewish leaders were really only interested in catching Jesus out), or if they themselves were sinners, their accusations had no validity. This is why Jesus says that whoever is without sin can cast the first stone. Given that this message was a common one in many of the epistles of the New Testament, it would seem that the Christian community suffered from the sin of the judgement of others. Sadly, this is far too evident today as we still see gossip, anger, bitterness, sarcasm and judgement of all kinds still alive in our parish communities. People are hurt and hurt others despite the powerful witness of Jesus in this story. We should be reaching out to heal old wounds, to initiate (and receive) reconciliation with others and to search for ways of living and working together. Are we judges of others? Do we hurt others with our tongues? Do we refuse to forgive and to forget wrongs, real or perceived, done to us? Lent is the time when we think about how we relate to others and to work at changing our image and our actions. Otherwise we stand judged as were the Pharisees and receive also the condemnation of God. The key message of the Gospel is about God's gift of Salvation, and proclaiming it as a gift for all sinners. It begins with us and as disciples we are called to take this gift of divine mercy out to others that they too may know Peace.

Prayer

Loving God, we thank you for forgiving all the wrongs that we have done and not calling to mind our stubbornness and failings. May we go and do the same to others in your name.

Sunday March 29th

John 12:20-33

The Greeks are those who have adopted Judaism. They were a part of the group of converts called 'God-fearers' who were not allowed to share in the eating of the Passover lamb. Jesus does not respond to their request because in John's mind Jesus must first undergo death before the Gospel can be preached to the Gentiles. The crucifixion is once again referred to in terms of the glorification and exaltation of the Son and not as an act of humiliation. On the cross, the fullness of his saving power will be revealed and he will draw all men to himself. His death is glorification because it will bear fruit for many. This is the grain of wheat that falls to the ground, providing an abundance of fruit for the hungry. This fruit is missionary fruit, bearing fruit well beyond Judaism. Note that it will not just bear fruit, but will bear "much fruit". The form of arguing is a very Jewish one. If the grain of wheat, which is laid naked in the ground, grows up again in however many changes of clothing, how much more will that be true of the just, who are buried in their garments in the grave. Jesus' hour has come, his hour being the point in history marked out by God to bring his works of salvation, so powerfully seen in the Old Testament, to completion.

John presents Jesus as the model of discipleship. He loved to the point of giving up his life so that others may know God and live. How then can someone claiming discipleship expect to be able to live out their lives of faith and yet avoid a path which may well include hardship and sacrifice? The other gospel writers express this in terms of "take up your cross and follow after me". The life that God offers survives death and survives all of the evils, fears, worries and darknesses that can crash into the life of a believer. But it is all dependent on how a person sets out to cope. To attempt to save our life on our own is to court disaster, for we are weak and limited. To follow the way of Jesus and be prepared to hand over our lives to God through living according to the way of the Kingdom of God (see Matthew chapters 5, 6, 7) is to find light and life. It does, however, demand a life of commitment and it is there that we find the crunch. "Losing our life" is a long-term goal, it requires a daily repentance, a daily struggle to put the Gospel into action, and to search for ways of carrying out the commands of Jesus. And in the end, it is God who makes it possible, for he will glorify us.

Prayer

Loving Father, through the grace and power of your Holy Spirit, so transform our lives that we may give a clear witness to the presence of your Son among us, that the world may know you.

Tuesday March 3rd

Matthew 6:7-15

Jesus stressed the importance of prayer for the disciple. Because union with God is now measured in terms of a personal relationship with Jesus, communication with God takes on a whole new significance. It is not enough to go to the Temple and hear the prayers, or to make the traditional ritual prayers of their religion. Now prayer has to be done "always" and "without ceasing". The Lord's Prayer is more than a prayer as it is also part "creed", setting out the proper attitude one must have towards God. He is Father (and so head of the household) and is "in heaven". He is not of this world and so his ways are not our ways. His name is so great that it and it alone is worthy of praise. His Kingdom is not of this world (which is passing) and all (in heaven and on the earth) must bow before him in humble submission and do his will. It is only after acknowledging God as God can we approach him with our needs. It acknowledges that we could not survive without him, that we need him. God is also the provider of forgiveness and mercy so we have the opportunity to begin again. But it is conditional on us showing mercy to others. As needy people we need God to help us overcome temptation and see us through to safety in the face of all the works of the evil one.

Prayer is the cornerstone of our lives as Christians and must be a part of our daily lives. In it we should be praising God as God. We should be asking him for forgiveness for our sins and our failings, thanking him for his goodness to us and placing before him all our needs. It is by praying that we are open to God and through prayer we allow him to have a role in our lives. Time and time again in the Gospels we see Jesus teaching his disciples that it is essential to pray, yet it is one of those disciplines that is so easy for us to forget or to push to one side in our daily regimes. Yet discipleship is just not possible without prayer. At key moments Jesus went off into the wilderness to pray. He paused in his busy timetable to leave his disciples on one side to pray. His ministry began with a "retreat" in the desert and on the eve of his death on the cross he went into the garden of Gethsemane and turned to his Father in agony and fear, seeking reassurance and comfort. We see the dying Christ on the cross also reaching out to his Father in the recitation of a psalm. Why would we think that we could afford to serve God differently?

Prayer

Our Father in heaven, you are worthy of all praise. As needy people we humbly come before you acknowledging our sins and limitations and ask that you help us in our daily lives, show us your mercy and bring us to life.

Wednesday March 4th

Luke 11:29-32

This is a somewhat difficult reading but the verse before it helps the interpretation: "...blessed are those who hear the word of God and keep it". The sign of Jonah for the people of Nineveh was the prophet himself and his preaching. They saw him and heard his message and they repented of their sinful ways. This is what Jesus is offering to the people of his own time: his own person and his preaching of the Gospel. They had been given a sign but unlike the Ninevites they were not repenting and were persisting in their old sinful ways. This takes us back to the preceding verse about hearing and keeping the word of God. On the last day, these pagan people who heard God's call and changed their ways will rise up from the dead and stand in judgement on the peoples of Jesus' time, for they had someone greater than Jonah but would not hear him. Jesus then takes it further and reminds them that the word they hear preached is a word they must take and live out so that they are lights to a people living in darkness. Their failure to live the Gospel demands will be their condemnation.

What would it take for our world to believe in God? I am sure if he appeared in power with an army of angels at his side we would have the Church filled tomorrow. If God's judgemental side was more obvious many more would be more faithful. If we were truly moved by the Gospel message we would be like the people of Nineveh: our lives would change. That is the measure of our faith, whether or not it makes an impact on our lives. Faith is not a collection of pious ideas. It is the Truth, and teaches us about God and about life and about our relationship to him and to each other. Too many people in the time of Jesus were attracted to him as a good idea but their lives did not change and so they stand condemned. If our faith does not impact on our lives, we too run the danger of misunderstanding what it is God is calling us to be doing. All the signs we need are there. The big question is not about what God needs to do before we are willing to repent and change the way we live out our lives of faith. The real challenge is for us to be able to discern his presence and his calling in the events of our daily lives. Our lives of discipleship are too often filled with missed opportunities when God has been saying one thing and we have heard another.

Prayer

Lord God, we thank you for the many signs that you have given us in our lives that show us your love and your caring presence. May we respond to your call to repent and both clearly hear and faithfully keep your Word to us.

Saturday March 28th

John 7:39-52

Verse 39 is important here because it speaks of the death of Jesus on the cross as an act of glory and not one of shame. Further, the death of Jesus on the cross was a necessary prelude to the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost. The Spirit had been at work in the Old Testament and could be seen in the stories of the Gospels, but his activities were nothing in comparison to the impact he made on the life and work of the early Church. John notes that the difference was the death of Jesus. Before the Spirit can be poured out, sin had to be dealt with (and this is the same message that is given by John throughout the Gospel to individual Christians in the post-resurrection Church). The chapter then moves on to the response of the people to Jesus. There is a group who hear in his words echoes of the prophet mentioned in Deuteronomy 18:15. Back in John 6:14 people were prepared to believe because they had seen signs. Here, it is the power of the Words of Jesus that convinces them that he is indeed the promised prophet. Others go even further and see him as the Christ. But not all agree. John takes us back to the old argument that a prophet could not come from Galilee. That being so, it is unlikely then that a Messiah would emerge from such a spot. This is presented as a contrast to the statements of faith by those who accepted Jesus' words and signs.

What is it about Jesus that attracts us to him? What is it that we expect from him? These were important questions in the Gospel and the reason why the Jews and others could not accept him as the One promised by God and as their Lord and Saviour. Their expectations were far removed from the reality of what God was seeking to do for them. If they had been prepared to be moved by Jesus along his Way then they would have known the blessings of the Kingdom. The people in today's texts were moved by what Jesus said. They had allowed themselves to be transformed and taken up by those words and found in the a comfort, a strength and a solace. What was it that allowed them to find those things? What did they have to let go of and what did they have to change in their own lives? The process was clear: they came to Jesus, they listened, they believed, they changed their lives. The question for us during Lent is: "Can we do the same thing?".

Prayer

Loving God, empower your Spirit within us that we may commit ourselves to listen regularly to your word spoken to us through the Scriptures and the courage we need to respond with our lives.

Friday March 27th

John 7:25-30

Chapter 7 begins with the brothers of Jesus urging him to go to Jerusalem because there the crowds could see him and follow him. This was something that Jesus had to strongly reject because it touched on one of the main differences between himself and other men. Unlike others he could not choose his own time of coming and going, for his time had been appointed by God. Equally important was that his destiny was not to be a popular celebrity. It was to be hated by the world, a hatred which arose because he brought the world to judgement. The question was raised about his divinity. Given his all too obvious human origins, how could he claim to be God's Son? Jesus replies by acknowledging his origins but says that is irrelevant. He did not come before them as a kind of famous representative of some city or nation, but as the envoy of God and his true origins were to be found with God. This teaching was the occasion for an attempt to arrest him. The Jews were not successful because the time was not right and all that Jesus did and said was according to the plan of God. When it was the appointed time, then he would be arrested.

All biblical writings were written for a specific community with its own unique needs. John's Gospel was written to encourage and to give strength to a group of Jewish Christians who were filled with doubt and whose beliefs were being eroded by the teachings of the Jews in the towns in which they lived. They were also a community under some persecution by the Jews and had already been excommunicated from their synagogues. Jesus had been put to death by the Jews and now Christians were wondering what to do. One of the answers that John gave was that the life of Jesus was always in the hands of God and nothing happened except with the approval of the Father. The Jews could only crucify Jesus "when the time was right". It is tempting to think sometimes that God has lost his relevance or his power or that there are some situations in which he has little interest or involvement. Or worse, to begin to think that because of our sins, God could not or would not be interested in what is going on in our lives, that he is only interested when we are righteous. Not so says the Gospel. If God can do that to Jesus and bring resurrection out of Golgotha, then why are we concerned about our relatively minor struggles. Whatever we may think, God never abandons those who come to him in faith.

Prayer

Merciful Lord, lead us in this time of Lent to walk in your ways and to be always aware of your loving and caring presence in all that happens to us. May our faith enliven all we do.

Thursday March 5th

Matthew 7:7-12

The section verses 7-11 begins and ends with the same ideas of "ask" and "give". This is qualified only by the last verse which says that the Father will give "good things" to those who ask him. God always has in mind what is good for his children, or as St Augustine says: "God is more willing to give than we to receive". But we do have to ask first. The section that began with 5:17 now ends with the Golden rule (verse 12): "Whatever you wish that men would do to you, do so to them; for this is the law and the prophets". This is a rule of conduct well known in antiquity. The Great Rabbi Hillel wrote: "What you do not like should be done to you, do not to your fellow; **this is the whole Torah**; the rest is commentary". This is quite a statement and an interesting parallel with the teaching of Jesus. The difference is that Jesus puts it into a positive command. This rule does not mean that a person does this good in order that they may obtain something in return. Jesus is saying that the good of others is to be sought and what is for my good is only a pattern of what I should be seeking for others. The way it is written here makes it very similar as the commandment of brotherly love: "You shall love your neighbour as yourself" (19:19; 22:39).

What is interesting here is that we have Jesus saying how this rule summarizes the whole of the law. We should note that this is an invitation to action. It means we should think about the good things that we would want to be happening to us and to go about making them happen for others. Each of us is responsible for the good of others. This should be what makes our Christian community so different from other communities, that we care for people. But it does not limit the love and care to just those within the community of believers. The command covers all people, Christians and non-believers alike. It goes well with the reading of the last judgement scene we saw earlier, where judgement will be carried out on the basis of what we did or failed to do to others in need. This is perhaps where we should be focusing some of our Lenten reflections. The way we are to go about loving God is by loving our neighbour and as we see in the parable of the Good Samaritan (Lk 10:29ff) our neighbour is more often than not someone we have ignored, mistreated, disliked or despised, which makes it a tough demand.

Prayer

Lord God, your Son Jesus showed us how we should love other people, reaching out to sinners and to all in need of his mercy and healing power. Help us to live in community with the same love and compassion.

Friday March 6th

Matthew 5:20-26

The righteousness that is demanded is a righteousness that is not just in word but which flows over into action. The Pharisees are accused of preaching but not practising the demands of the Law (23:3). But it also means more than that, because it demands an internal attitude rather than just an external observance. Before a Jew could enter into the sanctuary and offer sacrifice they had to observe a cultic purity. That is not so here. All that is required to enter into the Kingdom of God is "to do the will of God". The section 5:21-48 contains the antitheses, a collection of sayings that follow the formula: "You have heard it said... But I say to you...". Here Jesus is talking about the oral laws and traditions that were taught in the synagogues by the Rabbis as interpretations of the Law of God. The real difference is that the Rabbis interpreted the law literally and in doing so managed to find ways of circumventing the original intent and even annul these laws. What Jesus is saying is that he is teaching the fundamentals, the true heart of the law, going back to what God had in mind at Mt Sinai when he gave the law to Moses. As we can see in 5:18 not one part of the Law is to be changed or altered and Jesus does not change or alter any laws. What he does in this section is help the disciples understand that obedience to law is not a matter of literal interpretations and adherence to the letter of the law, but of an ethics of the heart.

The Pharisees were not all that unusual. All they were doing was stretching the teachings of the law to fit in with their own lives and their own understandings. It is easy to do, to know what God wants, to know what is expected of ourselves as disciples, but then to allow it to be filtered through our own processes of modification. We should pray daily but... We should attend worship faithfully and regularly but... We should make sacrificial offerings that truly reflect our thanksgiving but... We should love others and take the Word to other people but... It is amazing how easy it is for us to find reasons for not doing these things, even though they are a part of the definition of what it means to be true disciples. These are not options for saints, they are what makes it possible for us to be faithful to our callings. What would place us on a level similar to that of the Pharisees would be if we talked the talk of the Gospel, but failed to witness to it in all that we did daily.

Prayer

Loving Father, forgive us when we fail to be faithful, when we water down your demands to suit ourselves and to make life more comfortable.

Thursday March 26th

John 5:31-47

In this section of the chapter the message begins to focus in on witness. Jesus does not give testimony about himself but relies on the various ways that God has determined: the witness of John the Baptist, the witness of his deeds and the witness of the Old Testament. The problem for the Jews was that they enjoyed the witnessing but could not accept the mystery to which they were giving testimony. There was one final witness, and that was the witness of God himself which was made known to those who were prepared to listen. Because of their distance from God, the Jews cannot believe and while they profess to have hope in the message of Moses and the prophets, this hope is in vain because it needs union with God to bring it to fulfilment. Here we see Jesus fulfilling his vocation in obedience, in obscurity and in suffering (Mk 10:45) and also as Messiah through being rejected and put to death in the midst of Jewish unbelief. It is in this section that John asserts that with Jesus the Old Testament finds its fulfilment and that the humble figure of Jesus, who is obedient to God at the cost of his own life, is equal to God and that in him men can truly encounter God. In Jesus they find God carrying out his traditional works. In Jesus they can hear the Word of God. In Jesus they can see the God whom no man has ever seen.

One of the great problems for the Jews in the Gospel of John is that they are so busy searching for God's answer to their prayers that they were unable to notice his reply and accept it when it came to them in the person of Jesus. Their problem was not so much that of unbelief as much as it was an inability to allow for the very real possibility that God was answering them in a way that was radically new and quite different from their previous experiences and their expectations. Jesus showed them the way — he was humble and obedient, but they rejected that witness, preferring instead a rigid and legalistic application of their understanding of the law. Jesus posed a threat because he proclaimed a personal and direct way to God which was only possible through him. Discipleship then became not a matter of observance of laws or commandments, but a way of life. It was not about faith as belief, but about faith as life lived out each and every day. In the world today we need to take the role of being "John the Baptist", pointing, by our way of life, to the presence and love of God in the world.

Prayer

Merciful God, help us to see your presence in all that happens to us and around us. May our Lenten observances lead us in the way of humble obedience to your will.

Wednesday March 25th *The Annunciation* **Luke 1:26-38**
of the Blessed Virgin Mary

The Annunciation story is filled with many different theological and spiritual insights and it is not possible to present them all here. One worth noting though is the parallel between Nathan's oracle in 2 Samuel chapter 7 (this is worth reading in its form in 1 Chr 17:11-14) and Luke's pronouncement in 1:32. Luke clearly identifies Jesus with the Davidic messiah but then goes further by asserting that he is also the Son of God. It is God who "begets" the Messiah and so we have the introduction of the notion of the virgin birth in the Gospel. The expectation of Judaism was that there would be a Davidic messiah and the angel is saying that he is going to be more, he is going to be God made man. We have the Spirit of God coming down on Mary and new life will begin just as new life began with the Spirit hovering over the darkness and the deep at the beginning of creation. It is in this context that the virgin birth needs to be understood, not as something directed towards Mary but as an activity of God making clear the origins and mission of Jesus. It is this background imagery with the angels and the Spirit of God that points us in the right direction of the purpose of the story.

Mary is important in Luke's story as she is presented throughout the Gospel as a kind of model. She is the "handmaid of the Lord" who hears the word of God and acts on it and who willingly and without any reservation co-operates with his great work of salvation. It is for this, what God is able to do in her, that Mary is called blessed. She is a model because she goes first along the path that all of us are called to walk, that of discipleship. This path is marked by listening to God, by a willingness to put to one side one's personal ambitions and demands for the sake of the will of God. She also showed a strong spirit of perseverance. She first of all gave birth to Jesus and then for the rest of his life she followed at a distance as he moved towards the cross. Yet not once did she say it was too hard, or too difficult. The picture we have from the Gospel is one of a woman who continues on throughout the whole of her life in the same spirit of generosity and humility that is there on the day that the angel first appeared to her. It is the call of the Church to individual believers, through persevering with an open and willing heart, to be open to the possibility that God can bring his Son to birth in the world around us, through us.

Prayer

Almighty God, through the humble and faithful virgin your Son became man and lived among us. Through your grace enable us to share his life with the world in which we live.

Saturday March 7th **Matthew 5:43-48**

The command "you shall love your neighbour" is found in Leviticus 19:18 but the second part "...and hate your enemies" is not a biblical text. This is another example of Jesus reacting against the additions to the biblical laws that were put into place by the Pharisees. Groups like the Essenes, who lived in the desert of Qumran down near the Dead Sea, considered anyone who did not agree with their theological view as their enemies. But this is not a biblical revelation. Jesus' teaching is far more radical in its understanding of "neighbour" because it extends to all those who were persecuting them. For the Church of Matthew this was an enormous demand because as Jewish Christians they were facing a great deal of persecution from the Jewish leaders and the synagogue communities. These were the people the disciples of Jesus were told to love. Why should they? Because the Father in heaven loves them, even though they sin, and because Jesus himself came to save sinners. Those seeking to be disciples could not just be concerned about their own families and friends but had to reach out to show God's love to all peoples.

In all these admonitions Jesus is speaking as the Son of God. He uses the words "but I say to you..." as a proof of the authority for his teachings. In this way he is doing two important things. He is casting himself as the giver of a new Covenant and new Law and also making himself as the window through which we must read the old law and the old covenant. No one can come to the Father except through the Son is another way of saying what he says here. For us this section highlights the depth of possibilities of the Gospel, that they are never fully lived out, that we can never reach the stage where we can say we have done enough. What Jesus is preaching is a way of life, of true change in the way we live out our lives in the world. The tough part about these teachings is that there are no options provided. Jesus expects a full compliance and a part of the definition of discipleship revolves on our ability to love. This is not about avoiding those we do not like, but in taking initiatives in reaching out to the unloved, the lonely, the sinners, the powerless, those who are different and those who are searching for life and light. It is up to us to take the initiative to accomplish these things and not sit back and wait for them to come to us. And here is a further tough part, liking our neighbour is a part of loving them.

Prayer

Almighty God, it is sometimes hard to love all people, yet we are called to reach out to them. When we find it impossible to love, help us to remember that your Son loved us and gave his life for us, while we were still sinners.

Sunday March 8th

Mark 9:2-10

It would seem that Mark wanted his readers to see 9:1 as pointing to the story of the Transfiguration and it is important to read the account of what happened on top of the mountain in the light of those statements. This does not mean it is the only revelation of the Kingdom. There would have been a growing understanding that God's sovereignty was at work in the person and ministry of Jesus, a revelation that, like the mustard seed, was a slow growing one that only reached its highpoint at the resurrection. What is special about this event, the Transfiguration, is that it takes place before the death of Jesus at Golgotha, thus presenting us with a rejected and crucified Messiah as being at the heart of the Kingdom. This may well explain why the disciples remained confused, as any triumphalistic thoughts would have been shattered by what is proclaimed here. The voice that comes from heaven takes us back to the voice heard in 1:11 and together they provide a clear testimony as to the identity of Jesus as the Son of God. This is not a statement of faith by a disciple, but a pronouncement made by God himself. Joined with the prediction of his death, the reader is being made aware that it is as the Son of God that Jesus will be going to the cross, as it has been written of him. The cross then should not be seen as a threat to faith, for it is the same Jesus who is revealed in all his glory on the top of the mountain who will climb the mountain of Calvary as a humble and obedient Son. How can the grave hold him! Thus we have a major theme of Mark's Gospel.

Discipleship is not always a straightforward proposition. There are times when it is hard to be faithful to our baptismal promises. The Twelve clearly did not relish the idea of the Messiah going to the cross and were even less enthralled by the idea of having to follow him to the same fate. This perhaps explains what they were doing for six days (9:2). They were arguing and debating with Jesus about the wisdom of that understanding of discipleship. That is why they were taken to the mountain top. Like Moses before him (Ex 24:1-18) it was only by the disciples taking time out, by gathering around their Lord, that they had the way forward made clear to them. Discipleship has not changed! To understand is not always possible and for most believers the only way to know the will of God and to find his light in darkness is to spend time on some "mountain top" listening to what it is he wants to say to us.

Prayer

Father of mercies, inspire us with the grace of your Holy Spirit so that we spend time each day listening to your will for us.

Tuesday March 24th

John 5:1-16

It is from this point on in John's Gospel that we begin to see the building up of hostility towards Jesus, an opposition that will end up in his death. Jesus wanders around among the sick lying on their beds and for some reason approaches this particular man. He had been there for thirty-eight years and during that time had not managed to find a cure. The man did not approach Jesus but responded to an unsought invitation from the Lord. Jesus commanded him to pick up his bed and walk. There was no question of faith, no challenge to belief and presumably the man was thinking only in terms of the stirring of the water. It was because the cure was carried out on the Sabbath that the opposition to Jesus emerged. The man himself when challenged about why he was carrying his bed, quickly blamed Jesus and the Pharisees set off in pursuit. Ideally they were trying to preserve the Sabbath day and to try and stop the people from turning it into just another day when secular activity was carried out but they went too far. Their attacks on Jesus were focused on the carrying of the bed and not on the cure of the sick man. Jesus had given him a new form of life and had removed his sins but this was all ignored by the Pharisees for a legalism of their own making.

Jesus seems to doubt this man's good will. It would appear that the man is seeking a cure because he is there by the pool. But Jesus raises the question about why he could not have found someone to put him into the water during those thirty-eight years. The implied suggestion is that he had become content with life as it was. It may not have been perfect but he was obviously fed, clothed and watered. His every need was met or he would not have survived. If he were to be cured, he would have to go out and work and take up his responsibilities in the community. That is why Jesus asks that question. If he really wanted to be cured, Jesus would be his way to wholeness. That question is for us in Lent. Do we really want to be renewed and healed, knowing what a true life of discipleship would mean for us? If we truly wish to be healed then we would be doing those things that are necessary to make change happen. It really is a heart searching question because Jesus is saying that any steps along the road to growing as disciples will mean a change in the way we live and this does not happen by chance. We are called to repent, to evaluate our lives in prayer and begin to work on changing the things we need to change and including the things we need to be doing.

Prayer

Loving God, as we continue in this season of Lent, help us to listen to you so that we know what it is you want us to be doing so that our lives change and so that we are more open to your calling and your graces. Help us to do what is necessary to live new lives as disciples of Christ.

Monday March 23rd

John 4:43-54

The word "for" at the beginning of verse 44 indicates that Jesus knew that he would be rejected and that his ministry would not be easy. His own rejected him and so he went to Galilee. They had seen the signs and wonders and heard the teaching but still rejected him. Why? In contrast we have a noble from Herod's court asking Jesus to cure his critically ill son. He believes in Jesus' ability to perform the miracle he seeks but this is not the real faith that the Gospel demands. What we have here is a faith that is fed by the spectacular, by signs and wonders that are beyond human understanding. But in the Gospel of John we find Jesus accepting these people (cf 6:6; 14:11) even though it is not the highest form of faith (2:23ff). This is brought out in the unusual words of Jesus to the nobleman. But he does see his miracle take place. The son is sick in Capernaum and Jesus healed him from Cana. But, true to Jesus' observations, the miraculous was enough for the man to believe and he and his whole household with him. This story follows on from the story of the Samaritan woman (4:1-42). They were supposed to be heretics and stood condemned by Jerusalem, yet they were able to proclaim: "We have heard him ourselves and we know that he really is the Saviour of the world". John leaves us to ponder the question of how to enable faith.

The problem of faith is tackled throughout the Gospel of John. He presents the leaders of the Jews as rejecting Jesus because they do not want their world turned upside down. They were frightened that they would have to make too many changes to their lives, that they would have to give some things up with which they had grown comfortable and take on new challenges that would move them out of their present comfort zones. They had constructed a neat and workable religion and all of it was under challenge by the life and teachings of Jesus. They did not want God coming in and interfering in good religious practices! Those who believed were those who needed God and who experienced powerlessness in their lives. It is not that the Pharisees did not need God, it was that they could not recognize their need and acknowledge it. The details of our religious practices are meant to lead us into a deeper relationship with God and enable us to preach the Gospel more effectively to the world in which we live. If they do not, then they need to be changed or at least brought under question.

Prayer

Loving Father, when we seek to go our own way and leave you on the edge of our lives, speak to us and bring us back to you and reassure us of your mercy and your love.

Monday March 9th

Luke 6:36-38

Luke 6:27-49 is called Luke's Sermon on the Plain, a shorter version of Matthew's Sermon on the Mount. In Leviticus 19:2 the people are commanded: "You must be holy for I am holy". In Matthew's Sermon he wrote "You must be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matt 5:48) while in our text Luke writes "You must be merciful as your heavenly Father is merciful". The Old Testament does not actually have an example of the perfection of God, but it does speak of God's great mercy and what the disciples are told to be doing is to imitate God. As God is in the world, so they are to be to others. When he talks about judging here, he is not speaking in juridical terms but in terms of the need to avoid being critical of what people see as the failings and limitations of other people. They should avoid criticizing others and finding fault with them, instead, relationships should be measured by a true generosity of spirit.

Luke here builds on a rich vein of biblical theology which was proclaimed by Matthew's command to "be" salt and "be" light. They were to be "as Christ" to others so that people who were caught up in sin, in fear and anxiety, worry, depression and other human limitations, could know freedom through having Christ revealed to them in the life and witness of believers. As God has been to Israel, as God has been to the Church, as God has been to individuals, so we are called to be to others. This is an enormous demand and one in which most of us fail time and time again. Lent is a good time to stop and reflect on this reality, for it reminds us of our calling to "go out into the whole world and proclaim the Good News". This "proclaim" is not the same as "preach", but means that our lives and our personalities are to be sermons in and through which people can come face to face with a loving and merciful God. If we do not do it, then how are they to know the invitation of faith? Too much of our lives as Christians can be centred on our own Church concerns. Parish council meetings, pastoral gatherings and personal enthusiasm and involvement can too often be directed towards those who are already Church people. According to the Gospel, a primary reason for the existence of the Church is so that those outside the Kingdom can come to know God. How much of our time and effort is directed towards those who do not come anywhere near the Church? That should be our major preoccupation.

Prayer

Father, you reveal yourself and your love for us in many ways but most of all in your Son Jesus Christ. Strengthen us so that we can make him known to those who walk in darkness, by the way we live out your love and mercy in our daily lives.

Tuesday March 10th

Matthew 23:1-12

This is a strong example of the condemnation Jesus levels at the leaders of the Jewish community. He brands them as the sons of murderers and the ones who are continuing to carry out murder in the name of justice (23:31-32). The whole of the city stands condemned for their acts of stoning the messengers of God and through them the whole nation. Matthew, when he talks of the disciples, sees them as representing the whole of the Christian community. What is demanded of them is demanded of every Christian. The seat of Moses is a teaching seat and represents the authority he has from God. This authority was passed down through Joshua, the elders and the prophets to the scribes and Pharisees. The weakness of this argument is that not everything they say comes from God, yet they make out as if the most minute of their teachings has the full weight of the throne of God behind it and so is binding. One of the major problems for Jesus is that there is a difference between the teaching of the Jewish leaders and their religious behaviour. The yoke of Jesus is light but the yoke of the Pharisees is heavy. They weigh people down with burdens that they themselves are unable to lift! Matthew insists on the importance of "doing" the will of God while the Jewish leaders tell the people what the will of God is, but do not do it on a personal level.

That Matthew places this story in the Gospel suggests that the challenges that are addressed to the leaders of the Jewish community need also to be addressed to Christians. It must have been that the disciples were guilty of the two sins mentioned in our story. The first sin was that of hypocritical behaviour. Christians professed one way of living but their lives gave out other messages. They spoke of love but could not forgive, spoke poorly about others, ignored the poor and needy and failed to live the teachings of the Sermon on the Mount. For Matthew such behaviour was destructive of Church life. As the City of Jerusalem was destroyed because of sin so the Church will tear itself apart because of its failure to take seriously the demands of the Gospel. The other sin was that of loading up people with demands. We are prepared to welcome them, to share our resources with them, to acknowledge them as a part of our community — if they do things the way we expect. Instead of being a place of refuge and healing for the sick, the weary and the needy, we turn the Church into an inaccessible dream many feel they cannot join.

Prayer

Father, in your mercy and your love, give us the gift of open hearts so that we can reach out into the community in which we live and make all who are in need aware of your great love.

Sunday March 22nd

John 3:14-21

The ascent of the Son of Man to heaven, the return of the Son to the Father begins with his being "raised up" on the cross. It is there that his power to save believers is disclosed, as he says himself "When I am raised up from the earth, I shall draw all men to me" (12:32). According to John this lifting up "is necessary", a phrase which suggests that we have here a very early theme from Christian teaching and preaching. He takes the story of Moses and the Exodus from Numbers 21:8ff and ties it to Jesus. As the Israelites needed to look on the snake in order to survive the poison from the bites, so they needed "to look on" the Son of Man on the cross in order to defeat the powers of sin. This is important in John's theology for it makes of the cross an instrument of the exaltation of Jesus. It is not a cross of shame because it is a means of salvation. The cross itself has saving power and from it Jesus brings life to all who "gaze on him". Once he is raised up he will then "draw all" to himself (12:32). John sees the purpose of the ministry of Jesus as being the giving of eternal life to those who are "in him". It is through a relationship with Jesus that life is possible. In 3:16 we are given the reasons for this great gift of life. It is "because God loved the world so much, that he gave his only begotten Son, so that none who believe in him may perish but have eternal life". In that verse we have the whole Christian message of redemption. The way to salvation is through the cross.

It is here in John's Gospel that we most clearly see John struggling with similar problems to the writers of the other Gospels. He is making it clear that there is no simple means to salvation. There is no list of laws to obey, no "quick fixes" and no programme outside of the law of love. We are now told that it is only by joining ourselves to the Son of Man, by believing in him and shaping our lives according to the example he set that we can know salvation. What is salvation? It is a life that is set free from the powers of sin, from being under the control and influence of forces and drives that take away our sense of peace and happiness. It is Jesus who enables us to be freed from the control of these things. It is the cross which gives us hope, that provides us with light when it seems that darkness has taken over our lives. If Jesus can turn the disaster and horror of the cross into a victory, then there is hope for all of us if we live our lives in his presence.

Prayer

Father, for the gift of your Son we give you thanks. Guide us with your Spirit, so that as we meditate on your Word we may be strengthened throughout all the trials of our lives.

Saturday March 21st

Luke 18:9-14

This is a story which contrasts one person's attitude with that of another. The Pharisee is conscious of his own righteousness because he goes beyond what is demanded in the Old Testament laws. The tax collector is conscious of his sin and can only plead for divine mercy. Jesus says that the prayers of the latter are found to be acceptable to God because God calls the humble and needy and not the proud and the disdainful. Jesus is attacking the kind of character which would result in Pharisaism. They genuinely and sincerely believed that their attempts to fulfil the law correctly would make a contribution to the coming of the Kingdom of God. Jesus puts this aside in favour of the attitude of those who expect nothing of themselves and their works but everything from God. The prayer of the Pharisee is condemned and rejected because of its pride and contempt for other men. The tax collector is presented as a model for Christian living. He stands at a distance in the Temple and keeps his eyes to the ground, not even daring to look at the place where God dwelt. His hands too remain by his side instead of in the usual raised position and he beats his breast where his heart is. The heart was thought to be the seat of sin and his beating his chest a sign of true contrition and repentance. The prayer he offers is one that simply appeals to the mercy of God. He believes that God will show his mercy to sinners by forgiving them their sins. He cannot earn forgiveness by words and deeds. It is a free gift.

One of the hardest things for Christians is to develop the right attitude towards God. The Pharisee was so sure that he could influence God by the things he did, by his observance. God now "owed" him a blessing. The tax collector realized that he was in debt to God, that he "owed" God and his attitude and prayer reflected this humility. Lent is a good time to remind ourselves of just how much God has given to us and to evaluate our response to him. Do we consider that our lives reflect our need of Divine grace and blessing? Do we live lives of thankfulness? Are we more like the Pharisee or the tax collector in our attitude to God and others? The tax collector reminds us of two important realities. The first is that we need to be able to acknowledge that we are in fact sinners in need of forgiveness. Secondly, even though we are sinners, God welcomes us into his presence and wants us near him, sharing his life just as he welcomes those of our community who may, in the eyes of many, be great sinners.

Prayer

Merciful God, we come before you as children in need of your mercy and forgiveness. Remove from us our sins and failings and create within us a truly humble heart.

Wednesday March 11th

Matthew 20:17-28

The three sections of today's reading highlight what it is Jesus is trying to teach. We have the third prophecy of the Passion where Jesus is reminding them of the necessity of suffering and death in the mission of the Son of God. This is in contrast with the mother of the Sons of Zebedee who is looking at it in terms of reward for faithfulness. If her sons are going to go through all this suffering Jesus should be offering some extra reward. The disciples then show their limited understanding by wanting the Zebedee boys punished. It is in response to this unrest that Jesus then proclaims his message: discipleship is all about service even to the point of being willing to sacrifice one's life so that others may live. This is what Jesus was doing and he expected those who followed him to show a similar willingness. Once again it brings out the difference between Jesus and the Pharisees. They taught that a life of faith was a life of personal observance of the Law. Jesus is teaching that a life of faith was a life of humble service of others and that it was to service that all disciples were called.

Three times in this Gospel Jesus makes a prophecy of his coming suffering and death and three times he makes it clear that disciples will be expected to follow him. There are simply no short cuts to a Gospel life. This novel teaching reaches its highpoint in the understanding of service. Discipleship is all about what the disciple can do for others. It is more than just "doing things" because Jesus uses the image of being a slave. Being a Christian means being willing to be a slave — a slave of God and a slave of others in need. Jesus reminds us that if he as the Son of Man can humble himself and become a man among us, putting aside the things of God, and as a man die for us so that we might have eternal life, then it is reasonable to expect that anyone wanting to follow him should also seek to be humble and to live their lives for others. We can understand the request of the mother of the Zebedee boys because that is very much the way of the world. There is little point in doing something unless there is a return. She is aware of the hardships they are undergoing in order to be disciples and expects them to be rewarded. Jesus turns this around and says that the reward received is in being called to serve in this way. Their vocation is also their reward.

Prayer

Lord God, help us to put aside our human desire for reward and recognition so that we may humble ourselves and seek ways of serving you and serving our brothers and sisters who are in need.

Thursday March 12th

Luke 16:19-31

This is a story addressed to the Pharisees and we find the whole of the chapter about the proper attitude towards and use of material possessions. The story has two points:

- (a) The reversal of material fortunes of this life in the next.
- (b) Even the return of someone from the dead would not be enough to force a change in living for those like the Pharisees who will not accept Jesus.

It is in the second part that we find the main point of the parable and it is not meant to be a comment on a social problem. There is an element of reminding the Christian community that there are rewards and punishments based on how we live out our callings. For the early community the second part of the parable would have spoken to them of Jesus and his resurrection. He rose from the dead but the Jews would not believe him and rejected him, persecuting his followers. Salvation has a strong element of faith in it. There comes a point when the believer has to persevere even when things are no longer clear and when we live in uncertain times amidst all kinds of difficulties and challenges.

It is a difficult thing for many in our modern world to accept the idea of a life after this one and so much time and effort is put into making the present the major focus of our human activities. Many avoid the whole idea of death and dying, yet it is the one inescapable reality of our lives. We will all one day die. We will all one day be judged and we have ample time and ample opportunity to prepare properly for this. The resurrection of Jesus gives us hope and removes all fear of dying from our minds. This is why we should be looking at our resources and our material possessions as belonging to God and not for our own exclusive use. In biblical terms we have to understand that all we have is simply on loan from God and one day we will be called to account for its use. We are called to live for God in our service of others. Selfishness and materialism have no place in the Christian's vocabulary. The parable calls us to learn from the mistakes of the rich man and to live as if we are to die tonight. How much of our time and resources go into ensuring our own comfort in life and how much of it do we direct towards the needs of the suffering and to the needs of the Kingdom? A sobering thought.

Prayer

Lord God, we thank you for the gift of life and all the blessings we enjoy as we live in your presence. Help us to be people of hope, with our eyes set on the Kingdom yet to come while at the same time faithfully fulfilling our callings in this life.

Friday March 20th

Mark 12:28-34

This text is concerned with the Great Commandment, the commandment of love. It comes from a man of the law who would have understood the Jewish pursuit of righteousness as being one of fulfilling all the laws of God. There were 613 of these laws and there was an age old debate, still raging at the time of Jesus, over which was the most important and which was the least important of the Laws. They believed that salvation was obtained by a person's fulfilment of these laws. On to these the Pharisees then added a second layer of interpretations and applications that themselves became laws to be obeyed. When Jesus answers the Scribe's question he does so by going to the heart of the Law rather than the individual laws themselves. The greatest commandment is to love God by making everything a person does in their lives reflect his divine mercy...*with all your heart, mind, soul and strength*. Linked into this is the second part of his command which cannot be isolated from the first — *love your neighbour*. The second is to be a way of living the first and without love of neighbour love of God is neither possible nor acceptable. While Leviticus 19:18 defined neighbour as one of the "sons of your own people" Jesus in Luke 10:25-37 defines neighbour as any person who is in need. The final judgement on the attitudes of Israel comes at the end of verse 33 in today's reading. God does not want any sacrifice or offerings or prayers, unless both commands are obeyed.

How wonderful it would be to have a short list of things "to do" so that we can consider ourselves to be faithful disciples. Jesus here says there is no such list because each day will call the believer to move in new ways and will provide new opportunities of faithfulness and love. It is no longer possible to measure our discipleship by our acts of Christian worship or obedience of the commandments. We measure it now by our love of others and by how much we allow God to have a place in all the things in which we find ourselves engaged. Is God alive in our relationships, our way of speaking, our thoughts, plans, activities, etc? If not then we are in sin and need his forgiveness. God will not accept being on the periphery of life.

Prayer

Almighty God, you have always shown your love in concrete ways, in the works of creation and in the many saving deeds down through time. Your greatest gift to us has been that of your Son. May we seek to live out our faith by our engagement with others in the world and by our acts of love.

Thursday March 19th

Luke 11:14-23

This section of the Gospel (11:14-54) is concerned with Jesus' conflict with the Pharisees. Our text today looks at the question of the authority Jesus has for his teaching and his miracles. Prior to this the Holy Spirit had been promised to anyone who asked the Father (11:9-13). Now we see evil spirits who are under the control of Satan. Some of the Jews responded to the exorcism with wonder while others accused him of acting under the authority of Beelzebul the ruler of demons. The coming of the Messiah had been anticipated as being a time when God would set up his reign among his people. To do this the control darkness had over the children of light had first to be destroyed and this is the point of most of the exorcisms of Jesus. Once the prince of darkness had been overthrown it would then be easy to plunder his house and reclaim once again God's lost sheep. At the start of the Gospel Jesus overcame Satan during his temptation in the desert and this victory is restated here. The real problem that faced the Pharisees was that if Jesus really could cast our demons then they should be listening to him and accepting him as the promised Messiah of God.

The casting out of demons had long been an anticipated consequence of the coming of the Kingdom of God. The gates of hell would not be able to withstand the onslaught of God's grace. This explains why there are so many accounts of exorcisms in all the synoptic Gospels. Salvation means setting people free and this freedom is more than just a notional concept. It is a reality in their daily lives. This is the freedom that is offered to all who seek to follow Christ and to live in his ways. They are invited to a life of freedom from whatever it is in their lives that holds them back. These things may not be demons, but Jesus has in mind other "demons" as well, things like fear, anxiety, sorrow, depression, anger, unruly passions, weaknesses, sin and more. Freedom however is a consequence of following Christ and once sin is removed there is the chance of living in the blessings of the Kingdom — peace, joy, fellowship, love, etc. The choice is ours and this is the time when we commit ourselves to making it a reality. Before any of this can work in the lives of believers, a person must be prepared to make a personal commitment to faith. It only changes the lives of those who come to Jesus, live according to his teachings and believe in him as the Risen Son of God.

Prayer

Loving and merciful Father, our lives are filled with all kinds of weaknesses and sins that hold us back and stop us from living in your presence. Through our spiritual activities may we allow you to heal us.

Friday March 13th

Matthew 21:33-46

This is a parable about how Israel responded to God's saving activities, the greatest of which was the sending of his only Son. Israel was often compared to a vineyard in the Old Testament (Hos 10:1; Ezek 19:10-14 and especially Isa 5:1-7 which Matthew seemed to have used here). This parable is addressed to the Jewish religious leaders (21:23) and the judgement is clear: because they rejected the prophets sent by God, rejected their calls to repent and even had some of them put to death, they have given up their birthright. Even more damning is their rejection of God's Son sent to bring them back to covenant faithfulness, condemning him to death on a cross, and so they lose their privilege as the first born son. Israel is now like all the other nations and the Kingdom of God passes on to other nations that are to be the messianic people. They will be formed not by flesh and blood but by the fruits of grace and by their union in Christ.

The vineyards of a village were an important part of the life and economy of the community. Wine was much more than just a beverage. It was a sign of the blessings of God, a part of celebrating the great moments of life and of communion with God through sacrificial offerings. It was also an item of trade and commerce. The world of the time needed wine much more than communities do today. It is therefore important when the communities of disciples are called to be "vineyards" for the world. In verse 43 we find an important qualifying note. The Kingdom is there for those who "produce its fruit". Jesus made it clear that it was not enough for a person to be a Jew to be saved. They had to live lives of covenant faithfulness. The same applies to the New People of God. It is not enough to be baptized. That is the first step along the journey of life in the Kingdom. Receiving the blessings of the Kingdom is going to depend on how faithful we Christians are in living out the demands of the Kingdom. Jesus spelt them out time and time again in his preaching and by the example of this own life and our vocation is to "follow him" or do as he did. This is what the world today needs, to see what is possible if individuals and communities change their priorities and the way they live and instead put the Gospel values into operation in their daily living. If they cannot see it alive among Christians, how will they know about God?

Prayer

Loving Father, you called us to repent and change the way we live and to follow your Son Jesus. Help us to find ways of daily living out the Gospel commands so that we take our part in healing the wounds and divisions of our communities.

Saturday March 14th

Luke 15:1-3, 11-32

This parable illustrates the pardoning love of God who cares for the outcasts. The sinful son is welcomed home by the father and his former status is restored. The central figure is the father who waits for his son to return. The other important figure is the son. We see his sin, his need, his repentance and his return. The reader is also shown the father’s joy at the boy’s repentance. The odd one out is the elder son. He cannot allow his brother to be forgiven and sees instead a threat to his own position. The sin of the younger son is not to be found in his activities in a far away land. It is in abandoning his father and in thinking that he could find for himself fulfilment and peace through his own activities rather than finding it in service of the father. This is what he discovers while he is feeding the pigs, that the life offered at home with the father is infinitely more satisfying than anything he can put together on his own. Then he repents and understands the true meaning of life. The father responds to this repentance by extravagant signs of love, mercy and healing. He stands waiting and watching, hoping that the boy will return. He then runs out, dresses him in the royal clothes and gives him the insignia of the father’s house. He is once again back as a son and able to begin a new and renewed life. It is the father’s waiting that gives the story its great message of hope.

In the parable Jesus paints the son as committing one of the most heinous of sins, that of wishing his father were dead so that he could have his inheritance early. In that culture it would have been acceptable for the father to punish him by killing him. The son then went further by thinking that he could provide for himself things that the father could not provide, that he was somehow better than the father. Yet his father forgave him. Those sins did not stop the father’s love. The father’s only concern was whether the son would come to his senses and return. That is the message Jesus brings from God, that we are always lovable and that he is forever seeking our return to him. Nothing can stop his love for us no matter how bad we think our behaviour has been. The really difficult part of this story is not so much applying it to our own lives, it is living out our own healing and forgiveness in such a way that those who are filled with a sense of their own worthlessness may come to know that God is a loving Father who pursues them no matter what they do.

Prayer

Father, forgive our sins and failings. When we do sin, when we do wander away from your care, help us to hear you calling us to return and bring us home again.

In verse 20 disciples are called to a higher level of perfection than what was seen in the righteousness demanded by traditional Jewish piety. Perfection is described in the Gospel as “doing the will of God” (7:21), the details of which are spelt out in the Beatitudes, and the will of God is to be found in the person and teachings of Jesus. This is the only way of entering into the Kingdom of heaven.

In Matthew Jesus is the “new Moses” seated on the “new Sinai” (the Mount of the Beatitudes) teaching the people the way of the Kingdom. Thus when he is writing about the Law, he is not talking about Jesus’ attitude to the Law but the Law’s relationship to him. He does not stand in subjection to the Law but as the One to whom the Law points. The function of the Law is now to bring people to Christ. Within Judaism obeying the Law was fundamental and God’s mercy was seen as operating according to their personal observance. But as Paul points out in his epistles this is wrongly making it into a way of salvation. It is not. The purpose of the Law was never to justify people before God. What the Law does is help the people to better understand their failures. A magnifying glass helps people to better see the smudges that are on a piece of glass. The Law operates in a similar way, helping people to better evaluate their lives with God. But it is a tool, not an end in itself.

There is no fixed and minimum list of requirements that we have to fulfil before entering into the Kingdom so that once we have completed these we are assured of a place in heaven. The only requirement is the Law of Love. The newness in the teachings of Jesus was that he was proclaiming a way of life. Everything in a person’s life was to be lived according to the laws of Christ and the teachings of Jesus were to come alive in all that a person thought, did and said. It was the radical nature of these teachings which so antagonized the Pharisees. Laws that were written “in the heart” demanded far more than a list written in stone. This is now how we are to evaluate our lives of discipleship. Not by what we have done wrong, but by how we have lived out our baptismal callings. As disciples we are called to reflect on our lives to assess whether or not our faith is evident in the way we live.

Prayer

Loving Father, we thank you for the new life of grace which you have given us in Christ Jesus our Lord. May we be renewed during this season of Lent and commit ourselves to putting the Gospel commands into action in our daily lives.

Wednesday March 18th

Matthew 5:17-19

Matthew chapters 5-7 are meant to be read as a unity with each layer helping to clarify and explain the others. It is a key section for Matthew as it spells out the demands of the Kingdom for those seeking to be disciples: they are to live according to a superior righteousness which is determined by the teachings and example of Jesus. He begins verse 17 with the statement: "In spite of what I will say in a moment do not think that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets". Rather he came to "fulfil", to "complete", to "bring to perfection", or perhaps even "to confirm" the law and the prophets. Matthew understood the prophets as pointing forward to the teachings of Jesus and has found in them their fuller and deeper significance. The Mosaic Law was provisional, meant to serve until it reached its completion in Christ. This refers not to the surface demands but to the spirit behind the law which was to bring men into deeper and closer relationships with God.

The two "until" clauses in verse 18 make it clear that there is a permanent validity about the law (the law as interpreted by Christ) and that it will remain permanent in the Kingdom until it has achieved its purpose. In other words, it has been proclaimed anew in the teachings of Jesus and there is, in a very real sense, no more Law of Moses.

Jesus understood the law given to Moses on Mt Sinai as being different from the laws that were put forward by the Pharisees. The Ten Commandments were the Torah, a Hebrew word which is better translated as meaning "teaching". God, having led the people to freedom from slavery in Egypt, then makes a covenant with them so that they become his people and he is their God. The Torah is his way of teaching them how they are to live so that they can remain faithful and live joyfully in the land of Canaan. The laws of the Pharisees were human laws and regulations that were proclaimed as being the proper interpretations of the Torah. However, by the time of Jesus the human interpretations had become more important than the divine commands they were supposed to be expounding. When Jesus says not one dot of the law shall be broken, what he is talking about is the Mosaic Torah and not the laws of the Pharisees. Christians were to obey the abiding prescriptions of the Law, which was the Law as proclaimed in the teachings of Jesus. What he wants the people to do is not simply observe the law but rather strive to live the inner meaning of the Torah which is the road to a deeper and more fruitful relationship with the Father.

Sunday March 15th

John 2:13-25

It is significant that Mark begins his Gospel with the quotation from the prophet Malachi that reads: "Behold, I send my messenger before your face" (Mark 1:2). In the original text it continues: "and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple" (Malachi 3:1). In the cleansing of the Temple it is quite likely that the evangelists saw a fulfilment of this prophecy and thus it takes on a special significance. John develops the story differently from the other Gospels, a difference that can be seen in the introduction of a saying of Jesus about the Temple being destroyed and by the Old Testament references he adds. It is also useful to observe that John has the story at the beginning of his Gospel, rather than relating it to the entry into Jerusalem just prior to Jesus' death as the other evangelists record. A key phrase for John is Jesus' demand that the traders "take these things away". He is referring to the birds and animals that were to be used for sacrifice. In the Kingdom, the old ways of sacrifice would no longer be needed for they had the Son who was going to offer his life as a ransom for many. This was the Jesus who, for John, was now beginning his ministry in Galilee, a ministry which would make clear who he was. This is what is behind his answer to the request for a sign. The sign that verifies the ministry of Jesus will be the resurrection. In this way John makes the cleansing of the Temple a foretelling of the victorious death and resurrection. Made at the beginning of the Gospel it enables what follows to be read in the light of the promised victory.

There was nothing wrong with buying and selling in the Temple forecourt. The Jews would not allow Gentile money to be involved in the act of sacrifice to God and therefore insisted that all Gentile money be changed into Jewish coinage before any animals were bought. For Jesus, as for the prophets before him, the problem was that the people thought that they could perpetrate injustices on the community and, providing that they had their temple liturgy correct, there would be no problems with God. Keeping clean hands by avoiding Gentile coins did not make their prayers and sacrifices any more acceptable to God, when outside of the Temple they were engaged in all kinds of sins against their brothers and sisters. Pure Temple worship did not necessarily mean pure lives of faith. Good liturgies do not necessarily make acceptable communities of faith.

Prayer

Loving Father, lead us by your Word and Holy Spirit, that we may worship you not just in prayers and sacred hymns, but also in the way we live with our brothers and sisters.

Monday March 16th

Luke 4:24-30

Both Elijah and Elisha brought help to Gentiles rather than to the needy of Israel and, like Jesus, were rejected by their own people. This is the model that is applied to Jesus. He too reached out to the Gentiles and he was rejected. This section (4:16-30) presents Jesus as the fulfilment of the promises of the Old Testament (Isa 61:1ff). The time of salvation has come and the Good News is being proclaimed to the poor. They can see the lame walking, the deaf hearing and the performance of mighty works. Most of all, history is fulfilled in the person of Jesus who is the prophet who was to come at the end of time. He proclaims a message of salvation to peoples other than the Hebrews and it is for this reason (partly) that he is rejected. For Luke it is also a model of what the Church is going to have to face after the resurrection and by placing the story here he is offering reassurance to his community that while they might be suffering now, Jesus their Lord and Saviour had gone through the same thing. Without raising the question directly, it is clear that Luke is posing the question: "Why did the Jews not accept Jesus?". The answer is: "For the same reasons they rejected the prophets before him!". They were not prepared to change their way of understanding salvation and would not acknowledge their sinfulness and need for forgiveness.

One of the problems that Jesus encountered among the leaders of Israel was that while they acknowledged God and worshipped him, they did not need him. Religion had replaced faith. Their lives were going along nicely and they had no idea that they needed to be forgiven, needed to renew and needed to come closer to God. They were comfortable in their worship of God, in obeying the laws and in their history. When Jesus came along and demanded more, when he insisted on a personal faith, on a life with God that permeated all that they did, the Scribes and Pharisees felt threatened. They did not want to change and did not feel the need of change. In this story Luke highlights a constant problem for disciples — creating a comfortable faith which we shape to fit in with our lifestyles. It is all too easy to create a life of faith that is more attuned to what we need to be comfortable rather than to doing what God desires. It is all too easy for the practise of our religion to displace a Gospel life.

Prayer

Lord God, help us during this time of Lent to see and to understand our need of you. Enliven our faith through our Lenten observances so that we can have the desire to repent of our sinfulness and may grow in faithfulness.

Tuesday March 17th

Matthew 18:21-35

The recurring theme in this parable is that of debt which evokes the idea of sin and the debt under consideration is enormous — the ten thousand talents would be at least ten million dollars in today's currencies. The point is that he has no chance of settling it and is thrust upon the mercy of his master. Picking up the biblical themes of compassion, mercy and tender love, Jesus clearly points to how we are to interpret its meaning. Our parable is concerned with the urgency and the novelty of the new dispensation which is in Christ. A person is no longer judged by a balancing of debits and credits as happened under the Pharisaic interpretation of the Law of Moses, but is now judged by their inner disposition of love and mercy that is made possible by the love and mercy shown to us by the sending of God's only Son. Mercy is to characterize all human relationships and is intimately connected to love of neighbour (which sums up the Law and the prophets). In the opening scenes we can see that the man is incapable of self-redemption. His life has so spiralled out of control that even if he were to sell himself and his wife and children he could not solve his problems. Into that hopelessness steps the merciful master who takes away his burden and sets him off to begin again. The expectation that is attached to this redemption is that the servant do the same to others.

What Matthew tries to emphasise in his use of this parable is that the believer should be transformed through their experience of the mercy and love of God that has been shown to them. As we use the season of Lent to meditate on God's place in our lives, we should be led to an inner transformation as we come to appreciate just how truly blessed we have been by God's love for us. But this love is a waste of time if it remains but an insight, as it represents also a call to renewal, to a recognition that we are still on our journey towards perfection and so in need of his divine care. The other transformation such a discovery should make in our lives is that it must change the way we relate to and deal with other people. Having ourselves experienced the mercy of God, we need to show that same mercy and love to others. This is the truly demanding part of our lives as disciples. If we are living out the kinds of teachings that we find in Matthew 5, 6 and 7 then the way we live out our daily lives changes particularly in the way we treat others, or our repentance is not genuine.

Prayer

Father, we know that there are many times in our lives when we reach the end of our ability to cope with our problems and know peace. Help us to hear your invitation to carry our burdens and strengthen us to share the burdens of others.